

## **ABSTRACT**

STOVER, JUDITH ANN. *Walking the Tightrope: Superintendents Balancing Funding Priorities and their Effect on Early Childhood.* (Under the direction of Dr. Bonnie C. Fusarelli.)

This qualitative case study focused on why rural North Carolina superintendents do or do not consider utilizing pre-kindergarten programming in their public school districts. The primary data sources were interviews of North Carolina school superintendents in rural counties. Review of an e-survey was used to supplement the interview data. The research questions used in the web-based survey investigated why public school pre-kindergarten is or is not perceived to be of importance by North Carolina rural superintendents looking at the prioritization of funding in their school system budgets. Rural North Carolina superintendents' perceptions, values, and opinions were examined in this study to determine how funding decisions were made concerning pre-kindergarten implementation in the state's rural public school systems.

North Carolina superintendents have the immense task of making sure that all schools are provided with strong support so that all students will graduate from high school career and college ready as stated in the No Child Left Behind Legislation (Fowler, 2009). This study sought to reveal how rural North Carolina superintendents reached a critical decision concerning usage of pre-kindergarten programming in their school districts. This study of 48 superintendents in North Carolina showed that all saw the value of early childhood program initiatives for young children, and how the lack of early childhood would impact their entering kindergarten students. At the conclusion of this study it was evident that the frustration level of the superintendents was high concerning how to create Pre-K due to continuing dwindling of funding sources for school systems.

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Walking the Tight Rope: Superintendents Balancing Funding Priorities and Their Effect on  
Early Childhood

by  
Judith Ann Stover

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North Carolina State University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
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APPROVED BY:

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Dr. Kenneth H. Brinson, Jr., Ph.D.

---

Dr. Lance D. Fusarelli, Ph.D.

---

Dr. Bonnie C. Fusarelli, Ph.D.  
Chair of Advisory Committee

---

Dr. Matthew Militello, Ph.D.

## **DEDICATION**

This research study is dedicated to my loving parents, Ralph and Antonette Liberatore, who loved me so dearly and taught me that education was a gift that I should cherish. My father encouraged me to cling to my passion of teaching young children, and my mother was a role model of graciousness and working hard every day to help others.

Through this journey, my daughters Michelle and Ashley have encouraged me through their sweet letters and notes of encouragement, surprise text messages, and even fancy posters on my windshield when I completed one of the milestones! Your smiling faces before me have been my guiding light to continue this educational journey.

Thank you to my dear husband, Phillip, who found time to cook dinners, go grocery shopping, wash clothes, and do all kinds of chores through these many years, so that I could continue learning about my passion of educating children.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

The autobiographical sketch of Judith Ann Stover, the study's author, is shared below. I was born on March 15, 1950 in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, the eldest of two daughters of Ralph and Antonette Liberatore. My educational journey began at Saint Patrick's Elementary School. I graduated from Canon McMillan High School in Canonsburg in 1968; and from the Pennsylvania State University with a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education in 1972 and a Master of Education in December of 1976; and from the North Carolina State University with a Master of School Administration in 2000. Having taught all grades, from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, in the states of Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Virginia, it prepared me to participate in the pilot program for National Board Certification (NBCT) for Early Childhood Generalist in 1994 and the renewal NBCT process ten years later. My administrative positions have included assistant principal, pre-kindergarten coordinator, Title I Parent Involvement coordinator, and Reading First coordinator. Presently I am the Title II/ Beginning Teacher/Mentor/Student Teacher/Professional Development Coordinator for Franklin County Schools. I give thanks for having chosen the educational profession as my life's work, and have been inspired by many educational leaders throughout my career. I hope to have positively touched the lives of all the students and staff members I have and will come in contact with.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A special tribute to the deceased Mr. Clay Batchelor, my principal at Youngsville Elementary School, who had the vision to want to initiate housing one of the first public school pre-kindergartens in the state of North Carolina in 1988. Memories of Mr. Batchelor's enthusiasm, infectious smile, encouragement, and desire to interact with our youngest students have always been my inspiration to be an advocate for pre-kindergarten.

A special thanks to Mr. Gene Allen and Dr. Carl Harris, past superintendents of Franklin County Schools, and Mrs. Shelby Street, past director of Title I and Elementary Education, who worked as a team to make the vision of early childhood education become a reality in 1988 for the Franklin County School system. The Delta Kappa Gamma Society International has supported and encouraged my research.

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## **LIST OF SYMBOLS, ABBREVIATIONS, AND NOMENCLATURE**

ADM	Average Daily Membership
AYP	Annual Yearly Progress
DHHR	Department of Health and Human Resources
DPI	Department of Public Instruction
ECDD	Early Childhood Developmental Disability federal program for 3 - 5 year olds
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EC-GEN	Early Childhood Generalist National Board Certified Teacher
ELCC	Educational Leadership Constituent Council
E-Survey	Web-based poll
F.A.C.E.S.	Family and Child Experiences Head Start Survey
Head Start	Federal program to provide quality Pre-K for 4- and 5-year-olds in poverty
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IRB	Institutional Review Board
LEA	Local Education Agency
More at Four	North Carolina Early Childhood program
NAEYC	National Association of the Education of Young Children
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Programs
NC	North Carolina
NCDPI	North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
NBCT	National Board Certified Teacher
NCLB	No Child Left Behind federal incentive to increase student performance
NC Pre-K	North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program, previously called More at Four

NEA	National Education Association
NIEER	National Institute for Early Education Research
PRE-K	Pre-kindergarten or preschool
RURAL	Small towns with populations of less than 2,500
SACS	Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
URBAN	“Comprising of all territory, population, and housing units of more than 2,500” (Ricketts, Johnson-Webb, Taylor, June 1, 1998)
USOE	United States Office of Education
YMCA	Young Men’s Christian Association

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

*“There is no authentic utopia apart from the tension between the denunciation of a present becoming more and more intolerable, and the ‘annunciation,’ announcement, of a future to be created, built – politically, esthetically – by us women and men” (Friere, 1999, p. 91).*

For generations the United States educational system has tried various strategies for educational reform in the K–12 public school setting in order to create successful students. The last decade has ushered in an era of accountability using assessment scores of even our elementary students to predict a school and a child’s potential for academic success. As members of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century cadre of professional educators, superintendents continue to guide their educational staffs to pursue the federal *No Child Left Behind* Act of 2001 (NCLB), which adheres to the goal of all children reaching academic proficiency. However, many educational professionals, including superintendents, are beginning to come to the realization that the majority of our reform efforts in the last decade have been focusing on children in elementary through high school, and that that focus in fact amounts to “too little too late.” The emphasis on funding these grade levels rather than early childhood education may be due to public perception found in annual polls reported in Phi Delta Kappa and the Gallup Organization, which state that the majority of U.S. citizens think that their own

elementary schools are doing a great job (Bushaw & Gallup, 2008). However, politicians and researchers have taken such polls at face value and do not look carefully at the data concerning high numbers of students of low socioeconomic status struggling at the elementary level even as early as their entrance to kindergarten. Our entire public school system rests on a shaky foundation if our early childhood infrastructure is not strong. Too much emphasis on middle and high school reform has led to too little emphasis on young children of all ethnicities beginning kindergarten on an even footing academically and socially. The public has not insisted that all children receive a stable, rigorous focus in the early grades, which undergirds all learning in the later school curriculum for all children (Bryant, Burchinal, Campbell, Ramey, Skinner, & Gardner, Wasik, 1999; Cohen, 2001; Magnuson, Ruhm & Waldfogel, 2007).

Though the educational community in the U.S. continues to state that it strives for rigor and positive results for all students in our K-12 public schools, the data is quite alarming for many subgroups of students, especially those of low socioeconomic status. Based on the National Assessment of Educational Programs (NAEP), we find that disadvantaged children of all ethnicities are consistently less able to do well on the assessment tools used (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2007). One concern thought to be perpetuating this historical discrepancy between subgroups of students is that pupils from disadvantaged homes are not given as many opportunities to access quality early childhood programs as their middle- and upper-income counterparts. In response, many governors in the last decade have made universal pre-kindergarten part of their political election platforms and state budgets.

A large discrepancy in access to early childhood programs is evident in the U.S. Over 75 percent of all young children entering our public schools are in the low socioeconomic group as indicated by free and reduced lunch status. These children's families cannot afford to pay pre-kindergarten tuition, and the children fall behind academically and socially before they even begin their journey through the K–12 educational system (Chamberlin & Plucker, 2008; Merrow, 2002). Especially in the southern states, such as North Carolina, we are seeing universal pre-kindergarten becoming a topic of interest for superintendents looking for a means to assist their school district infrastructures. As the economy in 2012 continues to necessitate frugally using taxpayer dollars to receive the best dividends, the American people expect our superintendents and the school boards of our public schools to deliver equitable educational services for all children that produce high academic and social results. A close watch on early childhood research is imperative, so that we can create an infrastructure that supports all children to be academically successful and become contributing citizens in our American economy.

As time passes, policymakers, school boards, and superintendents are beginning to pay attention to where taxpayer dollars and funding sources for our schools are truly making a difference. In recent years, some early childhood research has shown that to increase student achievement nationally, not only must we have high-quality pre-kindergarten for all children, but we must link quality pre-kindergarten programs with coherent elementary-grade academic and social goals through the creation of a mutual organizational structure. This structure should maintain rigor, high teacher qualifications, and continuous quality professional development for all educational staff. At stake are issues of equity, equality, and

excellence in our educational programs. If we begin the educational journey with a quality pre-kindergarten program for all children and continue with an excellent K–12 curriculum, that alignment will produce the results we strive to acquire for all of our citizens (Cohen, 2001; Imig & Meyer, 2007; Merrow, 2002; Ramey et al., 1999).

Since the 1890s, improving the plight of students in poverty has been a goal of America's public schools (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Especially in times of an increase in the numbers of disadvantaged students, historically we have seen schools and community agencies trying to meld services to get more impact from taxpayer dollars. In 2012, we are again realizing that schools cannot work in isolation. Rather, superintendents realize that collaboration with school boards, community agencies, and philanthropic and faith-based institutions is needed in order to create a seamless and comprehensive reform strategy directed toward long-term goals and improvements for all students (Cooper, Cibulka, & Fusarelli, 2008).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Superintendents as leaders in education are scrutinized how masterfully and quickly they are producing positive results in their school districts. Reducing the achievement gap amongst varied ethnic and socio-economic subgroups, increasing the graduation rate, preparing all students to be college and career ready, increasing attendance rates, raising the awareness in their community for the educational welfare of all children and having all kindergarten students ready to learn as they enter the school house door, are all expected and measured to increase but with continued dwindling fund sources to accomplish.

In America today, one problem being studied closely is whether we should:

- Have universal pre-kindergarten in our public schools, for all children in all states, as seen in some states and in other nations;
- Offer public pre-kindergarten only to students in lower socioeconomic groups; or
- Continue to have a mixed model with many configurations of public and private delivery of early childhood programs.

Research has shown that over 64 percent of mothers of children under the age of five in the U.S. today are in the workforce (U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means, 2004). This research also shows that most children today do not have access to quality pre-kindergarten. It has been found that states and school districts need to work together to structure appropriate school readiness opportunities for young children. In some states, public school superintendents are joining the discussion by considering the challenge of coordinating all present and possible child care systems in order to strengthen their quality (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2004; Kieff, 2009).

Due to the political climate, especially regarding budgetary concerns, our country has chosen to continue to favor private enterprise over universal public pre-kindergarten in most states. However, in late May of 2011 the Obama administration announced that \$500 million will be devoted to a parallel competition among all states to raise the quality of early learning and child care programs in order to increase families' access to quality childcare. This historic state opportunity to improve early childhood education is called Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge. North Carolina received an earlier Race to the Top grant in 2010 and won again in 2011.

Superintendents struggle to have all schools meet state mandates with dwindling budgets. They are particularly concerned with supporting principals of historically underperforming schools, and question how to lead them effectively so as to acquire immediate positive results for all students. Superintendents must share a vision with all principals to study a school's capacity to connect school functions to the needs of the community (Rothstein, 2004).

Every school district leader is confronted with problems. A superintendent who clearly sees that some subgroups of his or her elementary students are struggling as they enter and leave kindergarten wants to make change. For real change to occur, a collaboration and acceptance of a problem by the key players in an organization of a school district will then lead to improvements. This research study asked whether the problem of not all subgroups of students attaining academic success was linked to how North Carolina superintendents prioritized public school pre-kindergarten in their school system budgets. The study listened to the answers given by superintendents to determine whether this was a problem of practice shared by other key players including school boards, communities, teachers, students, principals, parents, and the state and federal governments.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative bounded multiple-case study was to ascertain how or if public school superintendents of rural counties in North Carolina prioritize their funding to reflect their belief that public school pre-kindergarten is important to prepare their students prior to kindergarten entry, in order to maintain a smooth transition to the academic rigors of the North Carolina kindergarten curriculum. The overarching research question at the study's inception, identified as the study's focus, was:

How do rural North Carolina superintendents prioritize public school pre-kindergarten in their local school system budget funding? Why do they or do they not prioritize pre-kindergarten programming?

After data was collected, then compared and contrasted, themes emerged and coding developed which looked at the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of rural superintendents about the importance of universal pre-kindergarten?
2. What are the perceptions of superintendent's experiences with elementary education and of universal pre-kindergarten?
3. What are superintendents' perceptions of participation in Pre-K and academic success in all subgroups and socioeconomic levels?

Superintendents in the twentieth century are no longer only managers of resources; rather, they must have the expertise of empowering their constituents, respecting the dignity of each person as a valued human being, and being effective human relations leaders (Rebore, 2003).

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of the study, the following terms were defined for clarification when cited in this research:

*Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)* measures the yearly progress of different subgroups of students at the school, district, and state levels against yearly targets in reading and

mathematics. Proficiency target goals are set increasingly higher in three-year increments until 2013-2014. In 2014, 100 percent proficiency is expected for all subgroups.

*At-Risk* refers to any child who lacks sufficient support and may fail to develop adequate academic and social skills (Rossi & Montgomery, 1994).

*Head Start* is a federally-funded program targeting children ages three to five and providing a variety of services including preschool education, nutrition, and medical care. Head Start was introduced in 1964 by President Lyndon Johnson and adopted into law as part of the Economic Opportunity Act.

*More at Four* is North Carolina's state-funded pre-kindergarten program, which is narrowly targeted to at-risk four-year-olds. It has Birth-Kindergarten licensed teachers and uses a curriculum that supports Early Learning Standards aligned with K -12 standards. Under the authority of the NC State Board of Education, More at Four programs are located in public schools (54%), licensed child care centers (27%), and Head Start programs (19%).

*NC Pre-K* is the new title, as of 2011, for North Carolina's pre-kindergarten More at Four program.

*No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* is the 2001 federal legislation requiring individual states to provide a framework for school districts to measure success and progress in student achievement.

*Preschool Exceptional Children* began in 1991, entitling all three- to five-year-old children with disabilities to a free and appropriate public education mandated through the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B, Section 619 legislation.

*Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge* grants awards to states leading the way with plans for implementing a coherent and comprehensive early childhood plan. President Obama states that the years prior to kindergarten are critical in shaping how children learn.

*Readiness for school* is the ability of an individual student to be successful in the school environment (Kim, Murdock & Choi, 2005).

*Smart Start* is a collaborative process seeking to ensure that North Carolina's children are "healthy and ready to learn" when they enter kindergarten. The program seeks to overcome service fragmentation by promoting collaboration between local organizations that serve children under age six.

*Universal Pre-kindergarten* is pre-kindergarten access for all children.

## **Significance of the Study**

Since urgency in closing the achievement gap has been a pervasive issue in all American schools and the gap first manifests itself at the start of the kindergarten level (having developed before students start school), the perceptions and experiences of superintendents about the kindergarten readiness of our students is an important part of the puzzle to be examined. This study was particularly appropriate for the rural North Carolina counties I researched because the student bodies were often similar in size and in free and reduced lunch status, and a growing number of the counties had increasing Hispanic populations. Many of the schools in the research study had struggled with incremental growth to reach Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) and/or qualify for the NC Department of Public Instruction's School of Distinction designation.

This study is significant because it can inform researchers and practitioners in early childhood education about some of the key issues in the areas of kindergarten readiness and pre-kindergarten curriculum in the public school setting. This study can immediately benefit the leadership teams of the rural North Carolina counties being studied, since leadership is already in the process of developing a plan for a collaborative seamless interface to improve student achievement in the elementary schools. Kindergarten readiness had already been identified in the state of North Carolina by a task force studying the need for further investigation, refinement, and strategic action.

## **Justification of Focus on Research of Rural Schools**

The popular phrase "Walk a mile in my shoes" describes my personal journey. When my husband and I chose to move to a small town in the 1980s to begin his medical practice,

we were excited to start a life in an idyllic, historic, rural, setting in North Carolina. Our life in a large North Carolina city as parents of an academically gifted preschooler had afforded us many choices in amenities, such as abundant and varied nationally accredited, quality pre-kindergarten programs to choose from. Little did we realize that moving to a rural area of the state would leave us stymied by an almost non-existent pool of early childhood choices, even though we were able to pay tuition. The nearest high-quality, nationally accredited programs were at least an hour's drive away, with high tuition of \$2,000 a month or more. Early childhood experiences for our children were a necessity to us as a family with future goals of admission to top universities for our children. We and our friends in the high socioeconomic subgroups were able to afford expensive and distant child care, but not everyone could in this rural small town.

Today, choices have really not changed significantly in our town. My close friends and neighbors in our income bracket still make the daily trek to the neighboring capital city of North Carolina for quality early childhood services. Nannies, carpools, or stay-at-home mothers make it possible for these families to schedule these opportunities for their children.

But what about the lower-income and middle-class working families on the other side of the spectrum whose choices are drastically limited due to income levels, high tuition and lack of transportation? Very few home daycares exist, and most are only available by word of mouth. There are long waiting lists for the few spots funded by Head Start, and private tuition is out of reach for most of these families.

In 2012, ethnicity or the location of one's home should no longer be a part of the decision-making in access to early childhood services. Yet a few centers in my town

are attended primarily by students of only one race, due to longstanding traditions of who tries to attend facilities in certain neighborhoods of the town. Two half-day church programs and five full-day programs with limited spaces exist – programs that existed three decades ago, when I arrived in this rural town. However, waiting lists for early childhood placement in my county are still extremely long, and they continue to grow every year as the population increases steadily, from 30,000 in 1983 to about 45,000 in 2012. This rural county resembles many of the rural counties in the state that are situated near a large city.

To date, none of these early childhood settings have received accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). From 1988 to 2004, this county had one of the first Title I-funded public school pre-kindergarten programs in North Carolina, a program that I had the honor to develop from the ground up by hiring quality staff, ordering appropriate curriculum materials, and developing a pacing guide with quality curriculum goals and objectives. It became a model for many counties in North Carolina and for other states due to its national accreditation by NAEYC and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), as well as by virtue of my being one of the first National Board Certified Teachers (NBCT) in Early Childhood Generalist in the U.S. These distinctions in quality early childhood programming led teams from many school districts to come to observe our program for a day, then return to their districts to implement public school pre-kindergarten in their school districts for children most academically in need. The duration of this Title I pre-kindergarten program served many academically and socially at-risk four-year-olds. A longitudinal study of the first classes was done showing positive results in achieving high school graduation. However, due to changes in district leadership

and budget funding choices, Title I pre-kindergarten program funding was diverted to other K-12 educational needs in the county in approximately 2001.

Many may question why it is necessary to research the prioritization of funding for pre-kindergarten programs by superintendents of rural school districts. However, my past experiences as a leader in early childhood programming in the state, as well as my passion to research how leaders make funding choices, drove my desire to continue to expand funding opportunities for rural children. This research was motivated by the knowledge that even a longitudinal study showing positive results had ultimately not provided enough of a basis for continued funding of a successful public school pre-kindergarten program that was used by many counties in North Carolina as a model of how to begin and implement a quality early childhood program. As successful as it was, the program still only touched a small part of the growing iceberg of needy young students, ages three to four years old, in a rural county with a continually growing waiting list of over 400 children who qualified for services by reason of academic need.

If “the squeaky wheel gets the grease”, then researchers must continue to be the “voice” of young children in rural North Carolina, who deserve the same opportunity to receive quality services that is offered to young children in other, larger towns and cities in the state .

### **Overview of Research Approach**

This was a qualitative bounded multiple-case study examining the funding priorities of superintendents in rural North Carolina counties. The purpose of the study was to ascertain how public school superintendents in rural North Carolina prioritize funding programs to

prepare their students prior to kindergarten entry so as to maintain a smooth transition to the academic rigors of the state's kindergarten curriculum.

An e-survey was sent to all rural North Carolina superintendents. Themes and coding of answers to the survey were studied. Based on the responses, four superintendents were sent invitations to participate in individual interviews. The participant sample was these four rural North Carolina superintendents, two who gave high priority to funding public school pre-kindergarten and two who gave it low priority. The transcripts of these interviews were examined for themes after coding.

### **Chapter Summary**

In summary, this study was of great significance because superintendents' perceptions of the importance of public school pre-kindergarten, and their decision-making processes to prioritize funding for it, are important factors in making universal pre-kindergarten a reality for America's children. A sense of urgency persists as long as we still do not know why some of our children are entering kindergarten far behind their peers, and what strategies we can immediately put into place to make all of our students successful at the starting and ending points of our K–12 educational system.

An extensive body of literature from the past decade from North Carolina and other states shows that kindergarten readiness is an important key to students' continuing success in school. The kindergarten curriculum of today is more challenging than in the past, and it mirrors what used to be taught in first grade. Even with differentiation in instruction in kindergarten, many of our five-year-olds are vastly behind their peers in language ability, social skills, and academics. In the past decade the demographics of North Carolina rural

towns has changed dramatically, with an influx of new residents who speak only Spanish. Given obstacles to a successful entrance to kindergarten such as poverty and language barriers among students in these towns, the focus on pre-kindergarten is all the more important.

One of the main purposes of this study was to look at the needs of children in a community, and then look at the funding decisions made by superintendents to see if they can truly be transformational instructional leaders of their school districts within the constraints of time, budget, and protocols for change that they must follow as superintendents of their county school systems.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter Two includes a review of the literature in early childhood, definitions of rural, description of multi-case study analysis, and a review of the literature on superintendent leadership. Chapter Three outlines the research design and methodology, theoretical framework, and limitations of the study. Chapter Four includes the e-survey data in order to frame themes, and then presents the four individual cases of rural North Carolina superintendents, including the results of interviews with them. Chapter Four concludes by discussing the overarching themes from the survey data and case studies from the interviews. Chapter Five discusses the findings in relation to the literature. It also addresses the implications of the findings for future early childhood policy and practice. Possible implications for future research on early childhood as a strategy for superintendents to use to close the achievement gap could be considered.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

Universal pre-kindergarten in the public schools was selected for this study due to the rising popularity of this program in recent years as a way to boost academic and social achievement in some states in the U.S., as well as in nations such as France and Japan. In North Carolina it is clear that strong leadership is needed across all organizations and settings to make quality pre-kindergarten an established educational component (Howes, Fox, & Davies, 2009). As the literature review will show, the discussion of how best to teach children under the age of six has been part of the fabric of America since colonial days, as the colonists brought varied theories of child development with them from Europe.

Child development and social policy, however, is a young field of research, dating only to the 1970s in the U.S. Today, the time seems ripe to expand the discussion about what is best for young children by looking at the newest positive research in how to advance a young child's learning and intertwine these needs with society's larger economic, political, and social interests (Aber, Bishop-Josef, Jones, McLearn, & Phillips, 2007).

All students in each school in North Carolina must be at 100 percent proficiency level by the year 2014 in grades 3-12 as stated in the goals of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The researcher desires to study the gap between the "knowledge and decision-making" concerning strategies for young children, and the researcher continues to look for research questions and designs that might help to bridge that gap and facilitate the important next steps to a quality education for all children (Golden, 2007; Aber et al, 2007).

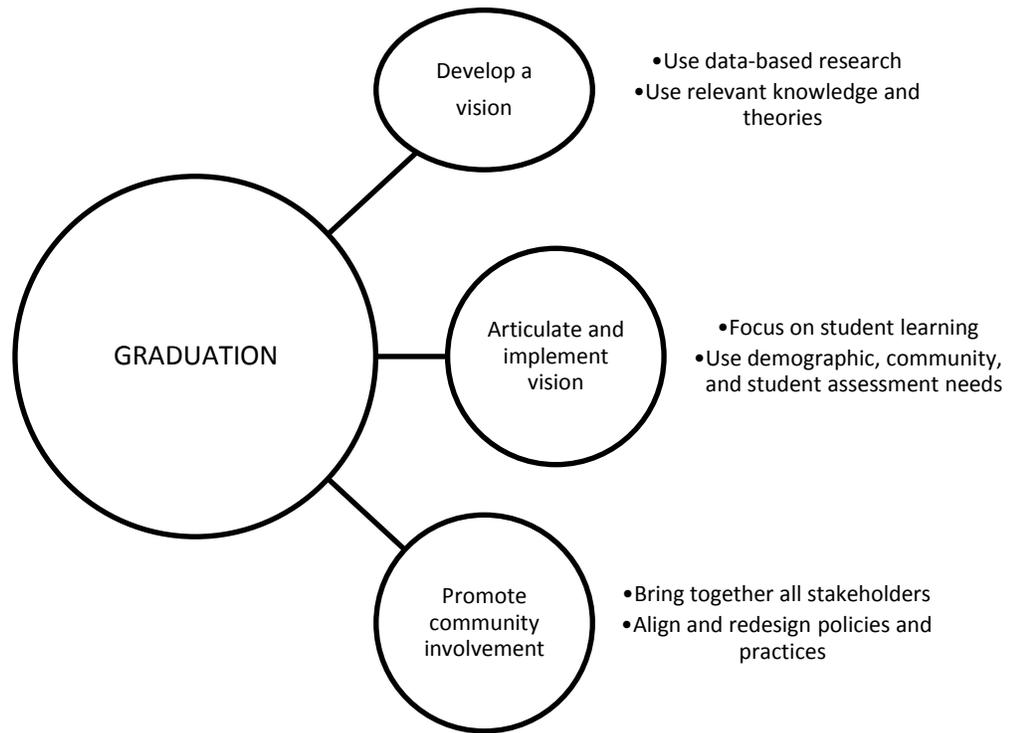
The phenomenon of early childhood education has been studied since before the eighteenth century (Hilton, Styles, & Watson, 1997; Marten, 2009; Morgan, 2011). Universal pre-kindergarten in the public school setting, however, has become a polarizing topic in the field only in the last ten years, discussed both in research studies and in the media. Pre-K Now, a decade-long program of the Pew Charitable Trusts that concluded in 2011, e-mailed weekly state updates on public school early childhood implementation in the U.S. (Darrow, 2010; Turgeon, 2010).

In the examination of the concept of universal pre-kindergarten in North Carolina in this study, it was assumed that superintendents in the state are looking at this program as a possible strategy for increasing student achievement (Wilmore, 2008). Superintendent leadership is a fundamental guiding torch to a school district's overall success. This study assumed that as such, superintendent leadership is also fundamental specifically to a school district's educational improvement and innovative initiatives (Bartley, 2008; Sawyer, 2010; Sutherland, 2009; Wilmore, 2000).

Figure 1.1 offers a graphic representation of how superintendents, using the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELLC) Standards, propose to make their vision for graduation of all students a reality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Today a superintendent wears many hats --- visionary, manager, public relations expert, instructional leader. Instructional practices that have worked in the past may or may not work in every school system today. Therefore, it is critically important that the superintendent know the ins and outs of their school district and the community it resides in. That historical background will help them to understand where they have been, and how they

have gotten to their current status. Vision needs to become a reality in order to make an impact.



**Figure 1.1 Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) Standards for Improved District Performance by Superintendents**

This literature review traces the background of early childhood education and theorists in early childhood and brain research, leading to the evolution of the concept of universal pre-kindergarten using the theoretical frameworks of leading theorists such as

Froebel, Locke, Oberlin, Owen, Pestalozzi, Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky (Chudacoff, 2007; Ilick, 2002; Morgan, 2011).

This literature review will also focus on the superintendent leadership decision-making process research, looking at how superintendents choose programs in early childhood to assist all their students in achieving their highest potential (Sciaraffa, 2004; Gourley, 2006; Santoro, 2011).

### **Historical Background:**

#### **Learning in the Home Nursery**

We often hear schools tell families that the family is the child's first teacher. When studying the historical background of schooling, it becomes evident that this belief is embedded in the American psyche. To this day, early childhood schooling strikes many Americans as an imposition on a family's individual choice to keep young children in a home setting. This reaction stems from the beginnings of our nation, when many of the first settlers from Europe brought their philosophies of schooling and child-rearing with them.

In the 1600s, John Comenius, a Czechoslovakian scholar who taught at the University of Heidelberg, wrote *School of Infancy*, the first book to assist parents – both mothers and fathers -- in educating their young children (Morgan, 2011). Involving fathers was an extreme idea; prior to this, all teaching was expected to be done by mothers.

Comenius offered several innovations in education, including the divided page in a book that placed all of the English text on one side and Latin text on the other side, allowing the reader to focus on one language at a time in order to increase their skills. He also published the first children's book with illustrations accompanying the text, which allowed

children in the pre-reading stages to read by “reading” the pictures. This book, *The Visible World*, written in 1659 (Morgan, 2011), used illustrations as a tool to help very young children learn to read earlier.

Many of the first settlers were from England and France, where mothers taught their young children with homemade books and nursery alphabet cards, and they brought these teaching traditions with them to America. In 1693, John Locke, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, offered advice on teaching young children to read by using ‘some easy pleasant books’ (Hilton, Styles, & Watson, p. 31, 1997). In some circles, it is believed that this comment from Locke planted the seeds for bookseller John Newbery, in 1744, to publish what became known as the first children’s book (Hilton et al., 1997). (The Newbery Medal, named for him, is given each year to books deemed to have made a distinguished contribution to American children’s literature.)

In 1662, Anne Bradstreet, a Puritan and poet, wrote a book for mothers of young children that offered reflections on how to teach children of varying dispositions to be good people and honor God (Fass & Mason, 2000). Often in religious sects, mothers were directed to teach by books such as *The Compleat School Master or Child’s Instructor*, which, in the section called ‘Laws and Orders Proper for Women to Observe’, gives detailed instructions on how to teach young children to read (Hilton et al., 1997). In these directions, mothers were told to show their one-and-a-half and two-year-olds letters and teach them to hold a pen to write. Using this method, they were encouraged that their children would be able to read and write at three, four, or five years old (Hilton et al., 1997).

Prior to European colonization, Native Americans had taught their children by focusing on the skills they would need in their gendered adult roles, such as plant gathering for girls and hunting for boys. As Europeans took over Native American land, these children were eventually schooled in the European fashion (Illick, 2002).

### **History of Early Childhood in Public Schools**

John Locke believed that societies require an extensive system of laws in order to be safe; this philosophy was used by James Madison and the founding fathers in writing the Constitution. In the 1950s and 1960s, the psychological theorists James Watson and B. F. Skinner would again use Locke's theory to create behavior-modification approaches to classroom management.

Today our public school systems still show the remnants of Locke's influence in their teacher-centered methods, organization and control of student movement. The Lancaster system, which used Locke's ideas, was first introduced in England in the 1700s and early 1800s and eventually brought to America. This system helped maintain conformity among large groups of students. The Lancaster system was not challenged until 1930, when the theorist John Dewey began to deliver ideas from his research on child-centered education. Practices such as student-centered teaching, progressive, open-ended, affective humanistic education were espoused by Dewey (Morgan, 2011).

In the mid-eighteenth century in Germany, the theorist Friedrich Froebel became the father of the kindergarten movement. At its inception kindergarten was originally defined by the Germans as children's play. Froebel also believed that children could be shaped not broken by the use of codified teaching systems. Froebel believed that at each stage of

development, specific skills should be taught using specific materials and moral lessons (Wollons, 2000). After Froebel's death, German theorists and scholars took his kindergarten movement to continents all over the world. As kindergartens began in different countries, they often strayed from Froebel's purist theory and began to take on elements of the culture of the country in which they were being established. Today's conflicts about what early childhood curriculums should look like have their beginnings in the diffusion or strict acquisition of Froebel's ideas of what kindergarten should look like.

Likewise, the current struggles over creating policy for universal pre-kindergarten have their roots in the ideologies of the early American colonists. "Gradually American children developed along two tracks: the first was geared to middle-class children whose parents believed in the value of an educational head start; the second was aimed at the children of immigrants and the poor who (middle-class educators and reformers) believed needed to be Americanized and controlled" (Wollons, 2000, pp. 6-7).

The historical timeline of early childhood education in the U.S. began with a focus on kindergarten in the private sector, and evolved to eventually having kindergarten adopted in some form in most public schools by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet even today, kindergarten is not mandatory in some states, such as North Carolina. Ironically, in the same fashion, we are now seeing the dialogue about universal pre-kindergarten follow the same contradictory path towards implementation. Politically, Americans disagree on adoption of a large, coordinated federal or state directive versus private localities choosing their own modes of delivery of services. It is crucial for the future of early education that we be cognizant of this history, because it provides solid ground with roots from our past to our future chosen paths. We

need to reflect on and use what we have learned from past early childhood directions to construct our new road toward increased academic achievement (Nutbrown, Clough & Selbie, 2008).

The American use of kindergarten and Pre-K contrasts with what the majority of the industrialized world advocates for young children. While most industrialized nations have universal pre-kindergarten for all children who wish to attend, in the U.S. there has historically been a divide between conservative and liberal views on who should be watching young children. This disagreement over where and with whom young children should spend their days, and who should be their first teacher, has fueled the ongoing conflict over making pre-kindergarten mandatory for all children in the public school setting (DeShano da Silva, Huguley, Kakli & Rao, 2007; Merrow, 2002; Spodek, 1973). The next section will examine these two ways of thinking about how to teach children, and the roles of socioeconomic status and ethnicity in each.

### **Crisis in America: Stratification of Young Children**

“Disparities in academic achievement by race and class are apparent as early as ages three and four – well before children enter kindergarten” (Jacob & Ludwig, 2009, p. 57). In the United States we find that if you can afford the best, you can have it, and that includes top-notch educational settings for pre-kindergarten in the private sector, which can sometimes cost between \$5,000 and \$15,000 a year. On the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, North Carolina’s most disadvantaged children may apply for federal funding in Head Start and Title I pre-kindergarten if these programs are available in their communities,

as well as state funding for More at Four classroom spots (now called NC Pre-K). However, there are not enough of these slots available for all who qualify.

Until 2002, North Carolina was one of only two states in the Southeast that did not offer state-funded pre-kindergarten for at-risk children. When Governor Michael F. Easley ran for office, he proposed the More at Four legislation to establish a four-year-old Pre-K program, stating, “We must build a system of education in North Carolina that gives every child every opportunity to succeed, regardless of geographic location or economic condition. If we are to eliminate the achievement gap and give all children a chance to succeed, then we must provide high-quality Pre-K opportunities to our 4-year olds who need them the most” (Pianta & Howes, 2009, p. 123-124).

Many counties in North Carolina have hundreds of low-income students who qualify for pre-kindergarten services but wind up on long waiting lists and are never served, ultimately entering kindergarten academically and socially behind their peers. Low-income parents who are lucky enough to qualify for the existing slots in Head Start do receive many benefits; Head Start gives mothers in poverty opportunities to try and finish their high school diplomas, and to receive a two-year associate’s degree while working at the program with their children.

Head Start had its roots during the Kennedy administration. President Kennedy felt the immorality of the issue of poverty in an America with dichotomies between the have and have nots needed to be addressed to support young children and their families. After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, “President Lyndon Johnson assumed the mantle left by the Kennedy administration and officially declared a War on Poverty. During this

time the Civil Rights movement was also gaining the nation's attention on race and poverty" (Kaliefeh, 2011, p.39). During the time period of Head Start it has evolved through the hands of many presidents with different ideas for its structure and governance. Though the goals of Head Start have remained comparable through its evolution sometimes its emphases have varied. Such ideas as the eradication of poverty, support for families to provide correct nutrition and healthcare for their youngest family members, as well as childcare services have waned or expanded through the decades since its inception in 1964 with the seed from the Educational Opportunity Act. Head Start had been created as a federal program that offered free education and comprehensive support services to young children and their families with incomes below the federal poverty level. "Project Head Start was known as one of the nation's largest federal early childhood programs. Touted as one of the most significant and successful initiatives launched during President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, Head Start initially provided preschool programs for all 4-year-olds who met its eligibility criteria. The program began as an 8-week summer demonstration program serving 50,000 disadvantaged preschool children in 1965. In 1966 it was authorized as a year-long program. In 1976 the Head Start Performance Standards had an onsite program review implemented. It has been reauthorized in 1984, 1990, 1994, and 2000. In 1996 it was expanded to have full-day, full-year services, expanded to younger children through Early Head Start, and began to require minimum teacher qualifications. In 2004 a National Reporting system was launched, and in 2008 the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act was created (Kaliefeh, 2011). Today it still has the program description of federal funding for a designated comprehensive early childhood program model. Eligibility prioritizes

children now in the age bracket of three to five living at or below the federal poverty threshold, with a certain number of slots set aside for children with disabilities (Sullivan-Dudzic, Gearns, & Levell, 2011).

In 1965, when President Johnson created Head Start, the goal was not only to serve and educate young children in poverty, but to also create jobs for parents and to give opportunities for healthcare and education. President Johnson believed that success for our nation was predicated on a good education grounded by an early start. Parents in most of these families targeted for Head Start worked two and three jobs and still made less than \$30,000 a year with four or more people in a household (Aber, Bishop-Josef, Jones, McLearn, & Phillips, 2007; Zigler & Styfco, 2004; Zigler & Styfco, 2010). President Johnson and his wife believed in Head Start, but had to try and convince the public and legislators of its effectiveness. To do this they asked “Sargeant Shriver, politician, academician, and brother in law to the Kennedys to testify before Congress citing the impact of Head Start on raising the IQ as much as 8 to 10 points in a six week period” (Kalifeh, 2011, p. 43). However, at the same time some studies were coming out showing ‘fade-out effects’ on cognitive gains after entrance to elementary school (Kalifeh, 2011, p. 43). All the Presidents since Johnson have supported the continuance of federal funds for Head Start for our lowest socio-economic subgroups. This population is now growing due to economic strife in these times, therefore, waiting lists are long due to not enough available slots.

The wealthiest families in the United States can afford the best early childhood centers staffed with high-quality teachers, starting their children on the road to the most prestigious academic halls in the future. The middle-class family tends to fall through the

cracks, with too few high-quality early education choices or no ability to afford high tuition payments. Because of federal and state funding charts, these families seemingly do not qualify to attend public programs targeted to low-income families, but at the same time they cannot afford private pre-kindergarten institutions.

As stated, stratification begins early on, with some children not even able to begin kindergarten on an equal footing because of the economic setting into which they have been born. This is in comparison with many other westernized nations that offer all citizens universal pre-kindergarten from an early age (Espinosa, 2010; Haddad, 2001). In the United States, it remains to be seen whether we can commit to valuing young children as an important commodity by ensuring kindergarten readiness for all of them regardless of socioeconomic status.

The United States is a very diverse, conflicted group of people who are all trying to attain their values politically and through other social venues. In the past, school politics was a game played by the wealthier constituents in a given municipality. New areas of population growth, however, bring citizenry with differing policy demands, which at first the old guard disagrees with (Kieff, 2009; Kirst & Wirt, 2005). As time passes and more new members coalesce, dissatisfaction with past policies begins to strengthen. As the dissatisfaction theory states, when the makeup of a population has changed, satisfaction with what was in place also changes, and the desires of the new group emerges (Kirst & Wirt, 2005).

An example of the dissatisfaction theory in action in North Carolina is illustrated in *The North Carolina Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development: The Inception, Planning, and Formation*, written by a North Carolina State University researcher who

followed the Institute's development (Boling, 2000). The demographics of the group sample used represented the diversity of early childhood communities in North Carolina --- varied stakeholders with differing philosophies on how to educate their personnel. As we look at the history of early childhood education, we see that the people involved have represented different school settings at different times: first private programs, then Head Start, and finally public schools. Boling's research showed that twelve individuals in the North Carolina childcare workforce met with others nationally, and that that meeting became the catalyst for change to be recommended in North Carolina and simultaneously in many other states (Boling, 2000; Goffin, 2007; Gormley & Phillips, 2003). The changes they recommended were that all children needed quality care with quality teachers, curriculum, and facilities. They found that quality care was not available for all children due to short supply of quality early childhood facilities and the fact that many of these facilities were not affordable for all.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of universalism in early childhood education did reach some needy children through the creation of Head Start. Individuals and interest groups used their power to shape policy implementation for the creation of Head Start, in a display of micro-politics evidenced by both public and private transactions. Early childhood education has been and continues to be an area of conflict due to authorities and partisans trying to reach consensus about how to use federal, state, and/or local dollars. Just and equitable distribution of these scarce monetary resources continues to be a crucial puzzle piece for early childhood implementation. The ongoing debate over implementing universal pre-kindergarten throughout the U.S. depends on such theories as exchange theory, game theories, and interactionist analysis, wherein different actors realize that the trading of

benefits and rewards may be an important power play. The key to understanding micro-politics is to understand players and their agendas.

Interactions between and among stakeholders are crucial because they all have different politics with varied stakes, patterns of interaction with one another, policy outcomes, and strategies. Micro-politics has an emphasis on the socio-gram of interactions of persons and groups pursuing their own self-interest. The power vested in the micro-politics of early childhood education policy is evidenced by the ability of political influence to affect decisions made concerning that policy. In Kirst and Wirt (2005), the contrasts between micro-political and organizational theory are given. These theories have been described in the recent research on the politics of universal pre-kindergarten. The debate about universal pre-kindergarten is grounded in the ideological disputation among the different actors and interest groups in early childhood education due to their inability to reach a consensus.

Organizational theory is an example of the decision-making and authority used by Head Start officials to make this policy become a reality. This was accomplished because a large enough core of constituents believed in the need for early childhood services for preschoolers growing up in poverty. Therefore, Head Start policy was created because of the organizational theory postulates of authority, goal adherence, consensus, motivation, decision-making and ideological neutrality when it came to discussing services for economically deprived young children.

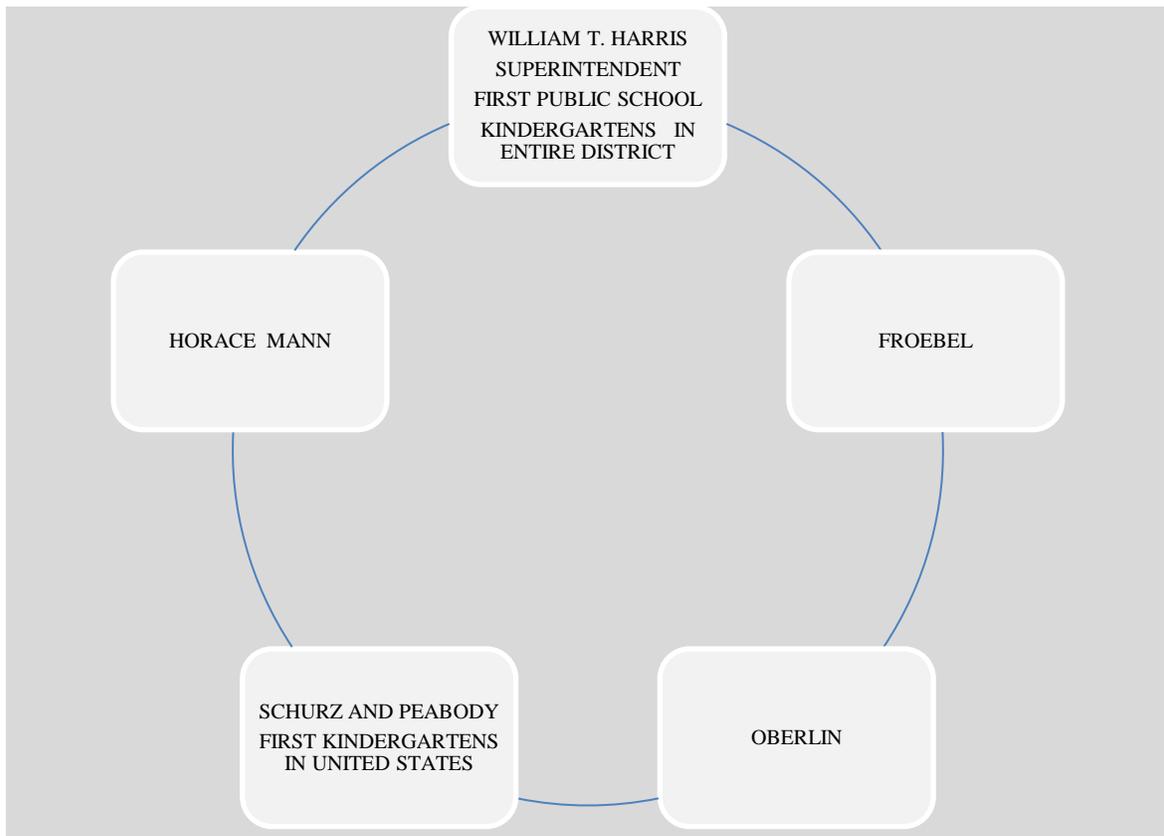
In contrast, in the last few years we have seen an influx of diverse opinions reflecting different generational thought patterns on the topic of pre-kindergarten and its necessity and value in various states. Today, the topic of universal pre-kindergarten has entered the realm

of micro-political theory, where gender concerns and traditionalists conflict with the reform-minded interests of other citizens. In the last two decades, policy initiatives have been taking place at the state level, where political advocacy coalitions have used universal pre-kindergarten as a proposed cure for many of society's ills (Goffin, 2007; Gormley & Phillips, 2003). Policy advocates are aware of their intended audience and gauge support of pre-kindergarten to adapt how they articulate solutions. Also, research done in the last decade notes the ideological disputation between issues of access and how total expenditures per child should be measured (Clifford & Crawford, 2009; Imig & Meyer, 2007).

### **Early Childhood Theorists**

The researcher used the earlier theorists Froebel, Rousseau, Oberlin, Pestalozzi, and Owen, etc. as the foundation of this study. The researcher wished to show through the historical literature of early childhood that now, just as in our country's earliest days, families and communities struggle with the conservative idea that a mother and a father are the best teachers for their children, compared with the idea that children can also be taught by others during the day so that parents can do other things. Today as in the past, debates on early childhood education question the public/private boundaries of teaching young children (Wollons, 2000). At the beginnings of the institution of kindergarten in Germany in 1802 by Princess Pauline, it was reiterated that kindergartens were never intended to replace familial child-rearing, but were intended to allow children of poor working mothers to learn values and bible passages (Wollons, 2000). In France in 1767, Johann F. Oberlin had established a school for children under six in a poor, rural coal-mining community, also to help working mothers (Morgan, 2011). In Switzerland, Johann Pestalozzi developed the theory that

children under the age of six would benefit from practices geared to their developmental level more than from practices geared towards older children. In the early 1800s, Robert Owen, who studied Pestalozzi's theories, introduced the idea of school for infants to the United States (Morgan, 2011). In Figure 1.2, beginning on the right and moving clockwise, the cycle of theorists evolves and eventually impacts a superintendent's decision to invest in early childhood education for his school system for the first time in the United States (Morgan, 2011; Wollons, 2000).



**Figure 1.2 Early Childhood Theorists' Impact on First Superintendent in the United States to Support Public School Kindergartens in the Mid-1800s**

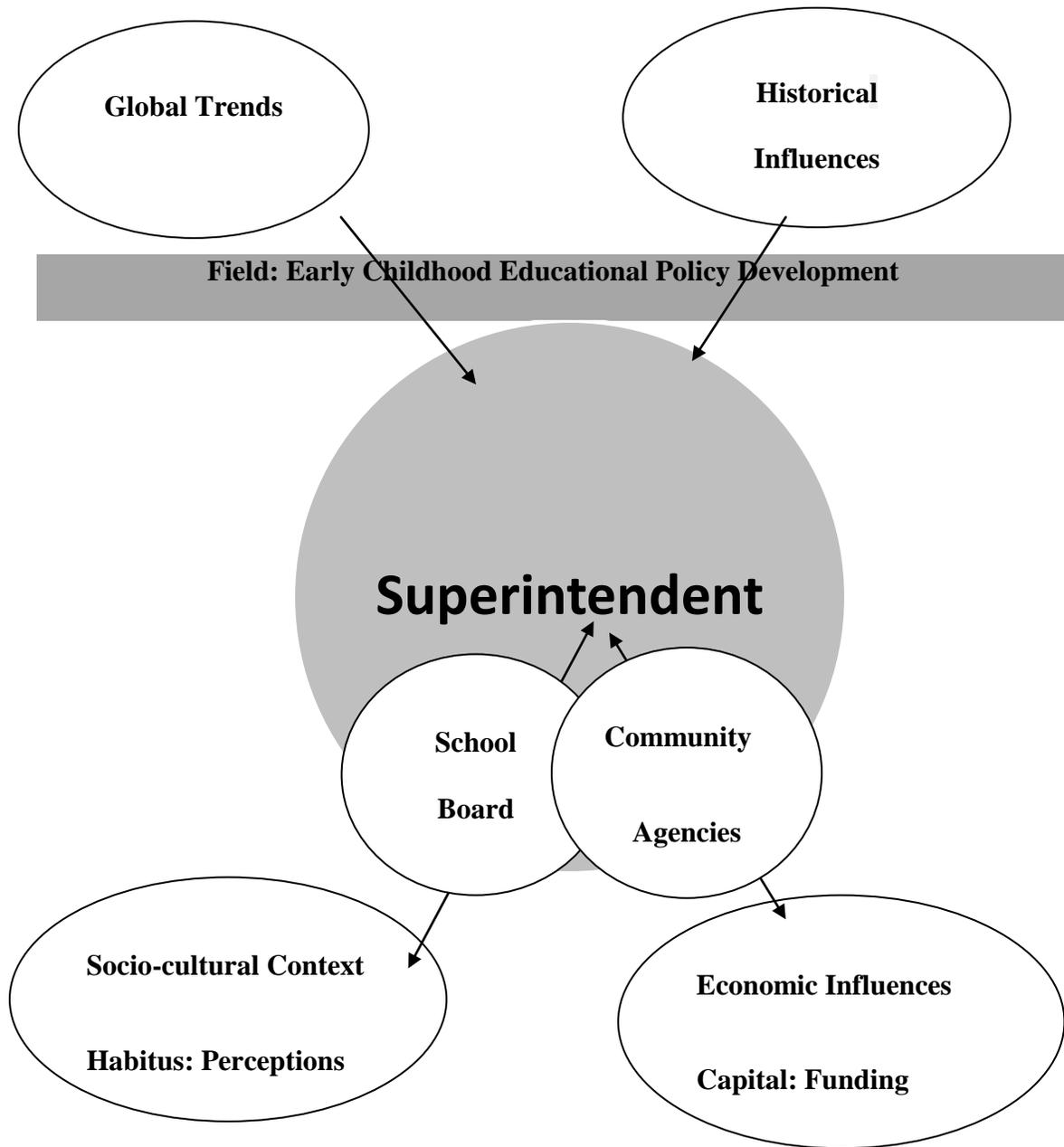
## Theoretical Frameworks

The theories that support the research included in this review were the aforementioned theories of the early childhood theorists spanning two hundred years of study about young children, including Locke, Froebel, Rousseau, Owen, Oberlin, Pestalozzi, Horace Mann, Dewey, Piaget, Montessori, and Vygotsky, to name a few. All were important contributors, laying the building blocks -- individually and sometimes intertwined -- to bring us a comprehensive foundation of varying perspectives on the most valuable and significant practices to enhance the education of young children, preparing them to be life-long learners and productive adult citizens. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, it became evident that the importance of child and human development began to become embodied in social practices. As Harris stated, “the data, it revealed inequalities, educational deficiencies, and early school leaving for poor children” (Duane, 20010). These are the same criteria that superintendents today are grappling with in terms of strategies to alleviate the circumstances of poverty that are creating the achievement gap in their school systems.

My basic theoretical foundation was comprised by the early childhood theorists. However, the lens that I used is the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu’s Social Field Theory. The field that I was looking at was the common ground of a school district with K - 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students. The beauty of the social field model was that it was used to “portray complex, contextual, and contested interactions for example in the realm of educational policy”, such as universal pre-kindergarten policy (Anfara & Mertz, 2006). The reason Social Field Theory was valuable as a lens for this research was that it showed a moment in time or changes over a long period of time. Bourdieu’s theory can also show the interplay of the

many stakeholders, and how they affect each other's perceptions. As Bourdieu explains, the three important concepts of Social Field Theory are the field (location), capital (funding), and habitus (perceptions). These three concepts help a researcher visualize decision-making processes that may take place among the stakeholders or research participants (Anfara & Mertz, 2006).

In Figure 1.3, the development of Early Childhood Educational Policy is shown using an adaptation of Bourdieu's Social Field Theory with a focus on the superintendent. In Bourdieu's original graphical representation, two other circles interfaced the large circle in the middle, showing that other stakeholders -- for example, the superintendent -- would make an impact. This researcher agreed that the superintendent's decision-making process was affected by other stakeholders, but this study -- and, hence, this adapted figure -- focused on the superintendent and how he makes decisions to prioritize funding for his school district.



**Figure 1.3 Adaptation of Pierre Bourdieu's Social Field Theory**

As Bourdieu's Social Field Theory is used in this research, it resembles Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem, which also has a socio-cultural setting and similar influences on a child's life due to economic conditions and a child's historical background (Morgan, 2011, p. 175-176). As Bronfenbrenner states, "the essential variables in his social ecology theory are the essential variables attached to a child's environment" (Morgan, 2011, p. 176). As was seen in the historical background of early childhood, the environment that a child came from affected their success, and it continues to do so to this day.

"The theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory helps to frame studies of human ecology" (Morgan, 2011, p. 175), such as Bourdieu's theory and Bronfenbrenner. In Morgan's book, *Early Childhood Education: History, Theory, and Practice*, an entire chapter is dedicated to Critical Race Theory and how it undergirds the essence of public school classrooms historically, making the case that until we have open discussions and the availability of early childhood students as part of this dialogue, we will continue passing on racism and uneven educational opportunities (Morgan, 2011). Jonathan Kozol's haunting quote in Morgan (2011) makes the reader reflect on his own perceptions: "I was convinced that I was prejudiced in a manner over so many years that some of that prejudice undoubtedly would always be within me." As it was historically, the lens of Critical Race Theory is still an intrinsic part of early childhood policy decisions, both blatant and subversive.

### **Role of the Local Superintendent**

Educational leadership today differs radically from past decades. Stakeholders must realize that superintendents are appointed by school boards and school boards are voted on by the taxpayers: "As the chief executive officers of local school districts, almost all

superintendents are appointed by school boards” (Fowler, 2009, p.151). In North Carolina, local school boards play an active role in the education of the county they represent. Local school boards of rural towns try to find superintendent candidates whom they value as educational leaders and who can make good decisions on curriculum and other varied policy concerns for their constituents.

With the federal and state funding that is received by local school districts dwindling, the superintendent must make decisions with the aid of their district leadership team, whom they have chosen for expertise in their field of concentration. The leadership teams in these rural areas often have to wear many different hats and work together as a cohesive unit, making decisions in a holistic approach to the entire Pre-K-12 school system. Facing more and more budget cuts, superintendents must listen to their leadership teams, and study their district data to see how to make and achieve continuous academic growth in all areas and grade levels. “Thus, increasingly superintendents not only implement state and federal policies, but they try - both as individuals and through their professional organizations - to offer substantive input throughout the policy-making process” (Fowler, 2009, p. 151).

In Marzano, Waters, and McNulty’s *School Leadership that Works*, the authors remind the reader of Deming’s statement that to have continuous improvement, leaders must “keep it alive by keeping the goals of the organization up front in the minds of employees and judging the effectiveness of the organization in terms of these goals” (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p.16). If the goal of the organization of a rural school district is to provide an education meeting the needs of all students, then a superintendent who wants to be a change agent must do a needs assessment of his/her district and look critically at how he/she

is prioritizing funding needs to achieve this goal in the school system's budget each year, encompassing the needs of all students from the youngest to high school.

“Education in rural America may be substandard. Less money per student is spent on education in rural America than anywhere else. In 1999, 40 percent of U.S. public schools were in rural small towns that enrolled 26 percent of federal education dollars. These rural towns only received 23 percent of federal education dollars” (Lyman & Villaini, 2004, p.13). Therefore, rural superintendents must carefully prioritize what is needed to help these children reach their goals. Transformational leadership occurs when superintendents see the whole picture of their community and district's needs, and thoughtfully study how every agency and person in the county system impacts the end result of academic success. “School and district administrators, therefore need to think creatively about how to promote communities of practice without inadvertently reinforcing education's norm of compliance” (Wagner & Kegen, 2006, p. 80). Superintendents use the information from the communities of practice to make wise and relevant budget decisions that can drive the instruction in their district to reach district academic goals.

“In November 1996, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) specified six national performance standards in school administrator preparation, identifying the knowledge, skills, and dispositions deemed necessary to be effective educational leaders (ISLLC, 1996). Of the ISLLC standards, Standard Five relates specifically to ethics and leadership” (Enomoto & Kramer, 2007, p. xvii; Wilmore, 2008). This standard expects all administrators to take into consideration the diversity of their school district and to commit to finding all means to ensure that all students receive equal opportunities to reach their highest

potential through the availability of a quality education in their rural community, just as students will receive a quality education in an urban community. Dr. Bonnie Fusarelli contributed a chapter to *Handbook of Education Politics and Policy* that noted that school reform must focus on a collaborative effort from not only school systems, but also other agencies looking at such important keys such as “learning readiness” (Cooper, Cibulka, & Fusarelli, 2008, p.369).

In Appendix G, the researcher of this study has made a chart showing the progression of education in the United States from the 1800s to present. America has often looked at the educational process as a vehicle to reach an improved society (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Educational leaders today continue to study early childhood and daycare practices of the past as described in Appendix G, but still gravitate to the current controversies stirred up by passionate people on each side of the decision to create quality child care (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). As Tyack stated, “Once people recognize that the need for daycare is not a new or temporary problem, they might conclude that its permanence is best understood as the result of long-term trends in families and public institutions (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, pp.6-7; Steinfels, 1973).

Only recently had the superintendency started to reflect the demographics of the majority of teachers. Females tended to stay in the classroom as teachers, mostly due to family obligations and choices that women made to stay in a more nurturing classroom-based role. Just recently more females had begun to venture out into administrative leadership roles, and many were in rural America. “Sixty percent of women serving as a superintendent were in small town districts, with 60 percent of women were in districts with under 3,000

students” (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 85.). Women superintendents tended to be nurturing just as they were as past teachers and mothers.

### **Recent Empirical and Conceptual Research Concerning Early Childhood**

In the last decade, empirical qualitative research articles have begun to surface concerning universal and targeted pre-kindergarten. However, little has been found that drills down on how rural superintendents prioritize funding for public school pre-kindergarten initiatives. The researcher of this study desires to add to the fund of empirical research on rural superintendents in North Carolina and their decision-making processes to prioritize funding for early childhood programs.

In 2011, Casto and Sipple studied the decision-making process surrounding the implementation, maintenance, and partnering involved in the implementation of a statewide universal pre-kindergarten program, looking at five rural school districts in New York State. The interesting finding of this study is that rural superintendents were often making decisions for implementation due to research on best practices aligned with the character and needs of their community. This study was done just this year in rural America, but in a Northern state. In the implications for further research, it is encouraged that that research be done in other rural and urban areas of the United States.

An empirical study entitled “The Impact of Nonprofit Collaboration in Early Child Care and Education on Management and Program Outcomes” (Selden, Sowa, & Sandfort, 2006) showed the growth of a contributing body of knowledge on collaboration by exploring one type of inter-organizational relationship -- interagency collaboration -- in early care and education. This study looks at New York and Virginia, examining implementation of pre-

kindergarten in public school districts and the impact on non-profit child care centers. More research was noted to be needed on the long-term impact of collaborations. This study noted that school systems pay employees' higher wages than do child care centers, which may result in teachers leaving those centers for public school jobs. Another study, "Introduction: Crossing Boundaries and Colliding Worlds: The Politics of Prekindergarten Education" (Brown, McCabe, & Sipple, 2011), looks at access to early childhood education in the private and public sectors. The study raises issues for further research: Would a publicly funded and publicly accountable early childhood system displace workers in private child care? Do children in poverty need services beginning at birth, as many have in European countries, in order to experience long-term gains?

To support the evolving need for pre-kindergarten services, the empirical study entitled "From Child's Garden to Academic Press: The Role of Shifting Institutional Logics in Redefining Kindergarten Education" (Russell, 2011) provides a comprehensive explanation for the evolution of kindergarten. The study also emphasizes how popular conceptions of what constitutes a kindergarten education may have shifted, focusing primarily on images in California from 1950 to 2009. The data collected was from sources that provided some insight into how key institutional actors were framing the discussion of kindergarten over time --- newspaper articles, policy documents, archives of professional associations, and all articles that had "kindergarten" in their titles in the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* from 1950 through 2009. Secondary histories and newspaper accounts to identify state legislation, as well as text of proposed or enacted bills and curriculum documents from the California Department of Education (CDE), were also studied.

Interviews with longtime members of the CDE, with the founder of the California Kindergarten Association, and with two of the group's current leaders focused on the mission and how it evolved over time.

The evaluation of this study was a concern for the author because he could not analyze local policy, which likely had the greatest effect on teacher practice, systematically over time. However, what is important to me, as a researcher, in this study is the awareness that newspapers, state policy talk and organized early childhood professional activities over time recast the purpose of kindergarten education from support for a child's development to a foundation for future academic achievement. What happened in the course of six decades to the face of kindergarten in public school systems could possibly be happening to pre-kindergarten now; the discussion by all stakeholders is taking a very comparable journey as we speak.

Desimone, Payne, Fedoravicius, Henrich, & Finn-Stevenson (2004) looked at the implementation of preschool programs in elementary schools using the research design of focus groups. Five programs were purposefully selected to represent variation in geography, race/ethnicity, and income in Colorado, Connecticut, Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Missouri. All programs had been in operation for five years. Data was collected from 20 preschool teachers, 22 kindergarten teachers, 53 parents, and 10 schools in these five states to show perceptions of the success of the public school pre-kindergarten programs.

A 2008 empirical study examined early childhood educators' beliefs about what children need prior to entering kindergarten, aiming to address gaps in the literature. Four focus groups were conducted with providers from each of three types of settings (public,

private, and family) for a total of 12 groups with 81 participants. The focus group interviews were tape-recorded with participants' consent. Interviews were conducted in Spanish and English. Demographic data was collected, and transcripts with side-by-side English and Spanish versions were coded for themes by the lead author of the study and a research assistant who was blind to the hypotheses. Participation was voluntary and a modest gift was given to focus group members (Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Ritchie, Karoly, & Howes, 2008).

In the last five years, discussion of early childhood has been in the media weekly. In 2011, a study was done to see how media are framing the public movement on this topic. The researcher studied five major print media sources targeting a broad public audience. These were chosen to explore ways in which the current movement toward universal pre-kindergarten is being framed by politicians, advocates, and the media. The data collection process used political spectacle theory by looking for rhetorical patterns and symbolic representations consistent with political statements quoted in the media and media language (Brown & Wright, 2011).

Again, the researcher of this study sees that the topic of early childhood programming continues to be in the forefront in the minds of many Americans. Though many empirical and conceptual studies are being done on this topic, little or no evidence of how superintendents prioritize funding is available. The specific topic of rural North Carolina needs to be researched to assist the citizenry of rural North Carolina towns in their desire for available, high-quality early care for their children.

## **Program Development for Young Children from the 1960s to the Present**

In 1964, Dr. Benjamin Bloom conducted a research study that would get the conversational ball rolling concerning the idea that the earliest years of a child's life make an everlasting imprint on that child. Due to Bloom's dialogue about the importance of the early years, federal legislators began to look at how to minimize the readiness disparities of children born into poverty as they enter kindergarten.

Head Start legislation by the federal government was begun in 1965 during the Johnson era using federal funds (Zigler & Styfco, 2004, 2010). The Head Start program was begun for disadvantaged, low-income students and children at risk due to disabilities, and it was given a federal funding source (Cryer, 2003; Soto, 2000; Zigler & Styfco, 2004). From 1965 on, President Johnson made the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which impacted young children of low socioeconomic status, central to his antipoverty and Great Society programs (Kirst & Wirt, 2005; Merrow, 2002; Zigler & Styfco, 2004). Title I legislation, in the eighties called Chapter One legislation, began in North Carolina in 1987 for low socioeconomic students in the public school setting as a new initiative; the state allowed school systems to create public school pre-kindergartens using the federal money assigned to the school systems (Aber et al., 2007).

In 1990, young special education students were given a huge boost by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which states that preschoolers with a disability must receive services in the least restrictive environment from the day they turn three years old (Zigler & Styfco, 2010, p. 129). And since 1997, one of the pre-eminent early childhood program studies has been the Head Start Early Childhood program study, the Head Start

Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES), which is now on its third progress study report. This study involves a random national sample of 3,200 children and families in forty Head Start early childhood programs.

Other program developments have focused on quality of teachers in the classroom, which is linked to child outcomes (Zill et al., 2001). In 2001, a study sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement assessed demographic information about early childhood programs. Data was collected using questionnaires sent to a random sample of programs across the United States. Participation by 1,902 teachers, most of them white women, gave the study a look at characteristics of early childhood teachers and structural elements of early care in the United States (Saluja, Early, & Clifford, 2001).

This research study drew evidence from many other studies of Head Start, Title I pre-kindergarten, and other early childhood programs in the research literature (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Gomby, Lerner, Stevenson, Lewitt, & Behrman, 1995; Schumacher & Rakpraja, 2001).

In the last decade there has again been a strong movement in some states to extend pre-kindergarten availability in the public school setting to all children, not just those at risk by reason of socioeconomic status (Clifford & Crawford, 2009; Goffin, 2007; Gormley & Phillips, 2003). Many mothers have found it necessary to join the workforce, which has led to a need for child care.

Most current state pre-kindergarten programs exist because of federal funding targeting children with disabilities. Many of the parents of disabled children also want universal pre-kindergarten for all students so that their disabled children can learn in

inclusive classroom settings with typically-abled students whom they can interact with and model, just as they will be able to do in K-12 in public school. The present intensification of a push towards universal pre-kindergarten shows a recognition that all children, not just at-risk children, need and will benefit from this opportunity.

Early childhood education continues to have links to past conflicting opinions about young children and their innate curiosities. Varied schools of thought propose different modes of delivery of instruction. In the 1980s, Vygotsky felt that very young children should be permitted to follow their innate curiosities; in comparison to the theory of didactic instruction described by Horace Mann, who espoused a canned, direct curriculum. In the United States, public schools have seen direct instruction and assessment creep down into our kindergartens, and some constituents fear that the same would happen to pre-kindergarten in a public school setting (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009; Nutbrown et al., 2008; Soto, 2000; Spodek, 1973).

Today, the private and public school sectors still have varied historical forces pulling advocates in different directions, making it difficult for the early childhood voices to resonate in unison to make universal pre-kindergarten a reality. Private sector preschools often are church-based with at-home mothers as teachers in a half-day setting. Other private facilities are for-profit daycare centers, with minimal slots, that would lose both students and income if public school was made available to three- and four-year-olds. Opinion about universal pre-kindergarten is divided into four camps: Positive: (1) Pre-kindergarten education would help by making schools more accountable for their K-12 results and better using funds to create a foundation for improved academic results. (2) Politicians would begin to view pre-

kindergarten as a way to improve National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores. Negative: (1) The culture of testing and didactic instruction could filter down to pre-kindergarten. (2) Parents disagree on whether childcare should be housed in private or public institutions, or indeed conducted outside the home at all.

The heated debate over community and private organizations versus public school institutions teaching our youngest children continues. The above-mentioned ideologies force universal pre-kindergarten straight into the political limelight (Fuller & Pai, 2007). Appendix G lists a timeline of federal regulations involving early childhood, along with other educational milestones. To date, there are still three main federal policies on the use of federal funds to educate young children being employed in North Carolina:

1. Head Start and child care subsidies are for low-income children (Clifford & Crawford, 2009).
2. Federal funding is in place for children with disabilities (Cohen, 2001).
3. Head Start and public schools could collaborate, sharing their strengths of low class size and providing comprehensive services such as healthcare, parent instruction, and academics (Gilliam, 2008).

However, the original goal of hiring community-based individuals to teach children in Head Start is still being researched as an effective tool for student achievement, in comparison to hiring qualified educators as public schools do (Fuller & Pai, 2007; Zigler & Styfco, 2004).

This short historical overview leads us to the thoughts of North Carolina constituents today, and the question of where we go next in the debate over universal pre-kindergarten.

## **North Carolina: A Rural State**

One hundred counties comprise the state of North Carolina and eighty five of them are identified as rural by the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center (<http://www.ncruralcenter.org/index.asp>). Only fifteen are classified as urban. For this research study, the researcher also used the definition of “rural” given by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (<http://www.ncreportcards.org/src/glossary.jsp>). In order to define what was meant by a “rural North Carolina town,” the researcher of this study determined that living in a rural county in North Carolina presented challenges for parents in finding quality pre-kindergarten services, regardless of the socioeconomic level of the parent, due to the lack of availability of any early childhood choices in rural areas compared to early childhood programming in urban areas.

In this study, rural schools were located in a rural county of North Carolina identified by using the map of North Carolina counties at the website of the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center (<http://www.ncruralcenter.org>). The researcher noted that the Center disaggregated statistical data to arrive at the “rural” or “urban” classification for all North Carolina counties.

In 2007, the Rural School and Community Trust looked at recent literature and shared a report, “Quality Teachers: Issues, Challenges, and Solutions for North Carolina’s Overlooked Rural Communities” (McCullough & Johnson, 2007), that examined rural counties in North Carolina. The authors stated that rural counties in North Carolina are manifesting two kinds of demographic changes: They are showing either an increase in economic development or a severe decrease in economic prosperity. “In each situation, the

rural counties are experiencing demographic changes that impact the profile of the rural community” (Cowan, 2010, p. 10; McCullough & Johnson, 2007).

In this study, the researcher used the new research as a foundational stepping stone to learn more about the whys of funding decisions by rural superintendents of today through case study. Since the changes in North Carolina’s population demographics suggest an influx of non-English speaking families and, due to the loss of jobs in small rural towns, an increasing number of families living at the poverty level, then understanding the whys of budget funding decisions by local school district superintendents is important for all involved.

The Rural School and Community Trust shared that “children in rural communities are afforded neither resources nor the quality teaching they need to overcome their challenges and experience academic and personal success” (McCullough & Johnson, 2007, p. 5-6). This statement sums up the urgency to research rural school superintendents’ priorities to fund programs for early childhood in their districts. In conclusion it is imperative that all children no matter where their family chooses to reside in the state of North Carolina, rural or an urban area, they must all have equal access to an excellent education beginning with quality programs for early childhood education (Jimerson, 2004).

### **Path of Public School Funding to North Carolina Districts**

It is important to note how funding for pre-kindergarten and K-12 programs flows to public school districts in North Carolina because funding is structured differently in different states. Pre-kindergarten in public schools is a new phenomenon in the United States, currently implemented in fewer than five percent of the states. Funding was created by some

states using state funds such as lottery monies. This description will help explain the dilemma for North Carolina public schools in trying to find adequate funds for public school pre-kindergarten implementation. “Since Colonial times through the War Between the States, it was decided that government administration in North Carolina could be efficiently centralized in Raleigh, the capital city. Therefore, following the English tradition, North Carolina established county government for local administration of many functions” (Bell, 2007).

Today, due to North Carolina’s growing population and many economic changes, city and county governments must learn to cooperate in creating a vision while using their resources wisely. “In 1931 independent school districts in North Carolina were abolished. The NC legislature created geographically defined school administration units overseen locally by elected school boards. They were given no taxing power; instead they are funded by counties, state, and federal governments. In NC the local responsibility for health, education, and welfare is vested in the county government. However, county commissioners have limited discretion in whether or how much to fund them. In contrast, Bell stated in his article that these services may be carried out at the state level or vested locally in cities, counties, special districts, or a combination thereof” (Bell, 2007).

“Last June, lawmakers passed a biennial state budget that included \$7.44 billion for K-12 public schools for the 2012-13 school year. This \$ 7.44 billion education budget total includes a \$503 million “discretionary” reduction for school districts. This is money that districts will receive, but then immediately return to the state” (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2012).

“The NC Education Lottery provides an important revenue stream (\$419 million in 2010-2011) for education. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) allocates the money. Yet, if you consider these allocations as they relate to the total lottery fund, the percentage for funding pre-kindergarten programs for at-risk 4-year olds is only 5% of the total lottery budget” (NC Public Schools, 2012). This lottery amount for pre-kindergarten is the only state funding that North Carolina gives counties for implementation of four-year-old at-risk pre-kindergarten at this time. The dilemma is that the state courts under Superior Court Judge Howard Manning are saying that NC must administer pre-kindergarten to all four-year-olds in NC who qualify for the services, without a funding source being given to the districts to implement this order fully.

Local governments in North Carolina are providers of many services. NC county governments support school systems; K-12 public schools are one of the chief services authorized by county government in the state. In many other states, school districts have a more important role than do county government and county commissioners in North Carolina. In North Carolina, the local responsibility for health, education, and welfare of citizens in rural and urban areas is an important function of our county commissioners (Bell, 2007).

“The state of North Carolina Department of Revenue has established a minimum tax rate of \$1.50 per hundred-dollar valuation. Local boards of education approve local budgets that are submitted to county commissioners for final approval. Commissioners establish the local tax rate based on approved needs.....The state of North Carolina provides basic support for school funding with 41.2% of General Fund dollars earmarked for public education.

Limits on local supplemental funding for education do not exist in North Carolina other than those established thru local legislation. The primary unit of allocation is average daily membership (ADM)...In February of each year, school districts are notified of their anticipated allotments for planning purposes. These are based on a continuation formula from the prior year and new ADM projections. Within two weeks following the adjournment of the state legislature, allotments are made to all districts in the form of funds they can draw against (Testerman & Brown, 1999). However, the ADM formula is designated only for K-12 grade levels and not pre-kindergarten at this time.

“The Public School Fund (PSF) is appropriated from the state General Fund which is derived from sales taxes, as designated by the North Carolina General Statutes and State Board of Education policy. The School Machinery Act of 1933 established a state system of school finance in North Carolina. State funds for public K-12 schools are provided solely through annual appropriations and flat grants” (Testerman & Brown, 1999).

### **North Carolina Court Supports Young Children**

In 1997 and in 2004 the North Carolina Supreme Court ruled in *Leandro v. State of North Carolina* (commonly referred to as “The Leandro Case”) that North Carolina had failed to provide its neediest children with a “sound basic education” as the North Carolina State Constitution guarantees. Judge Howard Manning, who presided over the case, continues to press lawmakers to live up to this state mandate today.

On June 22, 2011, Judge Manning held a hearing to discuss whether proposed cuts in state funding violated the rights of North Carolina children. The proposed funding cuts for education might have entailed huge teacher and teacher assistant layoffs, and basically

dismantled early childhood programming (Charlotte Observer Editorial Board, 2011). Judge Manning noted in his order, “The financial crisis notwithstanding, the basic educational assets guaranteed to each and every child in the North Carolina Public Schools must remain...” (*Charlotte Observer* Editorial Board, 2011). In this legislation the funding for Smart Start and More at Four for North Carolina’s young children living in poverty would have been greatly cut. Early childhood again, as in the past, struggled to be funded and used as a strategy for improving the lives of young children.

Judge Manning’s major issue before the North Carolina court was whether or not the North Carolina General Assembly’s 2011 budget bill, which stated that More at Four would be consolidated into the Division of Child Development, was in conformity with the Supreme Court’s Leandro II decision. The Hoke County Board of Education and the Asheville City Board of Education were the plaintiffs; the State of North Carolina and the State Board of Education were the defendants. The plaintiffs were concerned that pre-kindergarten services for prospective “at-risk” North Carolina four-year-olds would not be made available given the cuts in the proposed North Carolina budget.

In the previous case, Leandro II, Part V. 358 NC 640-645, the Supreme Court had stated that “the state has “educational obligations for at-risk” prospective enrollees (children not yet of age to go to public kindergarten). The concern of the evidence of the problem is the extent of the deficiencies in the NC budget in affording all eligible prospective enrollees become guaranteed of the opportunity to obtain a sound basic education and North Carolina’s obligation to address and correct it” (358 NC 644).

Judge Manning is also looking closely at the wording of a provision in the new budget stating that a 205 cap would be used for at-risk student slots. Given the budget cuts -- 20 percent, or \$32 million -- many children would not be served and families of those designated as “at-risk” by reason of income could be charged copayments. At about the time of this ruling, the More at Four Program changed its name to NC Pre-K.

The concern of the legislature with Judge Manning’s court ruling is due to the precarious affairs of the state budget as a whole; legislators are having difficulty finding the large new amount needed to basically fund a new grade level statewide. State Republican Party leaders have asked that the state be allowed to not implement this court order due to budgetary concerns. An attorney for the Leandro plaintiffs, Melanie Dubis, has stated that “North Carolina may have more than 65,000 four-year-olds who could be labeled as ‘at risk’, but currently less than half of them are served” (Stancill, 2011).

Many early childhood educators not only statewide, but across the country, are looking to how this court order will play out in North Carolina, which had been known nationally as an educational leader. The years of educational leadership with Governor James Hunt, who not only helped to create the Smart Start program but was also a founding father for National Board Certification for teachers, made North Carolina a shining example of quality educational progress for all children.

Quality pre-kindergarten programming had been seen as a foundational piece for the building of a top-notch educational system. The goal of all children being ready to learn and grow to become 21<sup>st</sup>-century learners has been the cornerstone of the effort to make the North Carolina populace career-ready in future years.

How this legislation turns out is being closely watched, because its decision could reverberate nationally and affect early childhood programming decisions in all states. Jack P. Shonkoff, M.D., Director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, stated in a Smart Start communication that “ To my knowledge, this is the first time that a court order has recognized what decades of scientific research has shown – that the foundation for learning ( whether strong or weak) is built long before a child starts kindergarten. Indeed, science tells us that early experiences literally shape the architecture of the developing brain. With this knowledge as a context, the court’s decision is legally responsible, economically wise, and morally commendable” (Heller, 2011).

Since July 18, 2011, when Judge Manning delivered his order that North Carolina is “to provide the quality services of the NC Pre-K to any eligible four year old that applies”, heated discussions have ensued. The following section describes how the decision to implement has unfolded.

### **Most Recent Early Childhood Developments**

On May 27, 2011, Governor Bev Perdue submitted an application for the second wave of funding from the federal competitive grant program entitled Race to the Top, which encourages educational innovation and reform from the state level. These funds are sorely needed in the light of budget constraints occurring in North Carolina. In August 2011, Judge Manning reaffirmed his insistence that his court ruling be instated as quickly as possible. He insisted that North Carolina needed to help its prospective four-year-olds be ready to learn in kindergarten.

On August 11, 2011, Governor Perdue issued an executive order that the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) was to develop a plan explaining how to serve all eligible at-risk four-year-olds. On October 10, 2011, Governor Perdue requested resources to enable 6,300 additional at-risk four-year-olds to enroll in NC Pre-K starting in January 2012. The Governor stated that DHHS had determined that if we put these 6,300 children in pre-kindergarten slots that would equal the number of children served in the prior year in More at Four programs that had been cut from the 2011 budget. Looking closely at the budget and trying to be fiscally responsible, she stated that NC could use \$27 million from the bottom line end-of-year closing funds for Fiscal Year 2011. These were funds left over but not allocated at end of year. She also included \$3 million from the state's contingency and emergency fund (Clark, 2012).

### **Proponents vs. Opponents: What is at Stake?**

In the United States we have a diverse, ever-growing population. Many research articles discuss the political dynamics of American education, and show that one of the concerns of public school operations is that children's early needs are seen as going unmet (*Investing in young children*, 2007; Kirst & Wirt, 2005). This conflict is arising due to an increasingly diverse population looking to our political system for answers, while traditionalists are wary of change (DeShano da Silva et al., 2007; Kirst & Wirt, 2005). Upon reviewing the literature, it was very evident that many interest groups are involved in early childhood education. As stated in *The Handbook of Education Politics and Policy*, "advocacy coalitions have emerged as powerful players in the educational policy arena" (Cooper, Cibulka, & Fusarelli, 2008). Advocacy coalitions are made up of many different interest

groups with varied options to reach a desired outcome. The role of these groups is instrumental in the policy-making process. The personal nature of the early childhood debate as well as the conflicting values systems involved lead to fragmented groups lacking a single clear voice. This divisiveness in educational thought allows the powerful players to emerge in the advocacy coalitions. Unity of thought is hard to accomplish in diverse groups (Fusarelli, 2003; Fuller & Pai, 2007; Kieff, 2009). On the other hand, these groups do have lists of factors affecting policy development and change that often have many similarities. Therefore, researchers in early childhood are also trying to decipher the best way to assess these lists of criteria for the best model for early childhood education, with so many groups vying to create the best policy for all.

Some stay-at-home mothers, mothers who have nannies, or families who can enroll their children in half-day private preschool programs are often vocal in saying that they do not want full-day, universal pre-kindergarten or kindergarten mandated for their families. These types of middle- and upper-class opponents agree to have early childhood programs for the economically disadvantaged, but often are opposed to an early childhood mandate for all families, which they feel would take away their freedom to make parenting choices about pre-kindergarten services (Gormley & Phillips, 2003). Curriculum for advantaged and disadvantaged children was brought into the discussion because impoverished children often do not have the life experiences that advantaged children have, leading to class-based distinctions that have been part of the argument over universal pre-kindergarten since the turn of the twentieth century (Clifford & Crawford, 2009; Fuller & Pai, 2007; Imig & Meyer, 2008; Jenkins, 1998; Spodek, 1973). Societal issues such as crime, dropout prevention, and

poor health care are often the impetus for policymakers to consider funding public pre-kindergarten (*Hearing on H.R. 2343*, 2008).

In conclusion, after exploring the newest research, it is evident that most young children in the U.S. are presently in some type of early childhood setting weekly. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have minimal access to quality pre-kindergarten settings at this time in North Carolina, whereas their middle- and upper-class counterparts tend to have access to quality private programs due to their families' ability to afford high tuition rates. Compounding the issue in rural areas is the unavailability of enough slots for all children who qualify for subsidized pre-kindergarten services. In comparison, middle- and upper-class families in rural North Carolina tend to be able to transport their children a considerable distance each day so that they can attend quality pre-kindergarten programs. This discrepancy begins the lifelong struggle of trying to "catch up" academically and socially in American citizens' lives. Therefore, it would be beneficial for Congress to create a systematic program of research, "one that systematically tested the knowledge base about which approaches work – and for whom" (*Investing in young children*, 2007, p. 5). The Institute for Public Policy Research has been researching this issue in early childhood, and the researcher, Douglas J. Beshavro, gave testimony before the Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress in 2007. Some of the issues to be studied further are: (1) comparative studies of curricula; (2) parallel studies of class size for pre-kindergarten with those of K-12 class size; and (3) importance of formal education of teachers in relationship to No Child Left Behind legislation, to ensure that public pre-kindergarten teaching is of the same quality

as the best pre-kindergarten in the private sector (*Investing in young children*, 2007; Spodek, 1973).

If Congress finds that it is too costly to create universal pre-kindergarten at this time, then we must at least make sure that students from our lowest socioeconomic groups are being placed in child care settings that have been held to the highest and equivalent standards as the premier private child care facilities serving more affluent families. This can be done by using tax dollars to model and monitor all existing child care facilities, if we cannot yet afford to create a universal public school pre-kindergarten system.

How can the United States not afford to create a coherent, scaffolded infrastructure to give high-quality teacher training and make quality early childhood education available to all of our youngest citizens? Basically, we are turning our backs on the most important commodity for America's future success. The debate of homecare versus child care is a moot point because the majority of families now have both parents in the workforce and are feverishly looking for quality care for their young children, so that they can continue in their professions knowing their children are in the best quality situations during the day. I personally went through this agonizing search for quality care in rural North Carolina, even though I could have afforded high-tuition care if it had been located in my small rural town. Inequalities persist in many states because we are one of the last western nations to offer public pre-kindergarten programs. Some states believe that public early childhood programs are the way for their state to attract jobs and industries, fight crime, and support their K-12 educational institutions to become more successful (Bushaw & Gallup, 2008; Goffin, 2007; Gormley & Phillips, 2003; Merrow, 2002). However, North Carolina does not yet share that

belief. That is why this research examines how local school district superintendents are prioritizing funding out of the budgets they do have with federal, state, and local funding options.

It remains to be seen if the United States as a nation and North Carolina as a state will create a universal pre-kindergarten program for all children, some children, or none in the next decade. If after much study and research we continue to have a stratified system of early childhood choice for our citizens, then it will fall to local school boards and local superintendents to find an answer to help the families in their local school districts. Some states and some superintendents have already invested in early childhood programs. The problem is that if this is left as a subjective decision, then funding for early childhood programs can be cut whenever someone new takes office, at the whim and discretion of the persons in charge. The most prevalent issues at the forefront of the controversial subject of early childhood education are what do Americans value, do we want to fund universal pre-kindergarten, and if so, with what funding sources. A void of vocal and visible grassroots support for universal pre-kindergarten remains as well as the absence of a consensus of ideology about universal pre-kindergarten implementation. The decision remains to be made by the American people and their political voice. Rural North Carolinians will have to make this funding decision and make their wishes known to all stakeholders, including their local superintendents.

### **Chapter Summary**

Today the economy of the United States is faltering in much the same way as when it has gone through valleys of fiscal strife in past centuries. In this chapter, a timeline of

educational theorists and their impact on superintendents, parents, and community decisions regarding teaching young children was discussed. Policy-makers are concerned that American students are behind academically in the international market. A desire to improve school readiness, especially for all disadvantaged children, is becoming a national concern. Many long-term recent early childhood program research studies are showing significant returns on the investment of public dollars in long-term savings for our nation. Public costs in many areas are rising due to the failure of students in the public school system. Social problems such as crime, the need for more prisons, child abuse, and opposition to raising taxes outweigh the cost concerns of providing high-quality, state-funded pre-kindergarten programs. The economic conditions in America today make it quite difficult for a family to live on only one income. Even welfare today continues to have strict requirements and time limits for receiving benefits. Therefore, parents need to have the ability to find quality child care in order to work or go back to school for further education.

As the literature review explains, the discussion of public early childhood education began in the eighteenth century to assist children in poverty, and to help students learn the values required to be good citizens. This was the first time that young children were to be taught outside the home; due to the need for impoverished mothers to work, public school kindergarten began to be implemented in areas of poverty (Duane, 2010; Morgan, 2011).

With a sense of urgency about using dollars wisely, North Carolina as well as other state and local district superintendents are beginning to look carefully at the cost-benefit analyses of early childhood programming for our public school students. Investment in high-quality universal pre-kindergarten has been suggested to yield many benefits for all

constituents, giving more credence to raising taxes to fund it. An investment in credible results for children will lessen the burden of more taxes needed for such things as prisons and looming health care costs, due to poor health and social habits of an uneducated populace (DeShano da Silva et al., 2007; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001). Improving the life of all citizens happens through advocacy for the needs of children and families. Due to the vulnerability of young children and their families, we, as educators, and the general populace have an ethical responsibility to give a voice to their critical needs (DeShano da Silva et al., 2007; Kieff, 2009; Merrow, 2002).

Historically, as the literature review shows, a crucial disadvantage of not having enough quality early childhood programs has been the absence of a national infrastructure for early childhood education. Because early childhood programs have grown in phases with very different funding sources and built on different theories, each with its own specific goals and objectives, it has been difficult to monitor and measure quality amongst all early childhood programs (Zaslow, Martinez-Beck, Tout, & Halle, 2011).

However, the state of North Carolina has recognized this concern, and has been a leader in constructing a comprehensive system with all funding sources having been at the table monthly, trying to create a high-quality early childhood infrastructure for the state, from 2000 until the 2012 budget crisis. The *State Preschool Yearbook*, which is published by the National Institute for Early Childhood Education Research (NIEER), is a resource to show how each state is progressing annually in early childhood programming (Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Sansenelli, & Hustedt, 2009). The *Yearbook* indicates that as of 2012, North

Carolina is beginning to go backwards in terms of new early childhood initiatives being initiated or those in place being supported and scaffolded.

This study provided qualitative, thick, and descriptive data from the responses of rural North Carolina superintendents shown in Chapter Three through the methodology used. The data from the superintendents' responses was compared by themes and coding to the impact of the transition from home to kindergarten in a public school setting that had been shown by previous studies and theorists concerning young children, especially rural students in low-income groups (Fantuzzo, Rouse, McDermott, Sekino, Childs, & Weiss, 2005; Grace & Brandt, 2006; Pigott & Israel, 2005). Exploring funding decisions of rural superintendents in North Carolina and how they support their principals concerning readiness of students entering kindergarten looked at a crucial point in the creation of successful students and successful schools in North Carolina, which make School of Excellence and Adequate Yearly Progress distinctions. Linear cause-and-effect descriptions of why students are entering kindergarten not ready to learn on an equal footing with their peers can miss the fact that what is happening today -- the effect -- may manifest itself as tomorrow's cause (Wagner & Kegan, 2006). Administrators, as instructional leaders of their schools, make decisions through the course of a day that can have a major impact on their staff and students (Fullan, 2008; Hart, 1997). Principals with their superintendent's leadership wear many different hats. Administrators monitor student and teacher performance, share decision-making, and help maintain a school's or district's vision through overall leadership (Cotton, 2000).

Therefore, as Chapter Three, on methodology, will demonstrate, it was imperative that the superintendents interviewed in this study, who make so many important decisions

every day for North Carolina's rural schools, had their decision-making processes on funding choices explored as they relate to the effect of quality early childhood experiences on their student populations.

## **CHAPTER THREE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE METHODOLOGY**

Chapter Three discusses the rationale for the qualitative method used in this study; explains the study's research questions and research design; addresses reliability and validity issues; gives the researcher's subjectivity statement; and explores the study's theoretical and conceptual frameworks. At the conclusion of this chapter, the limitations of the study are discussed thoroughly.

### **Rationale: Qualitative Approach**

Qualitative research was the perfect match for this case study because it allowed for open-ended inductive thinking (Merriam, 1998). As previously stated, the purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of North Carolina rural superintendents regarding the use and funding of universal pre-kindergarten in their districts.

In their definition of qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) state that "qualitative research focuses on studying things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Klenke, 2008, p. 7). As a qualitative researcher I sought to construct meaning by analyzing the interview data from the superintendents. As a researcher, I sought to understand the meanings the superintendents had created about pre-kindergarten due to their experiences and their everyday perceptions of the world at large.

This study clearly lent itself to the qualitative investigative approach. A growing abundance of theoretically supportive research on early childhood exists in the literature review. One of the clear reasons for choosing qualitative research was that inquiry involves making meanings from people's experiences (Akos & Galassi, 2004). This study examined

perceptions and their meanings, and asked if superintendent leadership supporting early childhood education is considered as a strategy to support broader school improvement.

This qualitative multi-case study used interviews in naturalistic settings, use of descriptive data, compilation of thematic meanings, and an inductive process, all of which are often main characteristics of qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Superintendent interviews and e-surveys, as part of the case study research, gave rich descriptions of the superintendents' views on public school pre-kindergarten. This thick and rich descriptive data will assist the reader in understanding the superintendents' views on early childhood education by allowing their individual voices to be heard more clearly (Merriam, 1998). Looking through the lens of a superintendent's real life experiences (Pelligrini & Bartini, 2000) is a process that may help create ways to improve achievement for all subgroups of students. As some researchers say, the purpose of qualitative research should be to advance a social justice agenda (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The interview inquiry approach collected data in natural settings that allowed the voices of the participants to shine through the open-ended question techniques. The research questions were oriented toward phenomenology, which is the subjects' lived experiences (Creswell, 2007).

In the superintendent's open-ended e-survey prompts and audio interviews, we obtained the emic view of the participants. Therefore, in the Findings section in Chapter Four, the reader will hear the etic views of the researcher through the cultural portrait drawn by the emic views of the participants and their school systems (Creswell, 2007).

This multi-case study was a bounded qualitative case study including the superintendents in rural North Carolina counties. “Case study research involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (i.e., a setting, a context)” (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). The issue studied was superintendents’ prioritization of funding public school pre-kindergarten in rural North Carolina counties. In this qualitative study, how the superintendents viewed universal pre-kindergarten was described (Merriam, 1998).

A multiple-case study design was used in order to compare and contrast between rural counties of North Carolina. This allowed the study to consider the influence of contextual factors on superintendent leadership and decision-making. The enhancement of generalizability and the ability to create understanding and meaningful connections were important reasons to use the cross-case analysis method in this research (Miles & Huberman, 1984). “By looking at a range of similar and contrasting cases, we can understand a single-case finding, grounding it by specifying how and where and, if possible, why it carries on as it does. We can strengthen the precision, the validity, and the stability of the findings” (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 29). Yin espouses that case study is “the preferred approach when why questions are to be answered” (Klenke, 2008, p. 63). Evidence from multiple superintendents’ case studies will hopefully be considered more robust than evidence from a single case study.

In summary, qualitative research in this study was aligned with Bogdan and Biklen’s (1998) description of the five qualitative research features, which include a naturalistic setting, descriptive data, process, inductive approach, and meaning. In this study, the

researcher went to the school district and used the superintendent as the direct source of data and as a key instrument in the study. Context was an important factor in this qualitative research, because the researcher could understand the interviewee's answers when observing them in their natural setting.

The researcher took the descriptive data collected, including their vernacular, and analyzed it. Qualitative research encompasses all data collected, as if it is a key to unlock a clearer picture that may lead to a new explanation of the topic being researched.

Because this was qualitative research, the data was approached inductively, which lent itself to gathering all bits and pieces and grouping them together to create meaning. Everyone gleans threads of meaning differently. In Creswell (2007), the author stated that grounding a theory in the views of participants will allow the researcher to study an action involving individuals. Therefore, the qualitative approach allowed the researcher in this study to look holistically at the complex leadership decisions superintendents make for their school systems. Each school district must be viewed as a whole, not only its parts, due to the immensity of its complex nature and intertwined relationships. It is more like a huge sociogram with impacts on varied parts of the whole structural system, not a linear impact involving only one other variable.

### **Research Question**

The main research question that initially framed the study was: How do rural North Carolina superintendents prioritize public school pre-kindergarten in their local school system budget funding? Why do they or do they not prioritize public pre-kindergarten

funding? Appendix B lists the specific interview questions used in pursuit of answers to this overarching question.

### **Participant Selection for Interviews**

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling. In purposeful sampling, subjects are chosen for research to enlarge your analysis or to test particular emerging themes and a working hypothesis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 274). The criteria for participant selection were: (a) current superintendents in the rural North Carolina County of study and (b) selection of two high funding counties and two low funding counties with a total of four rural superintendents to be interviewed (c) have participated in the e-survey. Based on these sample criteria, there were forty eight superintendents in North Carolina eligible to participate in this study. All said yes to agreeing to have a personal interview with the researcher after the e-survey if chosen. Since all 48 respondents to the e-survey said they were agreeable to be interviewed that is why after analyzing all the data the four who had fit all criteria and replied first were chosen to have the individual interviews. The researcher was striving for a 25% return rate of the e-survey, and was very pleased to have had a 55% return rate, which was used as one of the criteria to choose the four interviewees.

The researcher used large chart paper and grouped the responses from the e-survey questions about funding by high and low funding as well as by groups of regions of the state. The researcher looked at the groups and ranking within each group and verified the two highest funding and lowest funding counties of pre-kindergarten. If there were more in each group with the same amount of funding, the four that had replied first were chosen.

Due to the small sample size and a concern for possible county identification in this study, measures were used to protect their identity. Each superintendent was assigned a capital letter and a pseudonym to match A through D. The superintendents were not linked to the description of their counties or school districts.

### **Site Selection and Data Sample**

In order for there to be no possible preconceived findings in the study process, the superintendents were spread out through varied rural North Carolina counties. Four rural school systems were selected, including superintendents from varied regions to represent a variety of rural areas in the state.

Protocols were observed as aligned with North Carolina State University's Institutional Review Board in order to ensure that the participants did not experience harm as a result of participation in the study. Data was collected to determine which North Carolina counties are rural. From these school districts, a multiple-case, purposeful sampling method was employed to select four sites for further analysis of the superintendent leadership roles in early childhood with regard to their funding of public school universal pre-kindergarten. School districts were initially considered by listing those in rural areas in varied regions.

All rural counties received the e-survey; however, only four superintendents were selected to participate in a personal interview. A variety of demographic profiles were selected to ensure that sites had differing demographic student profiles. The district superintendents chosen reflected varied student populations based on socioeconomic status, which may influence early childhood policies. Two superintendents who highly prioritized funding for pre-kindergarten and two who did not were chosen for personal interviews.

The superintendents in this study were from rural counties in North Carolina. Each school system's total enrollment was listed after being chosen to be in the study. A breakdown of students by ethnicity was noted. The school systems' report of free/reduced lunch rate per district was noted and compared to the state average. The demographic data was reported by school district during the monthly report from NC WISE (North Carolina's student accountability database).

As stated previously, the population for this study was superintendents from rural North Carolina counties. The four interviews were comprised of four superintendents from varied regions in North Carolina tabulating to a total of four individual interviews with superintendents. In Appendix J on page 221 a table with their personal interview data given to the researcher from The Timeline of Significant Events is available. The age range of the four personal interviews was from ages 51 through 60. All four interviewees were male with one being African-American and the other three being Caucasian. The average years in education was 25 years. The average years spent as a superintendent was ten years.

The three landforms of North Carolina divide the state into three major geographic regions. The low, flat land along the Atlantic Ocean is North Carolina's coastal plain. The Piedmont is the middle region of the state, located between the coastal plain and the mountains. The western part of the state is the Mountains region, with elevations up to one mile high (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2006).

A comprehensive sample of all rural county superintendents by e-survey and four individual interviews were used for this qualitative study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Klenke, 2008; Yin, 2007). The superintendent interviews were assigned a pseudonym

and symbol in order that the records did not show any identifying information (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). After the four individual interviews with superintendents, the audiotapes and written notes were transcribed verbatim. Each rural county superintendent who was interviewed was assigned a random capital letter as a pseudonym from A to D and a name that begins with that letter in no special order describing the person or county as an identifier. County A was named Superintendent Adams, County B was named Superintendent Berry, County C was called Superintendent Conner, and County D was named Superintendent Douglas for better readability.

The superintendents had been promised that I would do my best to ensure that in no way could anyone reading my research be able to identify which person or which county had given responses to my research questions. The constant-comparative method was used to analyze the data. Transcripts of the recordings were thoroughly examined multiple times, looking and listening for phrases, words, and sentences that would lead to themes and/or categories that would be analyzed in both the interviews and the e-survey responses.

A typical multi-case sampling was used in this qualitative exploratory grounded theory case study, because the goal of the research was to find out the perceptions and experiences of superintendents with public school pre-kindergarten and other early childhood issues professionally and personally (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Klenke, 2008; Merriam, 1998). Superintendents of all rural counties in North Carolina were sent an e-survey. Four superintendents were chosen to be interviewed by purposive sampling of two chosen from rural areas that prioritized funding for public school pre-kindergarten and two that did not. Superintendents were chosen if they agreed by e-mail or phone on a first-come-

first-served basis with signature of an IRB consent form (Appendix A). Superintendents signed written IRB permission forms in order to participate in this study. Each page was initialed, and there was also a signature page (Appendix A).

### **Research Design/Data Collection**

This qualitative study used a combination of an e-survey questionnaire to all rural North Carolina superintendents and semi-structured interviews with four rural superintendents. Data collection began with the use of the e-survey questionnaire designed to determine specific leadership strategies and roles filled by the rural superintendents as well as to gather contextual data related to the challenges and priorities of the superintendents in rural areas (see Appendix B). The questionnaire was developed by the researcher using a framework that included components of North Carolina's "No Child Left Behind" regulations, as well as state and federal goals for school district improvement, and research information obtained during the literature review regarding early childhood and universal pre-kindergarten in the United States and/or other nations that implement universal pre-kindergarten programs. The questionnaire was reviewed by two early childhood experts to ensure face validity and clarity. Ronald Rebores (2003) stated that because "superintendents are state employees and education is a function of the state, then educational leaders should keep their personal lives from affecting their professional decision-making" (Rebores, 2003, p. 94).

Questionnaires and interviews did attempt to acquire a clear picture of what superintendents in rural North Carolina counties saw as their role in this millennium as school system instructional leaders and decision-makers regarding instructional program

implementation. Richard Elmore of Harvard University has urged superintendents over the last decade to focus on instructional leadership and “to think deeply how their work affects teaching and learning” (Epstein, 2004, p. 81). This study did try to help rural North Carolina superintendents reflect on whether their leadership was affecting implementation of programs that could have a huge impact on and represent a huge investment in their student population’s academic growth potential, with universal pre-kindergarten being the program studied in this research.

“Dewey believed that education is a lifelong process. Dewey also believed instruction should be developed along thematic and problem-solving lines” (Rebore, 2003, p. 103). As superintendents lead their districts with success, they will informally lead by example. As Kotter (1996) describes, the change process must be led by what he calls a “guiding coalition”, the size of which is related to the size of the organization as a whole. Change often starts with just two or three people. The group involved in successful transformations then grows to half a dozen in relatively small organizations, or small units of larger organizations (Kotter, 1996, p. 59).

After online survey data was completed for all rural county superintendents in North Carolina, then the four semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews allowed for follow-up to provide any clarifying data if needed. They also allowed for a thick and rich amount of descriptive data to be accumulated for study.

Data collection was time-limited, with e-survey data collected first. Permission to conduct a study was obtained from the selected superintendents. Directions for completing

the e-survey were delivered via email, with a link to the survey. The survey was conducted using online web-based survey tools.

The research study took place from February 12, 2012 through April 2012. The researcher e-mailed all eighty-five rural North Carolina superintendents an e-survey invitation with a web-link showing the nine questions concerning funding of pre-kindergarten in their county. To encourage participation, three reminder e-mails were sent using the Survey Monkey web tool. The first reminder was sent on February 22, 2012, entitled “Doctoral Student from North Carolina State University and Franklin County Thanks You for Participating in Very Brief E-survey”. Another email reminder was sent on February 27, 2012, entitled “Your Voice is needed. . . . .E-survey for Rural Superintendents Will Be Closing in a Week”. The final e-survey reminder was sent on March 6, 2012, entitled “Your Opinion Makes a Difference. . . Over 50% of Your Superintendent Colleagues Have Responded.”

Many of the superintendents who declined to take the survey called or e-mailed me to say that they were brand new to their districts, some only having been in place for a few weeks or months, and that they therefore felt they should not participate in the research since they had just arrived in their positions and could not give a clear and accurate enough picture in their answers to specific questions about funding for pre-kindergarten. The response rate would have been higher if these new superintendents had felt they could respond accurately. The high level of interest in this topic by the rural superintendents was quite evident. What surprised me was that I also received unsolicited personal e-mail messages from seven superintendents who had responded to the e-survey, but who wanted to give deeper responses

about their concerns over the lack of available Pre-K and the lack of school readiness of their entering kindergarten students. Many of these same themes were used in their personal e-mails, especially the concerns about child poverty, lack of affordable options, and the lack of quality preschool programs for all children in their rural counties

Superintendent interviews, an online survey, and school system data comprised the case study's primary data. Reflective journal writings (field notes) from the researcher were a secondary source of data. The specific data collected was interview recordings made with flip cameras and audio recorders; typed transcripts of interviews, handwritten observation notes taken immediately after the interview by jotting down the researcher's observations of each superintendent's perceptions as seen during the interview process; and field-note journals.

As the sole investigator, I used the affinity process as I listened numerous times to the audiotapes and took meticulous notes. After careful review of the four interviews as well as the responses on the e-survey, common themes emerged. As part of the affinity process, I took sticky notes and wrote comments and ideas about themes from the interview data. Then, using large sheets of chart paper, I grouped them by similarities. After this step, I named the similar groups with a title of a main theme or category that they represented. I then used the outcome of this affinity process with the e-survey data and compared and contrasted the themes and categories with the open-ended responses that came from the rural superintendents on the e-survey questions in a manner similar to the process I utilized with the data from the individual interviews. During this process, it was clear that open-coding was used.

The responses from the e-survey as well as the interviews gave a very clear and compelling picture of how these rural superintendents value the importance of education for young children, and the necessity of helping students during their K-12 experience in North Carolina's public school system. A locked filing cabinet was used to organize materials chronologically by superintendent and region, with file folders color-coded by region. All files were dated and assigned a title for easy access to hard copies of data. Also, online file folder systems were created for the data, such as survey data and interviews, on a secure drive. The audiotapes were erased from the flip cameras after the transcription process was completed. Several back-up files were created to avoid losing data for this research, using standard flash drives for USB ports. All materials were kept in a locked area at the researcher's home when not in use, and copies were kept on a flash drive in the local bank vault of the researcher as well as a vault in her home.

All rural North Carolina superintendents received an online invitation to participate in the online survey first. Details of the research study, the promise of confidentiality, and instructions on how to access the online "Survey of North Carolina Rural Superintendents Concerning Prioritization of Funding Universal Prekindergarten in Public Schools" were given. Online surveys were coded anonymously to ensure confidentiality. After the survey was online for one week, the researcher created an e-mail listing of who had not yet responded. E-mails reminders were sent out every few days to increase the response rate. A return rate of at least 25 percent was sought prior to data analysis.

Four superintendents from rural North Carolina were chosen for semi-structured interviews, including two whose data from the e-survey reflected high prioritization of

funding for public school pre-kindergarten and two who did not rate funding for public school pre-kindergarten as a high priority in their budgets. These four semi-structured interviews each consisted of a one hour interview (Creswell, 2007; Klenke, 2008; Krueger & Casey, 2008). Gatekeeper consent was given by the superintendents for all interviews, as well as consent given through the International Review Board process via signature pages (Seidman, 2006).

The interview protocol (Appendix A) was used in order to determine superintendent decision-making about prioritizing funding for universal pre-kindergarten. By the use of open-ended questioning techniques, participants were given the opportunity to describe their experiences with early childhood education and to offer suggestions of changes they felt would improve kindergarten readiness.

Questions were designed so that they allowed the information to be given in a delineated manner, in order to get at the core of determining what each superintendent thought was valuable to help make kindergarten students successful (Klenke, 2008; Seidman, 2006).

### **Multi-Case Studies: A Research Tool to Study Prioritizing Decisions**

In the earlier section of this chapter on recent empirical and conceptual early childhood research studies, examples were given of multi-case studies that have been conducted nationally concerning early childhood. The researcher of this study also used a multi-case-study approach in this examination of rural North Carolina superintendents and how they prioritize early childhood funding in their school systems.

In the opening paragraph of Robert Stake's *The Art of Case Study Research*, the author described case study as the researcher 'liking to hear their stories' in the study of a case of interest. He wrote that researchers interested in studying people or programs want to learn and enter the case study "with a sincere interest in learning how they function in their ordinary pursuits and milieus and with a willingness to put aside many assumptions while we learn" (Stake, 1995, p.1).

Robert Yin, in his book *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, cited a definition of case study from another author, Schramm, who wrote, "the central tendency among all types of case study is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result" (Yin, 2009, p. 17). This researcher is encouraged that using multi-case studies of rural North Carolina superintendents will shine a light on their decision-making processes and how they prioritize budget funding for early childhood programming.

This researcher is, however, mindful of the strengths and weaknesses in case study research. As discussed in Yin (2009), the researcher must "have targeted interviews with a focus on the case study topic, and provide insightful perceived causal inferences and explanations. If the researcher does this, then this shows strength of case study research. The weaknesses would come about if bias occurs due to poorly articulated questions, response bias, inaccuracies due to poor recall from the interviewer, and or reflexivity which happens when the interviewee gives what the interviewer wants to hear" (Yin, 2009, p. 102).

This researcher contemplated the use of a multi-case study in hopes that more than one case would "comprise a stronger study and make the results even more compelling" as

discussed by Yin (Yin, 2009, p. 62). However, this researcher was aware that the case study method often is “still questioned as able to produce a valid theory” (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000, p. 252).

In the past three decades, the field of education has begun to look to qualitative research when studying educational issues, hoping to find generalizability (Gomm et al., 2000). Stake has noted in his books that one study cannot usually give generalizability. However, “findings from one study in a naturalistic setting may apply to understanding a study of a *similar* situation” (Gomm et al, p. 75).

One strategy of case study research is use of clear-cut procedures in order to reduce the possibility of misinterpretation. Researchers use such procedures as “triangulation, a process of verifying facts through multiple data sources” (Klenke, 2008, p. 44). Stake suggests case study research’s “most important task is to show how a phenomenon appears in different contexts” (Stake, 2006, p. 27). Yin states that case studies may “investigate a contemporary phenomenon” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). This study interviewed North Carolina superintendents in rural school districts and asked them questions to look at how they responded in context and described their decision-making processes in prioritizing budget funding for early childhood programs in their systems.

### **Data Analysis**

In this research study, data analysis consisted of the researcher comparing and contrasting the responses to e-survey questions and interview questions given by the superintendents and reporting the findings in a qualitative narrative form. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) describe data analysis as the “process of systematically searching and arranging the

interview transcripts, field notes and other materials that you accumulate to enable you to come up with findings” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 159). The researcher waded through tons of e-survey data, transcribed the interview data and coded it after having grouped all the e-survey findings by groups and looking for themes as well as the interview data. The researcher used the data to analyze and look for themes, categories, and patterns. Once themes were identified, an organizer, such as a graphical representation, was created to assist the researcher in the analysis and synthesis of all the data that was gathered. This visual helped spot possible relationship within the data collected, and helped to provide a rich description of the study. Themes such as funding, early childhood quality programs, parents, varied stakeholders, academic needs, social needs began to surface for comparison. Knowing which counties responded to the e-survey data I ranked them by amount of funding in each region with notice of who replied first to the request for wanting to participate in an individual interview.

The superintendent prioritization funding data was analyzed in several ways. One analysis looked at each superintendent’s response and matched it to the themes. Another analysis looked at themes of superintendents and compared their themes with those of superintendents in other regions of rural North Carolina. The rural regions were rural Piedmont, rural Coastal, and rural Mountain school districts. These sets of analyzed data explored the possibility of similar or dissimilar themes in comparison with each other.

Once data was collected, the researcher compared the data and made categories and themes. The researcher used varied types of qualitative data such as interviews, online surveys, and document analysis of policy briefs for early childhood, media clips, and federal

and state legislation research. An audit trail of how data categories and themes were made was used. A feedback loop for interviewees was used to verify if the data analysis was an accurate reflection of their views.

Because of the large amount of data the researcher collected for analysis, the researcher continuously revisited the purpose of the study and the overarching research question. The process of analysis consisted of numerous instances of coding and looking for categories and themes with emergent patterns.

The researcher reread the transcriptions looking for patterns from the voices of the superintendents. The researcher tried to keep the voices of the superintendents intact as she stated the study's findings in Chapter Four. The researcher remembered that the literature review in Chapter Two guided the study. The literature helped identify areas of the superintendents' experiences and potential gaps in the literature about superintendent perceptions of kindergarten readiness and pre-kindergarten programming choices such as universal pre-kindergarten.

### **Research Reliability and Validity**

#### *Reliability*

Qualitative researchers believe in the importance of accuracy and comprehensiveness of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The focus in this qualitative study was the description and explanation of the superintendent interviewees as they answered the questions in their context. If this same study were replicated with a different population, it would possibly not obtain the same descriptions or explanations. "In qualitative research, 'reliability' often refers to the stability of multiple coders of data sets" (Creswell, 2007). The researcher reflected and

compiled consistent themes for coding, code names and procedures in order that all transcriptions be coded in the same way. As a qualitative researcher, it was important to use equipment such as flip-camera recorders to obtain clear voice recordings and to transcribe the voice tapes so as not to miss important nuances from each interviewee.

In Edmondson and Irby (2008), the authors state that “specificity in what the individuals named was paramount to the credibility of their work” (Edmondson & Irby, 2008, p. 79). If replication by future parties is desired, consistent and dependable rules are foundational pieces for case study research. In this research study, careful documentation and analysis procedures were taken so that reliability was established. In Merriam (1988), the author states the importance of careful documentation and analysis through the use of personal accounts, interviews, and transcriptions. The researcher of this study organized the data carefully with exact procedures in place and with a focus on hearing the superintendent voices, which helped ensure the accuracy of determining the superintendent’s priorities regarding using funding for universal pre-kindergarten in their public school systems as a strategy to close the achievement gap.

### *Validity*

From the superintendents’ reflection tool completed before interviews, the researcher cross-referenced perspectives for common themes and phrases. To mitigate threats to validity, such as a researcher’s presence, four school superintendents from varied rural counties around the state were studied. This was done so that the researcher did not have any evaluative or judgmental power over the interviewees. Interpretive validity was established with supportive documentation using words of the interviewees as well as verbatim quotes

from the interviews and online survey responses. In Edmondson and Irby (2008), Johnson (1977) describes that interpretive validity “requires developing a window into the minds of people studied” (Edmondson & Irby, p. 284).

Several strategies were used to attain internal validity. The researcher used triangulation of methodology, which included interviews and online surveys. Data triangulation was used involving multiple data sources such as multiple interviews, document analysis, and locations.

External validity is crucial to attaining generalizability of the findings. Multiple listenings of the audiotapes and multiple transcriptions were used to create a justification of validity results. Credibility was attempted by using a holistic-approach which tried to understand the underlying concerns of the respondents.

Generalizability for case study research means that the findings were about this research study, but that some other settings besides the ones involved in this study may also show some of the same types of generalizations. However, the reader, rather than this researcher, should be the one to make the assumption about any generalization finding from another setting. This researcher’s desire was to understand the budgetary decision-making of superintendents regarding universal pre-kindergarten from the points of view of the participants. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audio-taped and transcribed. The audiotapes will be destroyed one year after completion of the study. Names of interviewees and specific school systems were kept confidential.

### **Safeguards against Researcher Bias (Subjectivity Statement)**

Validity of a case study to many is more difficult to defend due to case study research being grounded in a naturalistic context, where everything stated is someone's perspective. In this case study of superintendents regarding prioritization of funding of universal pre-kindergarten in the public school setting, the researcher used triangulation to minimize the concern of subjectivity. Triangulation is the process of using multiple sources of data. The researcher used personal interviews, online e-surveys, school system data from NC Wise, and responses of most public rural schools, though in some localities it was a half-day instead of a full day of instruction.

As the researcher, I brought to this study a wealth of personal experience as an early childhood teacher and director, as well as the information gleaned from a vast collection of readings about the topic of early childhood education in general and universal pre-kindergarten specifically. Previously, I had experiences in a large city in North Carolina as a teacher in a nationally accredited early childhood program, and as a mother who did home daycare in her home while on maternity leave from the public school system. All of the personal experiences involved in my search for excellent early childhood experiences for my own children were biases brought to this study.

In 1988, I was asked to begin one of the first North Carolina Title I public school pre-kindergartens in the state in our rural county. Eventually, I would expand the Title I pre-kindergarten program to all of our system's elementary schools by training staff, ordering supplies and furniture, and scaffolding staff with Title I federal funds. Our county had the first public school pre-kindergarten program in North Carolina to receive National

Accreditation for Early Childhood Programs from the NAEYC in 1990. We were also the first public school pre-kindergarten in North Carolina to receive Southern Association Accreditation from SACS. Our goal was to establish a top-notch early childhood experience for our students. The program served students in the greatest need academically and socioeconomically.

With my experience in this field along with a master's degree with an emphasis in early childhood, I was asked to be a guest speaker for early childhood courses at the Pennsylvania State University for three summers. I also taught evening early childhood courses at a community college branch in my hometown. The experience of being one of the first thirty five National Board Certified Teachers in the United States in Early Childhood Generalist also has strengthened my desire to study the concerns of many parents and educators who believe that not all students currently have the same opportunities to learn at a young age to their fullest potential. Not having a quality pre-kindergarten experience puts these students behind before they even enter the schoolhouse door on their first day of kindergarten. My bias is that I believe that where a child lives or his/her economic status should not dictate the choices for learning that they will have as students. I believe that our youngest children and families in poverty continue to have poor choices for early childhood education even today. I also have firsthand experience that living in a rural county, even if you are affluent, means that you must travel at least an hour to find high-quality early childhood choices for your children.

Due to budget concerns, our local school system had to suspend our successful Title I pre-kindergarten program in order to use those funds for other needs in the K-12 system.

Even this year, a local Head Start program closed down due to tornado damage, without sufficient funding to reopen. As of this proposal writing, Smart Start and More at Four funds are being considered by the North Carolina legislature as line items to delete in order to balance the state budget.

The researcher is currently employed in a Central Office position in Human Resources in charge of all beginning teachers, master and mentor teachers, National Board Certification, County Staff Development Coordinator, and Title II. At the beginning of my research study I was an assistant principal at a Title I elementary school in a rural school system in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. The researcher's role in this study included determining which superintendents to select for the study, gathering permission to participate in the study, and interviewing superintendents about their perceptions of readiness for kindergarten and the use of universal pre-kindergarten as a strategy to close the achievement gap. Researcher bias could have occurred since the researcher had worked with many North Carolina counties to help them begin their Title I pre-kindergarten programs over the past twenty years.

My roles as an administrator for young children may have impacted the lens through which I viewed the findings of this study and the superintendent responses. However, I did "bracket" (Moustakas, 1994) my experience by selecting superintendents whom I did not know personally, and I introduced myself as a researcher and not as another administrator. Using qualitative research lent itself to problems with subjectivity; however, not all bias is problematic, as in the case of my personal experiences as a rural parent of a young child. This parental experience actually gave me insight into the problems of finding quality early

childhood programs in a rural area in North Carolina compared to in a larger city in the same state, where many quality early childhood choices were available. Case study research does not produce specific answers to specific questions; rather, it produces detailed information that may assist in creating a clearer picture of what is truly happening than quantitative research would. In summary, invaluable discoveries about flexibility and the need for a nonjudgmental lens are all lessons learned while performing qualitative research.

The research in this qualitative study was a multiple-case study design. I was looking at why superintendents make decisions due to their perceptions; Yin (1994) believes case studies are “the preferred approach when ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions” are to be answered, such as “Why should we consider having universal pre-kindergarten in the public schools?” (Klenke, 2008, p. 63). The theoretical lens of Pierre Bourdieu, as explained in Chapter Two, used in this qualitative approach with the goal of improving life for students by use of the theoretical framework of field theory. The researcher took pains to be sure that the process emphasized “visualizing settings, from everyday encounters to complex power plays, in terms of field, capital, and habitus,” likened to perceptions of participants. This process allowed the researcher “to see behavior in context and not focus on outcomes to the exclusion of process” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The use of the theoretical orientation of field theory by Bourdieu was my lens to look at the location (rural counties in North Carolina), the major players (rural North Carolina superintendents), and their strategies in decision-making for early childhood programming (as discussed in detail along with a conceptual framework diagram in Chapter Two).

### **Ethical Issues (IRB)**

The researcher conducted this study with respect for and validation of the importance of the superintendents' opinions. The superintendents were assured complete confidentiality during the entire process, and were assured that their perspectives could never be linked back to them. At the beginning of every interview, the researcher stated the goal of the research, and all interviewees were given the chance to ask their own personal questions. Permission for the research was requested from each superintendent from each school system in the study as well as the university, in conjunction with my chairperson and committee members, for qualitative transcriptions, field notes, flash drives, and hardcopies of all information to be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home, and a copy of the research to be stored in the researcher's safety deposit box. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission to interview form was completed, and after approval was granted, the researcher began to ask each superintendent for permission to participate in the research study by asking each superintendent to initial each page and sign a signature page as the researcher carefully explained the entire process to them. They were permitted to stop the process at any time. All participants were asked their permission to audio-record the research session with them and their wishes were complied with. There were no risks to participants, but the benefits could produce new and engaging ideas to improve strategies for school district improvement. No one besides the researcher gained access to the research information because all audio and written data was stored at the researcher's personal bank vault.

## **Limitations of the Study**

All studies demonstrate some types of limitations. In this study, it is recognized that the study's generalizability is limited due to data only being collected from superintendents in rural North Carolina. However, the response rate of 55 percent of the sample size of 85 North Carolina rural superintendents taking the e-survey was sufficient for analysis. The four in-depth personal interviews could have benefitted from a larger sample size in order to hear from more superintendents in more depth. However, the findings were representative about how to best prioritize and implement pre-kindergarten programs in rural areas of North Carolina relative to other rural and small areas in other states. This is, however, a reflection of the superintendents who individually willingly participated with no compensation. Therefore, the findings may not truly be a reflection of the other 38 rural North Carolina superintendents, who did not respond to the e-survey.

A second limitation is related to the construction of e-survey question seven. If used in the future, the question should be less open-ended because many of the respondents were not sure of the name of any kindergarten evaluation given in their district, which stymied them from giving an in-depth response compared to the other questions on the survey. To minimize confusion, the question could name specific evaluation instruments. Despite these limitations, the survey instrument served as a valuable part of the study to glean important information, and could potentially be used for future studies in other states looking at the same concern of prioritization of funding for pre-kindergarten.

Out of the 85 rural North Carolina counties, I did not choose the county I work in to interview my superintendent personally. The possible problems of easy access to

interviewees were taken seriously by the researcher. “ One of the principles of an equitable interviewing relationship, however, is that the participants not make themselves unduly vulnerable by participating in the interview” (Seidman, 2006, p. 41). “Theoretical sampling means selecting groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to your research questions, your theoretical position...and most importantly the explanation or account which you are developing” (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008, p. 167).

During the personal interview research phase, I listened carefully to each interviewee. I followed protocols explicitly and in the same way for each interview. I also took copious notes and recorded the conversations to ensure validity by using an online recording program as well as a handheld recorder. “Among the different qualitative research methods used in leadership research, the interview occupies a privileged position as it involves a conversation and negotiation of meaning between interviewer and interviewee” (Klenke, 2008, p. 150). This qualitative multiple-case study research design was an invaluable resource in compiling the information needed for analysis of the findings. Sample size was not as important as the purposive sampling of the superintendent participants who contributed deep meaning to this study (Klenke, 2008).

Lastly, this study used a case study analysis, in which it has often been explained that “sampling of attributes should not be the highest priority. Balance and variety are important; relevance to the quintain and opportunity to learn are usually of greater importance” (Stake, 2006, p. 26).

During my subjectivity statement I acknowledged my bias to funding priorities for pre-kindergarten. However, during this process I remained open-minded while collecting and

analyzing the data carefully by listening to the respondents' explanations for their budgetary decisions, and seeing from their viewpoint of having to use funds equitably for all children in their school system.

Most importantly, I agree with this statement from Bogdan and Biklen (2007, p. 3:8) "The goal is to become more reflective and conscious of how who you are may shape and enrich what you do, not to eliminate it."

### **Chapter Summary**

This qualitative bounded multi-case study was designed to ascertain how public school superintendents in rural North Carolina prioritize funding programs to prepare their students prior to kindergarten entry so as to maintain a smooth transition to the academic rigors of the North Carolina kindergarten curriculum for students in their school systems, and to examine through the use of open-ended interviews and online surveys the implications of these varied budgetary decisions. The multiple-case study approach allows descriptive and comparative data to emerge about the topic of universal pre-kindergarten and the leadership of these four rural North Carolina superintendents in the context of their school systems and regions.

Chapter Four will present the data from the four superintendents selected for individual interviews during the study, including the collective results of the online survey and the individual reflection tool. The chapter will highlight the findings resulting from the data analysis, and will link the findings to the data discussed in the Methods section.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

This chapter briefly reviews the purpose of the study and its methodology, and then presents the findings. The results are organized into sections and sub-sections to address each of the research questions. Each research question section is subdivided by the emergent themes revealed during data analysis. Chapter Four concludes with a brief summary of the findings.

### **Review of Purpose and Methods**

This chapter describes the rich qualitative data collected from an e-survey and personal interviews with rural superintendents to further the study's overarching research focus and purpose, which was to ascertain how public school superintendents of rural North Carolina districts prioritize funding pre-kindergarten programs to prepare their students prior to kindergarten entry, in order to maintain a smooth transition to the academic rigors of the North Carolina kindergarten curriculum. The following research questions guided this qualitative case study:

1. What are the perceptions of rural superintendents about the importance of universal pre-kindergarten?
2. What are the perceptions of superintendents' experiences with elementary education and of universal pre-kindergarten?
3. What are superintendents' perceptions of participation in Pre-K and academic success in all subgroups and socioeconomic levels?

A case study design was used to answer the research questions. Data were gathered from the e-survey responses of rural North Carolina superintendents, from individual

interviews with four superintendents, and by document review. The response rate of the e-survey was 55% (n=85). This chapter gives an overview of demographic data from the 2000-2011 NC Census Bureau and data from the 2000-2011 NC Rural Economic Development Center, as well as the data obtained from interviews with four of the respondent rural NC superintendents. Data on significant life events that may have helped form these superintendents' opinion of early childhood programming will be described in this chapter as well.

Transcripts from the e-survey questions and the individual interviews, as well as a Timeline of Significant Events document, were open-coded to identify themes related to understanding: (a) how superintendents were prioritizing the implementation of funding pre-kindergarten in their schools and (b) what thought processes were used to guide their decision-making process when making school district budget decisions for pre-kindergarten.

The constant-comparative method was used to analyze the study data. For the interviews, transcriptions of the recordings were thoroughly examined multiple times, looking and listening for phrases, words, and sentences that would lead to themes and categories to be analyzed. The results of this study revealed how superintendents implemented funding for pre-kindergarten in their rural public NC school districts.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using purposeful criteria-based sampling. All of the participants had to meet specific criteria established by the researcher to attain sampling validity (Creswell, 2007; Klenke, 2008; Stake, 2006). The criteria for participant selection were: (a) that the e-survey participants be current superintendents in the 85 rural North

Carolina counties covered by the e-survey; and (b) that of the four individual interviews ultimately conducted with rural NC superintendent respondents of the e-survey, two were respondents who were highly funding Pre-K and two were respondents who provided only limited funding for Pre-K in their districts.

In order to identify the North Carolina rural counties based on these sample criteria, I used the demographic data from the 2010 North Carolina Census and the 2010-2012 data from the NC Rural Economic Development Center. I then used the North Carolina Association of Superintendents' directory to get the contact information, so that I could email all 85 rural North Carolina superintendents to request their participation in an e-survey. The superintendents were able to see the nine questions that would be asked of them, if they wished to do so prior to taking the survey.

Due to using the sample of only rural North Carolina county superintendents, the following measures were taken to protect their confidentiality. Each rural county superintendent who was interviewed was assigned a random capital letter and a fictitious pseudonym that begins with that letter describing the person or county as an identifier. Each superintendent was assigned a pseudonym: Superintendent Adams, Superintendent Berry, Superintendent Conner, and Superintendent Douglas. The four superintendents individually interviewed were never linked to their rural counties in any way. Any additional personal background information provided in the methodology section was not included in the findings, so that these superintendents could not be linked to their descriptions. After the four individual interviews with superintendents, the audiotapes and written notes were transcribed verbatim.

## **Key Findings**

This chapter presents the findings of the overarching research question that initially framed the study: How do rural North Carolina superintendents prioritize public school pre-kindergarten in their local school systems' budget funding? The following research questions were used as a guide in this qualitative study to answer the overarching research question. Findings for the overarching research question are presented from the perspective of superintendents based on the supporting research questions. The research questions focused around pre-kindergarten implementation variables of size and locale, superintendent perceptions of universal pre-kindergarten implementation, and correlation with academic success for all subgroups having Pre-K attendance. Data analysis of the e-survey, interviews, and Timeline of Significant Events were used to support the three findings of this study. An adaptation of Pierre Bourdieu's Social Field Theory framework using the same attributes was used to organize the findings of this study.

### **Research Question 1: What Are the Perceptions of Rural Superintendents About the Importance of Universal Pre-Kindergarten?**

#### **Finding 1: Perceptions of the Importance of Pre-K Implementation and Attributes of Residence**

Miles and Huberman (1984) assert that "interweaving data collection and data analysis is the best policy because it allows theory to develop alongside the flowing volume of data" (Klenke, 2008, p. 67). Therefore, there was a need to reflect on the varied data sources of this study showing a relationship between the size of a county and its location and the chances of Pre-K implementation becoming a reality in that area. E-surveys, individual

interviews, and a Timeline of Significant Events were data sources used to study the rural NC superintendents' reasoning of how to prioritize early childhood funding. These responses were carefully studied to find the themes discussed below that were extrapolated from the synthesis and analysis of all data sources.

**Rural North Carolina Communities' Pre-K Availability.** Eighty-five of North Carolina's 100 counties are designated as rural. The NC Rural Economic Development Center describes a county as rural if it has no more than 250 people per square mile (NC Rural Economic Development Center, 2012). The North Carolina General Assembly adapted this definition using population density statistics from the 2000 census. There are 100 counties in North Carolina, but some counties still have two school districts so that there are 115 school districts.

Due to the alarming results of the 2010 census for rural communities, a forum for school leaders was organized, called "Re-imagine Rural – Transforming North Carolina's Rural Communities through Youth Engagement." Over 40 percent of the superintendents referenced this event in their responses. The census found that rural areas in the new millennium are losing their young adults in the 24- to 30-year-old age bracket to larger cities. Especially middle and upper middle class young families are leaving due to the inability to find jobs in rural areas that require a university-level education. The census also found that though many of these young citizens would like to come back to live in their hometowns or in other small rural areas, they are concerned that amenities such as recreation, shopping, good schools and child care facilities were not available for them and their young families in North Carolina's rural communities.

This finding aligns itself with the research study explained in *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What it Means for America*, written by Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas. These two researchers moved to a rural town in Iowa in 2001 and analyzed concerns evident in all rural American towns. Carr and Kefalas saw firsthand that “the most pressing problem is that young people moving away include the most highly educated” (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p. 4).

The lack of pre-kindergartens and daycare facilities that are nationally accredited, as well as the absence of recreational activities for under-four-year-olds, were of grave concern for young parents who had experienced life in a university town, where activities for young children and their families are readily available. These college-educated parents believe in the critical importance of quality early childhood education for all children, and demand its availability for their own children as well.

A text analysis of the responses from all data sources was completed using the e-survey, interviews, and the Timeline of Significant Events. This analysis turned up twelve important words and phrases used frequently to describe the need for Pre-K programs in rural North Carolina. The terms used most often were “affordable options,” “experiences,” “literacy,” “low socioeconomic status,” “parents,” “poverty,” “preschool programs,” “quality preschool programs,” “school readiness,” and “quality schools”. After the text analysis process, I compared all three data sources with the research responses in this study, grouped themes such as affordable options, poverty, and low socioeconomics, and looked at the frequency with which these terms were used by the respondents. For example, due to the frequent use of synonymous text describing poverty, I then studied varied statistics from

varied rural North Carolina studies to look for trends aligning poverty and little or no availability of pre-kindergarten programs. I then compared this to the responses from the superintendents in this study who stated that their kindergarten students were lacking in school readiness. The superintendents studied also shared with me their school system rankings, such as Schools in Progress, Schools of Distinction, and Low-Performing Schools. The respondents shared that early prevention programs would help their communities to be sure they had kindergarten students with school readiness.

The multitude of responses from superintendents concerned with the lack of early childhood programs in their communities signals a need to study this deficit and find funding to enable all children to have available pre-kindergarten before entering the school districts' K-12 infrastructure. Overwhelming concern by the school district leaders that their youngest students are entering kindergarten ill-prepared for the rigorous kindergarten curriculum, which the state and the nation have adopted with the Common Core expectations, creates the impetus to instigate policies to create early childhood programming for three- and four-year-olds to alleviate the unpreparedness evident in kindergarten classrooms in this time period.

Within the superintendents' responses to e-survey questions regarding the lack of school readiness, two major themes emerged: concerns about parents/families (30/48 responses), and a lack of quality Pre-K in their rural county (17/48 responses). Another superintendent response stated, "School districts should provide pre-k services for all at risk children." These responses affirm that rural North Carolina superintendents believe that families and parents in their communities are a crucial force in creating students ready to enter their school district kindergartens, but that a lack of quality pre-kindergarten for all

students in North Carolina was also a real concern. All North Carolinians should have the availability of educational services, no matter where in the state they reside.

Data from the interviews confirmed the findings from the e-survey. For example: Superintendent Douglas, in the individual interview, stated that “The state needs to require that all students of all economic subgroups be given equal opportunities before entering kindergarten no matter which county they live in”.

Superintendent Connor, in an individual interview, said, “I philosophically did not believe public schools should have three and four year olds at our public schools, but with an influx of kindergarten students entering our doors not ready for kindergarten, I am having to admit that the social infrastructure of our rural communities is changing, and we need to assist these students to come to school ready to learn in this decade.” In other words, although he was initially opposed to public involvement in pre-kindergarten, the sheer magnitude of the need has resulted in a shift in his perception of the role of schools.

Taken as a whole, the data from all sources indicates a clear need for and a lack of early childhood programming in all of the NC rural counties that responded (55%; n= 85). Not one rural county that responded indicated that they had an adequate or excellent venue for early childhood programming for all children in the county. In over half of all North Carolina rural counties, agreement that pre-kindergarten needs to be available for all was evident in the responses of this study.

**Rural North Carolina Superintendents’ Actions to Increase Pre-K Program Availability.** The North Carolina rural superintendents responded to learning the results of the NC Census by becoming active in their community political forums, as well as

participating in state level discussions with politicians to make them aware of the needs of their rural communities. Forty eight of the 100 rural counties indicated the need to create offerings in rural community school systems such as early childhood programs to entice young adults to take residence in rural communities. In all data sources of this study including the e-surveys, interviews, and timelines affirmation of need for early childhood program availability were indicated in an overwhelming majority of responses.

**Community Building.** The following quotes from e-survey and interview responses show that superintendents believe that one of their important job duties as school district leaders is to utilize all stakeholders in decision-making processes, involve all community resources and value all stakeholder voices in order to support a community for all residents. The responses show a need to look at the services available for all age groups, and determine what is valuable to attract young families, industries, and other potential resources to live in the community, creating jobs for potential growth of funds for local services. The responses show that a decline in financial resources in small and rural counties creates a dearth of available program services for county residents.

In the e-survey one superintendent stated, “We need to make our communities attractive places to live, work, and play. Attracting young families to reside in rural communities is a community problem that the school district shares with all stakeholders. It is imperative that superintendents of local public school districts be a major player in this process in their rural communities.”

Another superintendent responded in the e-survey that “One of my most important duties as a rural superintendent is that I work with other agencies in the county making sure

we are using the same ‘road map’ of success. All stakeholders in a rural community must have a vision, a goal to align services to make our rural communities great places to have our families grow up and thrive in.”

During the interview, Superintendent Douglas shared, “My rural county’s population of young college-educated professional families has been dwindling due to the fact that many professional jobs have been lost in our small towns that comprise our county. My own children would love to come back home to live after college, but they question availability of resources for a young family not being available, such as daycares and preschools for all socio-economic subgroups, especially for their own family situation, that of the middle class.”

Superintendent Connor had a similar perspective. He responded, “In our community there are not enough spaces for all children to attend a quality pre-kindergarten program. Quality programming for pre-kindergarten as well as accredited public schools is a concern of college educated professional young families when they speak to the realtors as they look at purchasing a home in our area. As a community leader I seek out opportunities to keep the discussion alive with all stakeholders to find funding to create Pre-K programs in our rural county.”

Data from the interviews confirmed the finding that pre-kindergarten is seen as a good use of funding for school districts by the respondents of this study, as they strive to utilize all available finances to improve educational performance in all subgroups. The superintendents are attempting to diminish the existing achievement gaps between all subgroups of students in their schools. Until the achievement gap is closed and educational

disparities are a thing of the past, superintendents will continue to search for the best usage of their allotted school funds. An overarching theme in 100% of the responses by the superintendents was that they must justify spending by their school district in order that voters see that their tax dollars are being used appropriately. Therefore, they are charged with continuing to look for ways to create academic success for all entering kindergarten students by finding funding for pre-kindergarten.

Three of the four rural North Carolina superintendents interviewed stated that they serve on non-profit boards in their rural communities, such as More at Four (now renamed NC Pre-K). These boards collaborate to create a needs assessment as a vision for their communities to aspire to. Nineteen of the forty-eight respondents in the e-survey responded to a survey question that described their participation on community non-profit boards such as the United Way, NC Pre-K, the Chamber of Commerce, the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, the YMCA, and Boys and Girls Clubs. In the individual interviews and the e-survey, the majority of the responses of both types of data also showed that the responses described superintendent membership on for-profit corporate boards, such as industrial companies in their communities looking at the needs of those communities, as well as a belief that all stakeholders must participate in a needs assessment in order to make relevant and pertinent improvements.

The rural superintendents who responded to this study showed in their responses that they realize that funding sources are limited. The respondents indicated that everyone in a community is more effective when they have dialogue on the success of what programs are already in place as well as how these programs are used most effectively. The

superintendents who responded agreed that studying which funding sources have been used successfully is an important step in continuing the search for ways to use the allotted funding wisely for the best immediate and long-term outcomes. In a personal interview, Superintendent Adam stated, “We are meeting the needs of our most at-risk students by blending our funding sources, collaborating with our community partners, and by involving parents.”

Data from the one response showed a concern about added regulations on how to use funds to create pre-kindergarten programs. This respondent, Superintendent Douglas, feels that the legislature’s decision to move early childhood education out of the public school’s Department of Public Instruction to the Department of Human Resources as “ridiculous”; he feels that DPI sees the vertical alignment of academic and social instruction, which would benefit a smoother transition to K-12 instruction. He stated, “With all the regulations placed on hybrid pre-k programs and limited funding, it is very hard to meet small community needs.”

All of the superintendents who responded discussed the growth of subgroups in their communities, and see the need to include these families as stakeholders in the discussion about early childhood programs. The term subgroup is often used to describe the varied racial and ethnic groups in our society (African-American, Hispanic, Caucasian, Asian-American, Native American). Other subgroups of students are defined by gender, free and reduced lunch status, and varied disabilities. In this millennium, an increase in variety in ethnicities, disabilities, and socioeconomic status has been seen in the NC census data. Superintendents have learned that in seeking appropriate feedback from families, some of whom cannot speak

English, phone or mail surveys, if utilized, will have a very low response rate. A structured questionnaire with a face-to-face interviewer who can speak parents' own language would minimize suspicion and help invoke trust between the interviewer and the family. This was an observation of almost half of the rural superintendents who responded about seeking more accurate feedback from non-English speaking constituents regarding their family's needs. Most of the e-survey respondents discussed concern about growing numbers of Hispanic families coming to North Carolina's rural school systems unable to speak English. They also recognize the growing need to hire English as Second Language teachers to assist these families and students in the state's rural school systems.

All four superintendents in the individual interviews were in school systems where Hispanic populations have grown over the last ten years. Superintendent Berry shared, "Our students from Hispanic families are coming to kindergarten with less life experiences as their peers, and coupled with the inability to speak English, it is putting them very behind their peers in reading and language acquisition in kindergarten." Superintendent Adams stated, "We still have many kindergarten students entering unable to speak English and not having many real-life experiences or any pre-kindergarten experiences to prepare them for instruction." Data from the e-surveys and interviews as well as census data showed a large increase in the number of Hispanic families choosing to live in rural NC communities. The majority of the students in these families who are entering kindergarten have not been taught how to speak English before arriving at the kindergarten doors. The lack of English vocabulary for all children has been shown in research studies to be an indicator of a lack of school readiness for kindergarten curricula in reading, writing, and math. This lack of

English vocabulary both flags and compounds the problem of this subgroup of rural NC students lacking school readiness capabilities.

Disaggregating and analyzing the responses in the e-survey revealed that all of the superintendent respondents showed a desire to encourage their school district leadership teams to create a needs assessment of their school district, and to encourage county leadership teams to create an overarching community needs assessment by working with all county stakeholders, such as non-profit and for-profit organizations. Having a visionary roadmap will outline the hopes and expectations for growth of the entire community, and it will illustrate the journey for all stakeholders, who will play integral parts in making a vision a reality for their community's children. All of the superintendents expressed the belief that collaboration between private and public resources was a key to the implementation of effective programming for young children and their families.

### **Summary of Finding One**

In summary, the findings for Research Question 1 showed that the superintendents in the NC rural counties indicated that because of the locale and size of their school districts in small, rural areas, they were experiencing an influx of subgroups in need of services due to lack of spoken English or presence of disabilities that would improve with the availability of pre-kindergarten programming before entering our K-12 school systems. This finding showed that the attributes of size and location impact the superintendents' perceptions of the importance of public pre-kindergarten programming. The superintendents see that there is a need to fund Pre-K and do want to prioritize that funding in their counties, because they realize the positive impact that these services have on the K-12 transition.

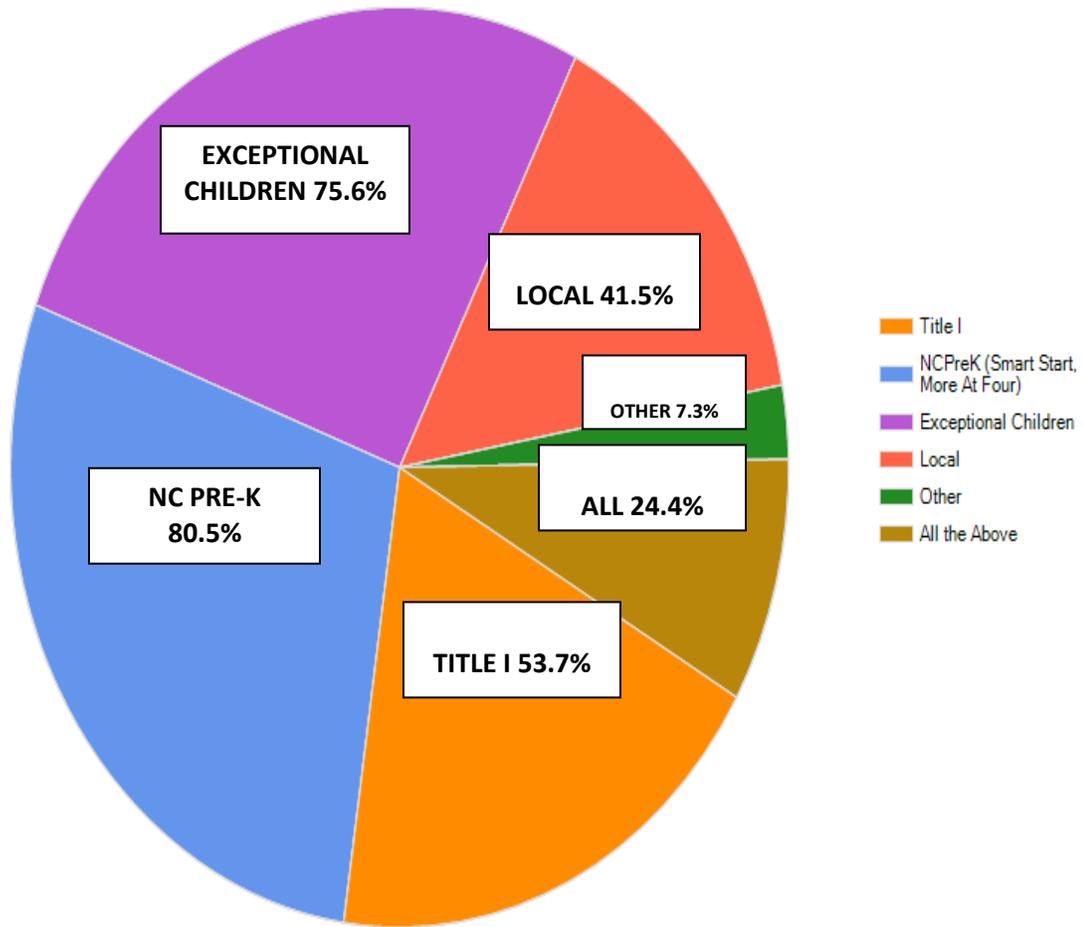
**Research Question 2: What are the Perceptions of Superintendents' Experiences with Elementary Education and of Universal Pre-kindergarten?**

**Finding 2: Superintendents with Pre-K Experiences Were More Likely to Make Pre-K a Funding Priority**

Barnett et al. (2009) note: “Advantages of universal pre-kindergarten are better coverage of the disadvantaged population, larger educational gains for disadvantaged children, and education benefits for non-disadvantaged students as well as a substantial economic return flowing from the first three advantages” (p. 39). In this study, data was analyzed concerning opinions about funding held by the NC rural superintendents, and the findings confirm that most of the superintendents take Barnett’s view.

**Funding Pre-K in Rural North Carolina.** Forty of the 41 superintendents who completed this survey question indicated that they felt that pre-kindergartens should be funded and highly valued in schools, and that they must offer quality programming. While the need for school districts to fund and implement quality pre-kindergarten programming was rated as highly important, only seven percent of the respondents currently funded Pre-K at an adequate level to reach all students at age four in their district. In the responses, though the vast majority of superintendents recognized that pre-kindergarten and quality early childhood programming are crucial to their K -12 schools being effective, they did not use funding sources to reach all four-year-old students in their district early childhood programs. The obstacle is the reduction this year in the flow of federal, state, and local monies. Budget cuts continue even though the academic expectations are increasing for all students. Figure 1.4 illustrates the funding sources for rural county Pre-K in NC during 2012.

What funds do you use to implement the early childhood program?

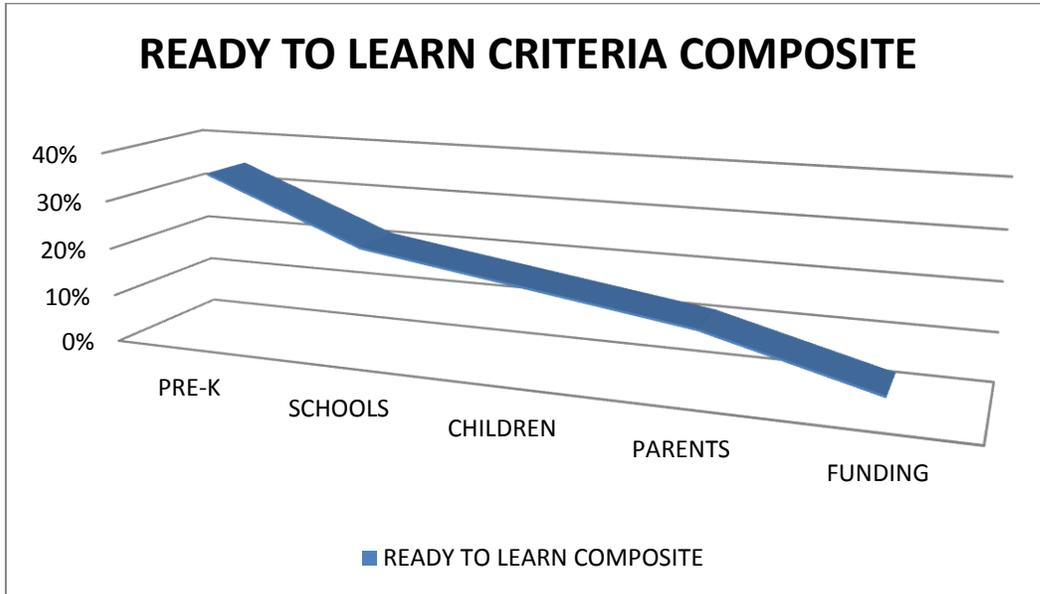


**Figure 1.4**  
**Funding Sources for Rural County Pre-kindergarten**

In the e-survey, superintendents responded that pre-kindergarten programming is an important investment to help students be ready to learn at kindergarten entrance. Yet Figure 1.5 shows that even though 30 percent of the superintendents who answered this e-survey question said that Pre-K should be funded, only four percent actually made funding for it a

top priority. The disconnect between school districts valuing a quality pre-kindergarten program and the evidence of inadequate funding of universal pre-kindergarten programs was clearly indicated by the research data of this study. North Carolina rural superintendents agree on the importance of a strong early educational foundation for every child. However, school districts struggle to fund any new initiatives with dwindling funding structures looming. Not all respondents answered all the questions on the e-survey but the majority who did respond indicated concern for funding for early childhood initiatives and felt that their districts could not afford to fund Pre-K with only local monies. The responses showed that the majority of rural areas needed funding from other sources of federal dollars, such as Title I and Exceptional Children, and state funds such as NC Pre-K and Smart Start, in order to have it be viable for county school systems to fund and make Pre-K a reality in their communities.

Following is a graphical representation of one of the e-survey questions concerning importance of educational criteria for students to be ready and successful to come to school to learn in kindergarten.



**Figure 1.5**  
**Respondents’ Views of Importance of Ready to Learn Criteria**

Figure 1.5 shows that the respondents scored Pre-K as an appropriate criterion for success of students in entering school districts ready to learn, yet that programming was discussed in about only four percent of the respondents’ statements. The respondents valued the implementation of pre-kindergarten, but the funding concerns continued to stymie its creation in the counties responding.

A concerted effort by many NC superintendents who lobbied the NC legislature in the spring and early summer of 2012 concerning the importance of Pre-K and maintenance or increase of funds for these programs stymied the efforts to take away public school Pre-K services to these rural counties for the 2012-2013 school year. Since the rural counties struggle for funding for all of their educational programs (Pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grades), rarely are other funding sources such as local county funds ever earmarked for pre-kindergarten

programming. This is a concern for superintendents; indeed, the four superintendents who were interviewed all indicated that this was a problem because local budgets were threadbare.

Superintendent Adams described his recent funding plea to the legislature in his response, saying, “I have just returned from Raleigh where I spoke to many North Carolina legislators about the importance of funding pre-kindergarten programs in our North Carolina public schools. I used data from my school system to describe the discrepancies of our subgroups as they take the pre-assessment for kindergarten readiness.” Superintendent Adams received positive responses from six of the eight legislators with whom he met. Those six were going to further study the issue of funding Pre-K, with more in-depth research of the topic by their team. Two of the legislators said that they were not aware of this concern, and that the superintendent’s session with them was food for thought in future decisions on funding.

The data from both the e-surveys and interviews indicates that superintendents are active in soliciting support for early childhood program funding. One superintendent stated, “Fiscal management by our legislature is crucial in these times of dwindling funding sources. I personally speak with legislators on a continuing basis. We must coordinate funds and resources to serve as many children as possible.” Another superintendent shared his views by stating, “Political savvy must be used by superintendents in order to keep the needs of rural school districts on the legislators’ radar, so they can remember the needs of these rural districts when divvying the meager pots of money amongst areas of need throughout the entire state. Personally, I routinely speak to our local legislators as often as possible, as well as email, and phone concerning the school district’s needs regularly.” As seen in Figure 1.5,

some districts carve out a small amount of money from all funding sources to create pre-kindergarten opportunities for their county's youngest children. However, local funds are not generally given to public schools for pre-kindergarten programs. According to 95 percent of the responses, if state funding is taken away and Federal Title I monies continue to diminish; more counties will have to eliminate pre-kindergarten classrooms in their public schools.

**Dichotomy between Supporters and Opponents of Pre-K Funding.** Belief systems about whether children under the age of five should be out of the home for child care have historically driven the decision-making process about pre-kindergarten programs. Private, for-profit preschools also worry about losing paying students if pre-kindergarten is publicly funded for all students.

Opponents and supporters of early childhood initiatives have had an ongoing dialogue for many decades in America. The opponent faction truly believes that children below kindergarten age should be taken care of by their parents or immediate family in a home setting and should not be part of the public school paradigm, both for philosophical reasons and out of the belief that huge amounts of money would be needed to implement public pre-kindergarten, whether universal or only targeted for all children.

Supporters of universal pre-kindergarten services believe that it is an equity issue, and that without federal and state funding, families and local budgets are unable to procure early childhood services for all children. This group believes that at this point in America, not all families have the capability to have one parent stay at home with their children due to the growing financial constraints on two-parent families, the increase in one-parent family configurations, and the professional needs of women who have chosen to work outside the

home. There is a dire need for quality early childhood programming from birth to kindergarten so that all of America's children have a choice, regardless of their family's economic status or place of residence. The majority of local small town budgets are unable to create Pre-K programs of high quality with enough slots to serve all children of that age in their communities. Under the IDEA, federal funds are allocated for any three-year-old with a disability, so that population of children will continue to receive federal funding for early childhood services. What is in jeopardy in North Carolina is state funding for pre-kindergarten.

**North Carolina's Roadmap to Academic Success.** In 100 percent of the responses, superintendents stated that expectations for kindergarten and pre-kindergarten have increased over the last five years. With the Common Core having become a reality in 2012, higher expectations for content delivery and instruction, as well as assessment data for each child, are now the norm. These criteria, coupled with tighter federal, state, and local coffers, make educators even more accountable for tax dollars. Below are a few of the responses from superintendents supporting the statement that higher expectations are in force for all incoming kindergarten students. The data from the study showed 100 percent of the superintendents supporting the discussion that there are now much higher expectations for students entering North Carolina kindergartens than in the past.

The theme of rigorous curricular expectations emerged from 13 of the 25 open-ended responses to the e-survey question addressing such expectations. Respondents noted: "Expectations are greatly increased for entering kindergarten and all K-12 students with much more emphasis being placed on the five domains of learning." "Expectations of all

students are higher from Pre-K thru 12<sup>th</sup> grades, and that is why building the foundation in Pre-K is so important.”

Another respondent explained that “Curricular expectations for Pre-K children have increased and available resources have grown at times. We now use specific tools to access and teach Pre-K students with alignment with standards to ensure readiness alignment to K-2 curricula. Our curricular expectations have risen dramatically in the last five years. We are losing sight of the real purpose of Pre-K, and that is to make the students ready for kindergarten and not regulatory compliance.” This response seems to indicate that superintendents are keenly aware of the higher academic-level objectives that entering kindergarten students are being expected to achieve from the very beginning of kindergarten. Pre-kindergarten through second grade goals are aligned vertically and horizontally as a student moves through levels of academic achievement. This transition from Pre-K through school-age can be one of ease if all stakeholders are seamlessly working together to create strategies for success by all children through these academic milestones.

Five of the twenty-two responses showed the theme of curricular focus. A typical response read, “A focused integrated approach to learning has become more developmentally aligned using assessment and accountability models to increase the probability of kindergarteners being ready.” This response talked about another type of focus for four-year-olds: “Even focused play is encouraged with learning objectives attached so students will arrive at kindergarten with their skill levels increased in academic areas with a big push to focus on literacy.” This type of response demonstrates that superintendents believe that all students entering kindergarten will be successful if stakeholders create a visionary plan that

supports quality early childhood programs for all children, looking toward the end result of college and career-ready students. Creating a vertically and horizontally aligned Common Core process of strategies and assessments to support our students from early childhood programs until they reach 12<sup>th</sup> grade, in order to make them proficient in job-readiness or college skills, is also an important step in this improvement process.

All data sources in this study concurred with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century goal of high expectations creation from pre-kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. This means that by imposing higher expectations at younger ages using the Common Core template, educators can see what the expected product of students should look like and can clearly identify at what point a student has missed an important learning goal in order to return and clear up any misunderstandings about a topic, or to re-teach the topic with strategies that can assist certain students in retaining the knowledge needed. The responses verified the idea that children learn many things at an early age. In a similar vein, Superintendent Connor's response stated, "High expectations are trickling down to the cradle. Parents have to be made aware that their children in infancy go through many learning milestones even before the age of two."

**Impact of Early Childhood Experiences on Superintendents' Perceptions.** In the e-survey responses, interviews, and the Timeline of Significant Events charts, all respondents indicated that their experiences with early childhood education had a definite effect on their perceptions and thinking processes about funding pre-kindergarten programs. Memories of early learning experiences, teachable moments of interest, creativity of learning projects, and a teacher's mannerisms all had an effect on each superintendent's perceptions of the importance of prioritizing early childhood programs.

Looking at all responses in all of the data sources showed that even superintendents who responded that they did not completely understand pre-kindergarten appreciated the need for implementation of an early childhood program. In an example of this type of response, one respondent shared, “I have no earthly idea! I pay very little attention to pre-kindergarten. I am going to be honest. I give that over to my staff, who really understands it. They understand early childhood education in depth more than I would understand it, but what I do know that due to societal needs my conservative views have to be put aside. I must continue the dialogue with all stakeholders to find ways for our community’s children to come to our kindergarten classrooms ready to learn, so that they will have a successful K-12 school experience and graduate college- and career-ready.”

**Future of North Carolina Pre-K Programming.** Forty-eight respondents’ answers to open-ended questions in the e-survey showed a compelling sense of the necessity of looking at pre-kindergarten programming as a way to assist the students in their rural community school districts. One e-survey respondent shared that “Pre-K should be available for all at risk children especially in areas that are historically low-performing, and I hope that pre-kindergarten programs will soon be offered to all students in all public schools evolving into something state-supported and mandated. In the next five to ten years we need to strengthen our Pre-K program because the benefits are valuable to kindergarten success. We are hoping to expand to universal Pre-K. This would be an essential piece of our total approach to ensuring that all students graduating from our district will be college and career ready.”

That quote is similar to the other responses, all of which show a strong belief that in the future, Pre-K programming must be made available to all students in the state. Superintendent Douglas said, “I would like to see our Pre-K program available for all children, so it will help students have a strong start in their K–12 programs, and not be behind from their first day of kindergarten. We, as leaders, must continue to expand and use more community partnerships to accomplish universal pre-kindergarten”. The responses uphold the notion that pre-kindergarten will eventually become a part of the K-12 infrastructure, just as in the past, kindergarten joined the first through 12<sup>th</sup> grade linear academic transition.

### **Summary of Finding Two**

The finding throughout this study was that prior experiences as an educator, parent, and superintendent affected the perceptions of the respondents, as did their childhood beliefs and experiences. These findings answer the overarching research question of whether a superintendent’s past experiences with elementary education and early childhood experiences, whether personal or professional, subconsciously play a part in their decision-making about the importance of prioritizing pre-kindergarten funding for their school district.

Analyzing and synthesizing the data from the e-surveys and interviews as well as the Timeline of Significant Events filled out by the four respondents being interviewed, it was evident that superintendents who have positive memories of their early childhood experiences agree on the importance of pre-kindergarten programs. Positive memories contribute to a positive belief that progress can be made in K-12 student success with quality early childhood experiences as part of those students’ early lives.

However, it was also noted that all respondents had come to the conclusion that because of societal changes and the needs of subgroups of students who had not been present in these superintendents' rural communities in the past twenty years; early childhood programming was becoming a more urgent need to implement. Memories of mothers at home or extended family members helping to babysit fail to match the typical reality of child care planning for young families today. Quality child care is typically cost prohibitive for many NC families, and in most rural NC communities, even if cost is not prohibitive, there are never enough available slots for all young children who qualify to attend by virtue of age. Due to social and demographic changes, pre-kindergarten is needed in all communities, so that all student subgroups will be ready to enter kindergarten.

**Research Question 3: What are the Superintendents in Rural North Carolina Perceptions of Participation in Pre-K and Academic Success in All Subgroups and Socioeconomic Levels?**

**Finding 3: Superintendents Believe That Quality Early Childhood Experiences Contribute to Academic Success**

Recent studies have drawn a direct line between school readiness and falling rates of social problems endemic to poverty, concluding that expenditures on early childhood programs can create reductions in the need for prisons and reduce drop-out rates (Lynch, 2007). The respondents in this study noted that poverty was a major factor in students not being prepared for school. Forty-seven of the eighty-five respondents gave examples of poverty and low-socioeconomic levels in their communities affecting the ability of students

to enter kindergarten with life-experiences that enable them to comprehend the kindergarten curriculum, and to succeed academically and socially in their kindergarten classrooms.

In this open-ended e-survey response, one of the rural superintendents gave his view in this way: “A socioeconomic subgroup must not be the determinant of a child’s educational opportunities. School districts need to be able to offer Pre-K to all students. It should not be required, but there should be opportunities for all children. The expectations for school-age students are so much greater than in the past, all children at-risk or not must be ready to learn in kindergarten.”

Therefore, community stakeholders must work as a team alongside their school district superintendents in order to find the financial resources to create an academic teaching template that is accessible to all subgroups. This infrastructure is crucial in order to attain, as the end-result, a college- and career-ready child.

**Subgroup Population Growth.** The census data supported the superintendents’ view that the state of North Carolina is showing growth in population and in racial and ethnic diversity. A state that had traditionally had mostly white and black constituents is now finding an influx of new North Carolinians from many different countries. Many members of this new component of the population are coming in search of work or in search of a lifestyle that is conducive to raising a family and having their children grow up happy and safe. Those seeking jobs often do not speak English. North Carolina is also seeing an influx of students with mild or severe physical and/or developmental disabilities. North Carolina county school systems have experienced a growing population of immigrant children from a variety of countries. In rural areas, the majority of these low-socioeconomic subgroups are Hispanic

children whose families are looking for agricultural jobs, which are prevalent in the agrarian rural counties. These subgroups often choose to live in the rural areas and commute to construction jobs in nearby cities due to more affordable housing opportunities in rural towns.

Forty two of the forty-eight respondents of the e-survey shared their concern over being able to provide needed services for the growing racial-minority; low-socioeconomic subgroups in the state's rural areas, a trend evidenced in the North Carolina demographic data for 2011-2012. Superintendent Adams responded that "The growth of low-socioeconomic subgroups in our rural county is a community problem that the school district shares with other stakeholders. Our county works with many agencies making sure we are using the same 'road map' for success for all children." This quote exemplifies evidence from all the responses attesting to the importance of communities working as teams of stakeholders holding the same vision, in order to successfully put into place the availability of early childhood programs for all children in a community.

Superintendent Douglas shared, "I think that students who are found in low wealth situations deserve the opportunities to have a preschool experience no matter where they live. Doing this allows them to start school on a more level playing field." Equal opportunities and equity of service availability were themes shared in all 48 of the e-survey responses.

Thirty-five other respondents made similar statements. One wrote, "Early childhood quality programming must be a priority especially in poor rural and urban areas. Parents should be assured no matter what town in North Carolina they choose to live in; they will have quality educational resources to choose from for their young children. All North

Carolina citizens want to be assured no matter where they make their home in the state, that they as taxpayers will receive the same quality of services for their families.”

Another respondent shared the same sentiments in this response: “Because of what we know from the research on Pre-K children, it is imperative that all school districts in North Carolina provide early childhood education especially for those who cannot afford private Pre-K service. Local Education Agencies should collaborate with non-profits, and partner with all funding sources to offer the most services possible for all children.”

In the interviews, all four superintendents talked about their concern that as children enter kindergarten, schools already are seeing discrepancies in what kindergarteners have experienced in their early childhood years, from zero to five years old. This variability in early experiences makes the educational playing field quite uneven, beginning with these young students’ very first day of public school.

Superintendent Adams’ response typifies that of all the respondents: “I think that students who are found in low wealth counties deserve the opportunities to have a preschool experience that allows them to start school on a more level playing field. My own children must travel to another neighboring county to receive pre-kindergarten services, which they can because I can afford the hefty tuition which most families cannot afford.”

A suggestion to remedy this was shared by Superintendent Connor, who said, “I think the state should fund all preschool programs with Average Daily Membership (ADM) funding, just like the state did to create kindergarten classrooms in our public schools in the past.”

**Current Design of the Kindergarten Model in North Carolina.** Thirty-five out of forty-eight rural superintendents responded that they believe the current kindergarten model was meeting all needs of their students; thirteen responded that they do not. This sentiment was shared because the superintendents are seeing an influx of unprepared students entering kindergarten compared to the recent past. All 48 responses noted a need for an additional early childhood infrastructure. A typical response of this type was: “The NC kindergarten model is good, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, kindergarten is not enough. Today’s children are capable of so much more. NC needs to require that all students be given equal opportunities before kindergarten.”

Superintendent Adams stated that “Our kindergarten teachers work closely with our Pre-K and 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers to vertically align curriculum, but the state should examine how to give Pre-K to all children and not just those in a low socioeconomic subgroup.” The concern is that there are not enough funds to budget slots for all children who qualify for Pre-K services.

Superintendent Berry responded, “Our kindergarten model currently is unable to accommodate the students who genuinely need the Pre-K program before kindergarten. Our kindergarten teachers differentiate instruction taking children where they are and helping them grow to their potential. We know more about how students learn, and we have a broader repertoire of instructional practices. However, getting students months in advance of kindergarten would give them more time to grow academically and socially.”

In the current 2012-2013 school year, all counties in North Carolina have professional learning communities, county-wide staff development, and grade level curriculum planning

encompassing the philosophy of Common Core standards for vertical and horizontal alignment of skills. The intent is that all children will be college-and career-ready as they leave 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Common Core Curriculum Standards are now a part of every child's educational foundation in all grades as North Carolina continues the track to academic excellence and high expectations for all students. Ensuring universal kindergarten readiness among North Carolina students is the next essential step in attaining those goals.

### **Summary of Finding Three**

The findings for Research Question 3 show that rural superintendents in North Carolina all strongly believe that kindergarten success is contingent on their youngest students entering kindergarten ready to learn. In answer to the overarching question of this research, this finding supports the fact that in 2012 in rural NC, superintendents believe that they should prioritize funding for pre-kindergarten.

Overwhelmingly, all 48 counties that responded (n= 85) state that they are seeing a growth in populations of students coming to their schools who are unable to speak English and who often have not had any pre-kindergarten experiences, putting them behind peers who are arriving with established abilities to read, write, and understand math concepts. Due to this finding, the answer to the overarching question of the need to prioritize funding for pre-kindergarten was unanimous among the rural superintendents. The respondents all see the need, but continue to struggle to creatively find ways to use their meager budgets to create pre-kindergarten programs to serve all students who qualify as at-risk in their districts.

In the following section, the researcher will describe the theoretical framework used while conducting the qualitative research for this study. This theory helped new insights

come to the surface as the data was analyzed and synthesized. The relationships between the various sections of the study's data showed relevance to today's evolving educational world and the decision-making required to improve it (Anfara & Mertz, 2006).

## Chapter Summary

The key findings for this case study were developed from analysis of an e-survey, interviews, and a document entitled Superintendent's Timeline of Significant Life Events. The following three research questions were used to guide this study to find the answer to the overarching research question, which was how rural NC superintendents prioritize funding for pre-kindergarten:

**1. What are the perceptions of rural superintendents about the importance of universal pre-kindergarten?**

The data indicates that size and location dictate superintendents' perceptions of universal pre-kindergarten in the majority of cases. The superintendents feel they would love to have universal Pre-K but believe that they cannot afford it. However, some outliers in the study showed that with stakeholders in leadership positions who dare to be creative with funding sources and think out of the box, funding for quality pre-kindergarten programs can be and has been created.

**2. What are the perceptions of superintendents' experiences with elementary education and universal pre-kindergarten?**

The data indicates that consciously or subconsciously, individuals' past early childhood experiences do play an integral part in prioritization of funding for early childhood programming. Superintendents who have witnessed, either personally or professionally, the effects of helping children learn at an early age become strong proponents for early childhood education, whereas those who do not have their own children or have not had contact in their profession with children in elementary

schools often have not understood the importance of teaching and exposing children at an early age to learning new concepts which increase brain development and activate learning. Brain research has found that young children are capable of learning at a very early age, and that there is a crucial window of time for early social and cognitive growth to occur.

**3. What are superintendents' perceptions of participation in Pre-K and academic success in all subgroups and economic levels?**

Superintendents in this study indicated that children from all socioeconomic levels profit from quality early childhood experiences. The superintendents stated that the achievement gap that has been a historical problem in the United States in K-12 educational settings will continue if America does not begin to look at new and varied ways to fund implementation of quality early childhood programs for all children, no matter who they are or where they live.

The next chapter will review the key findings, delineate the limitations of the study, describe its theoretical and practical implications, and propose directions for future research on pre-kindergarten implementation for all students.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION**

In Chapter Five, I will discuss the major findings from this study about North Carolina rural superintendents' prioritization of funding for early childhood programs in the public school setting. Primarily using the lens of the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu's Social Field Theory, this chapter will discuss the findings showing the interplay of the roles of superintendents and other stakeholders in the decision-making process about implementing public pre-kindergarten. The discussion will connect the findings to the existing research literature. Additionally, the implications of these findings for both theory and practice will be discussed, as well as recommendations for future research. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for policy alternatives to make universal pre-kindergarten a possibility for the children of North Carolina.

### **Review of the Purpose of the Study**

In 2012, the United States continues to see discrepancies in availability of local, state, and federal pre-kindergarten programs for young children. Public funding for early childhood initiatives has always been sparse and today has become even more so due to the effects of a nationwide recession and local, state, and federal budget cuts over the past decade. While some individuals still believe that early education should be the sole responsibility of parents, the conversation has shifted in recent years as more and more educational stakeholders realize the stunting implications that poor Pre-K experiences can have on students. Advocates for early education believe it is the proper role of the district, the state, and even the federal government to provide high-quality Pre-K to our most disadvantaged youth. Indeed, Pianta & Barnett (2012) note: "It would be extremely beneficial if the federal

government had a program to incentivize states to focus their efforts on creating high-quality, accessible preschool programs, so that all children have the opportunity to have a quality education. Increased financial support from the federal government would allow states to reach a higher level of consistency in the early childhood programs that are offered” (Pianta & Jenkins, 2012, p.17). This is especially important in remote rural communities, where there are higher rates of poverty and a lack of affordable, quality Pre-K options. Rural school district superintendents are therefore tasked with providing services that have not been historically provided by public schools. In a very real sense, the future of a community depends to a significant degree on the superintendent’s ability to improve educational opportunities for success for all students.

This study’s findings pointed to the need for collaboration, rather than an autonomous leadership model, in order for true and sustaining support for universal Pre-K to take root. The overarching research question guiding this study was: How do rural NC superintendents prioritize public school pre-kindergarten in their local school system budget funding? Why do they or do they not prioritize public pre-kindergarten funding? The following research questions guided the study in order to answer the overarching research question:

1. What are the perceptions of rural superintendents about the importance of universal pre-kindergarten?
2. What are the perceptions of superintendents’ experiences with elementary education and universal pre-kindergarten?
3. What are superintendents’ perceptions of participation in Pre-K and academic success in all subgroups and socioeconomic levels?

This study used a case study design to answer the research questions. The researcher focused on the responses from 48 of the 85 NC rural superintendents to an e-survey, as well as personal interview responses from four NC rural superintendents, each of whom also completed a Timeline of Significant Events. Two of the superintendents described their districts as highly funding public school Pre-K and two described themselves as low funders of public school Pre-K. To understand the superintendents' perceptions of prioritizing early childhood funding, the researcher relied primarily on the e-survey responses and the personal interviews. The researcher also studied demographic data from the census bureau as well as the NC Rural Economic Development Center, and collected documents relating to the implementation of district funding decisions. In order to analyze the data and identify themes relating to each of the research questions, the researcher used a system of open coding.

The results of this study revealed how NC superintendents in rural school districts prioritize their funding sources to implement programming in Pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grades.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

In her bestseller, *Liftoff Leadership*, the author Betty Shotten stated that, “Tomorrow’s problems will not be solved by yesterday’s answers. Fresh perspectives and unprejudiced minds are critical for new solutions” (Shotten, 2011, p. 91).

Superintendents, as leaders, must study the needs of their school districts and communities, and earmark funding sources according to their priorities. As will be discussed, while the superintendents in this study claimed to prioritize early education, few committed the requisite resources to have an impact on the experiences of preschool-aged children in their districts.

In this study, Pierre Bourdieu's Social Field Theory was adapted to depict how early childhood educational policy development is executed by superintendents who are impacted by global trends, historical influences, sociocultural content, and economic influences. Both Bourdieu's theoretical framework and this study highlight the importance of all stakeholders in driving the institution of new policies. In light of what I know here's some fresh understanding of it, and I will revisit the framework below.

### **Pierre Bourdieu's Social Field Theory Model**

Bourdieu's Social Field theoretical framework was used in this study "to portray complex, contextual, and contested interactions" (Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. 163) within educational policy decision-making about prioritization of funding for early childhood programming by NC rural superintendents. In this section I will report on the findings for the overall research study's focus and purpose, which was to ascertain how public school superintendents of rural North Carolina counties prioritize funding programs to prepare their students prior to kindergarten entry in order to maintain a smooth transition to the academic rigors of the North Carolina kindergarten curriculum.

This social field theory was chosen for this study because it lends itself easily to showing how the influence and communication between groups play roles in decision-making by policymakers. "One strength of this model, therefore, is that it is not *prescriptive*; it is *descriptive*. Rather than telling how things should be done, it allows multiple processes and complex interplays to be described" (Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. 170). The three concepts of *field*, *capital*, and *habitus* allowed the researcher of this study to give details about the place, the players, and the strategies involved in the process of decision-making about

funding early childhood programming. As stated in *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research*, "...theories are always evolving, and should be tested, adapted, and challenged. This is our contribution as qualitative researchers to understanding and explaining our world in multiple and diverse ways" (Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. 172).

I will focus on the following three important concepts of Bourdieu's Social Field Theory: *field* (the playing field, a micro-level social field of rural North Carolina counties); *capital* (specific amounts of educational, social, political, economic, and cultural power); and *habitus* (perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, and expressions used to make decisions and handle conflicts).

#### *Field*

Field refers to the concept of allowing the researcher to detail the context of the study and put boundaries around a specific location. In this study, I looked at the bounded field of only North Carolina rural counties (Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. 171). The purpose of any use of educational funds should be to decide wisely how to deliver a quality education to all students, especially those who are at-risk. Therefore, it should be evident that prioritizing educational funds for pre-kindergarten implementation is a crucial step in reaching and delivering instruction to students so that all rural NC students can continue to increase their academic achievement benchmarks in all grade levels, from Pre-K into college and career.

**Rural North Carolina Funding Challenges.** All 48 superintendents who completed the surveys and interviews believed that the challenges of educational funding for rural superintendents are very similar across North Carolina. Superintendent Adams stated, "Critical for all superintendents are the new standards, and when you look up the 21<sup>st</sup>

Century School Leadership goals for superintendents, it says we have changed our mission to be a new type of school leader, who can quickly improve school performance. Unless people understand developmental education enough to push money down instead of only ADM for K-12, this will be difficult to do.”

Thirty-one superintendents confirmed by their responses in an e-survey question that they blend funding sources to implement pre-kindergarten quality programs. All four individual interviews of superintendents talked about blending funds in order for implementation of Pre-K to take place in their rural counties. Superintendent Berry stated, “State allocations have not been covering anything below the kindergarten level. We move money from varied funding sources to maximize the efficiency of how to use those dollars. Blending and leverage of dollars as much as we can so that Title I federal funds, state money, local dollars, EC funds are combined in a way to maximize instruction by creating Pre-K and keeping K-12 strong.” In his interview, he also described the fact that “state allotments do not cover everything in terms of staffing and all the needs in the county’s kindergarten classrooms, therefore Pre-K implementation has to take some creative thought processes to make it a reality.”

The survey data revealed that 40 respondents discussed in one of the survey questions the recent major change in which state-level department is housing the infrastructure for early childhood education. The superintendents indicated their concerns that the state moved pre-kindergarten out of the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), where K-12<sup>th</sup> grades are supported. This response typifies the concerns of the superintendents in this study: “We have gone in the state of North Carolina from moving our Pre-K programs out of the Department

of Public Instruction (DPI) to the Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR), really stepping away as very similar to what we have done in mental health.”

When asked about the similarities and differences in early childhood program availability, eighteen superintendents surveyed reported that their county had the majority of early childhood program offerings in the private sector. Eleven respondents felt that public school pre-kindergarten would give a higher quality program, and only three respondents felt that the private sector has a comparable high-quality program expectation for Pre-K than the public school in their county. Superintendent Connor shared in an interview that “Last week in Raleigh when all the rhetoric in the legislature was calling for the privatization of Pre-K, I was one of the main people writing letters stating to make sure we do not give up state funding of Pre-K to the private sector, because we do a better job with it under DPI. So when we see Judge Manning weighing in, then we in the trenches are cheering, because we know how valuable early childhood programs are. In the next five to ten years, state funding must continue or there will not be enough funding sources to reach all children.”

The survey data coupled with the interview data analysis revealed that 55 percent (n=85) of NC rural superintendents acknowledged that the state allotments calculated by their average daily membership (ADM), are their major source of funding for kindergarten. Without ADM for pre-kindergarten, funding is relegated to monies given to rural counties earmarked specifically for Pre-K from the state, the Exceptional Children program, or Title I. These state and federal budgets have recently been drastically cut. Therefore, it is subjective, depending on a county’s needs and vision, whether they are continuing to use Title I federal funding for pre-kindergarten in the way it had been used in NC in the late 1980s and 1990s.

When asking for superintendents' perceptions of the similarities and differences between funding pre-kindergarten in their rural county, one superintendent, Superintendent Conner, summed it up in his interview by stating, "Based on what is happening now, I don't have a lot of hope. What is happening in Raleigh right now, not even in future elections, our state's disinterest for providing funds for our children is bleak. Philosophical differences I understand, but unless this communicative dialogue changes, we will see that without state funding it just won't get done, not on our local dollars. I am not optimistic!"

So to summarize, all respondents stated that local funds cannot bear the expense of creating early childhood programming for their rural communities. Rural budgets have already been stretched to the limit, and cannot even give services already in place with enough funds to accomplish all the needs of their communities. Therefore, new expense line items are not attainable with diminishing funding resources. The respondents to this survey know that until a linear progression begins with dialogue including local, state, and federal stakeholders, a universal pre-kindergarten template for all of America's children can never become a reality for all states. A universal model such as those in countries like Japan, Italy, France, or England needs participation from every state and locality to involve all Americans. The definition of universal pre-kindergarten used by these respondents was access for all children in the United States.

**Rural North Carolina Students' Kindergarten Readiness.** Forty five out of 48 respondents stated in one of the e-survey questions that they perceived that most students entering kindergarten are entering their school doors not ready for the state kindergarten curriculum. In the text analysis of the e-survey, as well as the four interviews, the vernacular

used most often in describing that lack of readiness listed the causes as poverty, lack of preschool program availability for all children, large pockets of low socioeconomics, a lack of affordable early childhood program options in their rural counties, and a lack of availability of early childhood experiences in their locality. Superintendent Berry shared that “I am rooting for Judge Manning! This whole scenario over the past year has been most disconcerting and shortsighted, as we move through the process of finding funding in our rural North Carolina communities. Research is very clear, that we can probably have the most impact the younger we intervene with students.”

All of the superintendents who responded stated that a lack of early childhood programming impacts classroom instruction in kindergarten and beyond. Readiness skills guide a child’s ability to be prepared for the NC Common Core Standards in K-12, which have horizontal and vertical alignment of the skills each child is to attain at each grade level. Reading Readiness, including writing and language readiness skills, and math readiness skill exposure in these early formative years give entering kindergarten students a strong foundation to reach all benchmark goals at the kindergarten level. One survey response stated, “The state needs to require that all students be given equal access of readiness opportunities before kindergarten even if they live in any area of North Carolina. A child’s residence should not dictate Pre-K availability. Good teaching in kindergarten may overcome a lack of preparation, but even with differentiation, some students are behind so many levels of month growth that they cannot catch up in one kindergarten year for all developmental benchmarks.”

Another superintendent stated, “Especially with the funding of 3-D Wireless assessments for all North Carolina counties, our teachers are able to progress monitor and assess students. This helps them see where they are and plan how to make them grow. Best teaching practices are imperative for all students. If teachers do not believe they can be successful with a student who lacks preparation, then they need not be teaching.” In a similar vein, another superintendent communicated his strong belief that “Pre-K should be available for all at risk children, especially in areas that are historically low-performing. I hope that pre-kindergarten will be offered to all students in all public schools in North Carolina, evolving into a state mandate. The benefits of Pre-K are valuable to kindergarten success.”

It is important to understand how NC rural superintendents perceive the purpose of Pre-K implementation in NC rural counties. As one typical e-survey response stated, “We have to stop finding excuses for our rural children, and help them learn.” One survey respondent wrote, “I am really worried about funding changes being discussed by the legislature. It is worrisome if there are increased standards and pre-kindergarten becomes an unfunded mandate. Political transition is critical, as we look at more demanding curriculum, Common Core standards, and the teacher evaluation system tying a student’s progress to a teacher’s evaluation. Again it is a concern if where a child lives or a teacher teaches dictates success.”

In this next section, the interplay of field and capital will be discussed. Whereas, the field is the common ground, with players holding different positions, capital is specific to the field: social, political, cultural, and economic factors interplay to reveal that “who has what

capital, and in what amounts, sets up hierarchically distributed power structure” (Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. 162).

### *Capital*

This study invited rural North Carolina superintendents to be participants. “How the players are invited to participate, or allowed access, uses the notion of ‘capital.’ This capital is specific to the field and could be social, political, economic, cultural, or symbolic” (Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. 162). How capital has impacted the funding of pre-kindergarten implementation equally in all counties in North Carolina will be shown by the superintendent responses regarding how various types of capital are impacting their individual school district and community decisions concerning Pre-K funding.

**Political Capital.** The fiscal context of political decision-making has a great impact on what programs will be implemented in a given time period in a local community. “Consequently, changes in the national economy send waves into the local economy and political system that generate conflict for the superintendents” (Kirst & Wirt, 2005, p. 186). When questioned about the perception of appropriate funding for the implementation of pre-kindergarten in their county, there were two major perceptions shared by the 48 respondents: 1) the use of targeted pre-kindergarten for students in low-socioeconomic groups; and 2) the question of universal pre-kindergarten for all students.

**Targeted Pre-kindergarten Funding.** There have been four longitudinal studies through the years in the United States forming the primary cost-benefit evidence supporting targeted pre-kindergarten for at-risk children. These programs were the Perry Preschool Project, the Abecedarian Project, the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, and the Elmira

Prenatal/Early Infancy Project. They showed “annual rates of return, adjusted for inflation, ranging from 7% to just over 20% and benefit-cost ratios ranging from 4:1 to more than 10:1”, according to a study done by Heckman, Grunewald, and Reynolds in 2006 (Zigler, Gilliam, & Barnett, 2011, pp. 22-23). Many researchers have followed the effects of these four early childhood programs, as these children entered adolescence and adulthood.

“Considering all societal benefits, the long range annual benefit per tax dollar was \$12.10 for a targeted program and \$8.20 for a universal access program (Zigler, Gilliam, & Barnett, 2011, p.178). This first perception that targeted pre-kindergarten should be the focus of funding has been shared by many respondents in this study. Superintendent Conner stated that “Targeted pre-kindergarten implementation will be difficult enough to make happen due to the financial state climate. Already we have facility concerns due to lack of adequate funding. We already rely on the private sector in our county for Pre-K services due to not enough space in our public school buildings or resources to create public Pre-K sites. We have a non-existent tax base to build enough buildings and classroom space for our K-12 ever growing population as a priority concern. I do not see having space for even a targeted Pre-K program, and a universal program would need many more classroom spaces and funding for supplies that we just do not have right now... We need to be able to serve the children who qualify for Pre-K services, or they will come to kindergarten woefully behind.”

Superintendent Douglas shared a similar perspective on targeted pre-kindergarten: “I think pre-kindergarten must be available and be a priority especially in poor rural and urban areas, especially if they are to come to kindergarten ready to learn. School districts should provide Pre-K services for at least all at-risk children, as much as is fiscally possible. I still

worry about the learning styles of our boys in socio-economically deprived homes, who at kindergarten age need time to move about the classroom and explore. Hands-on learning is so important in their social and emotional growth. They would thrive with exposure to a pre-kindergarten program, before they enter the more state mandated structured assessments in the Common Core curriculum in kindergarten and first grade.”

Historically, there has not been broad support for universal pre-kindergarten in the United States; pre-kindergarten services have typically been framed for at-risk children and their families. “Unlike other countries with which America routinely competes economically and intellectually, the United States does not entitle its young to environments that optimize their social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development” (Zigler, Gilliam, & Barnett, 2011, p. 44). The philosophical idea of targeted pre-kindergarten has driven the infrastructure of early childhood programming until recently, when the discussion began to shift to a cost-benefit analysis of programming for all children rather than only at-risk children. Data from this study indicates that the discussion has also shifted from a focus on inputs to outcomes.

**Universal Pre-kindergarten Funding.** “The greatest disadvantage of a universal program is undoubtedly its cost. The advantages are better coverage of the disadvantaged population, larger educational gains for disadvantaged children, and education benefits for non-disadvantaged students, and a substantial economic return flowing from those three advantages” (Zigler, Gilliam, & Barnett, 2011, p.39). Although universal pre-kindergarten is an idea that is gaining ground, 40 respondents had concerns that sufficient funding for it would not be available anytime soon. Superintendent Conner laughingly responded, “Based

on what is happening now, I don't have a lot of hope for universal pre-kindergarten becoming a reality anytime soon.

One respondent, despite being new to the role of superintendent, really understood the inconsistencies of funding availability in his first school district appointment, and his response gave very descriptive details about his county's funding capabilities. Superintendent Adams shared that, "For pre-kindergarten allocations keep in mind that I have inherited this budget, but this was in place this year in this county whether I agree or not. I ultimately hope to make changes in funding in the future, but this is what is in place now. We need to bring all stakeholders to the table and carefully look at all our funding sources and where they will make the best impact for all students in our community." He went on to say, "I am a new, young superintendent, and am still fired up, but it really burns you out as a superintendent sometimes. I have been discouraged with all the rhetoric in the newspaper, and losing funding for Pre-K programs in my county." He summarized his perspective by saying, "Funding for all Pre-K students is needed because superintendents should not have to weigh which student needs he can and cannot fund when they are all important."

**Social and Cultural Capital.** All 48 respondents agreed that all students would benefit from a high-quality early childhood program before kindergarten entrance. Forty-six NC rural superintendents stated that the public school system under the Department of Public Instruction is the best fit for preparing our youngest students, aligning the goals of pre-kindergarten vertically with the vision and end result of our K-12 public school system's goal of students being college-and career-ready when they graduate from the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Only one respondent wrestled with his philosophical views that four-year-olds should not begin school

yet, but he admitted that he needed to put his past beliefs away due to the alarming numbers of children entering kindergarten ill-prepared for the state kindergarten curriculum mandates for the Common Core. Superintendent Conner shared, “There is a very conservative side of me that doesn’t get it. Our role was never to educate children from the cradle to the tomb. However due to societal needs if we do not do this and it is not being done, then our children who arrive at kindergarten are woefully behind and then we will have to pay the piper anyway. So it’s a reality tempered by a conservative viewpoint.”

All four respondents interviewed individually shared that it was a priority for them to create the best educational setting for their students no matter what funding was within their grasp. Their goal was quality instruction. Superintendent Douglas shared his view of when educational instruction should begin by saying, “Three- and four-year-olds need to be introduced to certain educational concepts early on in order to be ready for school. All children can learn through many different ways at different rates. I believe in nurture over nature theory that most children can learn if they are given exposure to concepts any way that they can receive the content.”

The social and cultural capabilities of the stakeholders have a strong impact on their thought processes about initiating or upholding policies. Yet in the next section, the research will show that economic capital can often become the impetus for any final decisions to be made.

**Economic Capital.** “The movement toward better public early education in the United States is predicated on issues of equity. Policymakers and the public recognize the unfairness inherent in a system that provides some children access to full day Pre-K and full

day kindergarten programs and other children with no such opportunities. Making comparisons between school districts and localities is critical to understanding which children are excluded” (Guernsey & Holt, 2012, pgs. 5-6). In 2011-2012, policymakers actively sought data to decipher how to close the achievement gaps between all socioeconomic groups. The Foundation for Child Development and the New America Foundation’s Federal Education Budget Project have collected data on federal education funding to help politicians and policymakers unravel this confusing data set showing inequitable services to America’s children depending on where they grow up (Guernsey & Holt, 2012).

The most resounding perception of the synthesis of all data sources by all 48 respondents (n=85) to the e-surveys, interviews, and Timelines is that early childhood programming must be a part of the effort, moving forward, to make all students successful in their academic endeavors. Superintendent Adams shared that “Pre-K must be part of the public school system as an option for parents. You are going to find different opinions, because people are terrified to upset local businesses, but I have no apologies to privatization because I want to tell them we must intervene for all students, before they are five because just as a house on fire is too late to save, so is starting to educate a five year old too late.”

Another economic concern was shared by Superintendent Douglas, who said, “We use all the fund sources we receive, but we still do not reach all our entering kindergarteners. Every year we try to expand our Pre-K slots contingent on funding sources and together not even half of our entering kindergarten students have had a pre-kindergarten experience.”

Superintendent Berry shared this economic perception: “State allocations do not cover anything below kindergarten. We have a blended approach to fund our pre-kindergarten program. We blend and leverage dollars as much as we can and combine federal, state, EC funding, Title I funding in a way to maximize as much as we can, but we do not reach all students or even all that are in poverty.”

### *Habitus*

The definition of *habitus* is “a set of attitudes, beliefs, and practices that bind members together so they can identify and communicate with each other. Habitus is the feel of the game” (Anfara & Wertz, 2006, p.162-163). The beliefs and perceptions of superintendents as leaders of their school districts drive the prioritization of budget line items in their local budgets. These two different themes of beliefs/perceptions and prioritizations emerged in the responses from rural NC superintendents in all the data sources, showing the subjectivity of funding decisions and supporting the primary thesis of this research. One respondent strongly affirmed his perception in the crucial importance of pre-kindergarten programming when he stated, “We will look at all funding sources and talk to all stakeholders to flush out a way to continue pre-kindergarten because it is that important!” Another example of a superintendent’s strong preference for finding funding was found in this response: “Our county uses all types of funding making pre-kindergarten programs for all of our children entering our community schools. As a school leader, I encourage creative funding so that pre-kindergarten will be a reality for all children in our school district.” At the other extreme, a respondent noted: “Our school district has no resources, facility space, or availability of qualified personnel to create pre-kindergarten programs.”

As described in the *field* and *capital* sections, their interplay, along with the concept of *habitus* in the social field model, “can show a snapshot in time or it can show changes over time” (Anfara & Wertz, 2006, p. 170). Bourdieu’s theoretical model as an infrastructure for this study was a good tool with which to look at human interactions, and the visual diagram clearly showed the interplay of all factors that play a role in the outcomes of decision-making.

### **Pre-kindergarten Implementation Overview**

Throughout this qualitative case study, three themes emerged from the data: 1) the benefits of funding pre-kindergarten programs; 2) the challenges of funding pre-kindergarten programs; and 3) future needs for adequate funding to guarantee pre-kindergarten programming for all students in rural North Carolina.

**Benefits of Funding Pre-kindergarten Programs.** After data analysis of the survey and four personal interviews, it was clear that the respondents overwhelmingly confirmed the benefits of funding pre-kindergarten implementation (see Table 1.1). The greatest benefit that all 48 participants noted was readiness for kindergarten entry. Although adequate funding was perceived as a challenge by all 48 respondents, at least 31 mentioned a hope for future breakthroughs by continuing the dialogue among all stakeholders. Forty-one respondents shared the belief that pre-kindergarten assists in creating a college- and career-ready citizen workforce for our global community in the future. Forty-two of the rural NC superintendents believed that an important benefit is that rural counties would again become attractive places to raise a family. One superintendent stated, “I feel passionate about the quality of life in our rural community. My own children live and go to school here, and all parents want the best

for their children, and it should not matter where in America we happen to be living to have a quality education.” In addition to immediate benefits, eighteen respondents shared that a longer-term benefit would be fewer children being retained, being suspended, and becoming school drop-outs.

**Table 1.1****Research Study Respondents' Views of Universal Pre-K**

<b>Perceived Benefits of Pre-K</b>	<b>Response Rate</b>	<b>Typical Response</b>
Readiness for Kindergarten Entry	<b>47</b>	“Grave concern by most educators that many kindergarten students are ill-prepared for the NC Common Core curriculum.”
Making Rural Counties Attractive Places To Live for All Ages	<b>42</b>	“Lack of job opportunities, child care options, and varied family activities make coming to live in a rural county a challenge for young families.”
Creating College- and Career-Ready Citizens	<b>41</b>	“Infants to five year olds are capable of learning so much, and if they are not stimulated then they continue to come to kindergarten academically behind their peers, making it hard to ever catch up to become college-and career-ready.”
Fewer Children Retained, Suspended, Dropping Out	<b>18</b>	“When students feel successful and like school, they tend to have lofty goals and want to stay in school to achieve them.”
<b>Challenges to Pre-K Implementation</b>		
Is there Adequate Funding?	<b>41</b>	“Without adequate funding, universal Pre-K cannot become a reality.”
Necessary Quality Workforce Availability	<b>34</b>	“Quality teachers are needed for all students from infancy to college.”
Importance of Parent Involvement	<b>22</b>	“Parents are a key to assisting schools to support all students.”
<b>Future Needs To Attain Universal Pre-K</b>		
Local Needs Assessment	<b>41</b>	“Communities take ownership when everyone works toward a vision, and looks at needs and how to attain them.”
All Stakeholders' Input	<b>39</b>	“All stakeholders working together make things happen in a community.”
National Equity	<b>22</b>	“Pre-K should be available for all Americans.”
National Data Surveys	<b>10</b>	“A national focus is the only way universal Pre-K will become a reality.”

Superintendents as instructional leaders are part of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century standards. As discussed previously, the data from this study indicates that the beliefs and perceptions of superintendents, who are the budgetary leaders in their districts, have a huge impact on whether pre-kindergarten is made a priority in the school district's budget. As Superintendent Adams shared, "If there is a will, there's a way, as the saying goes, to make pre-kindergarten a reality with existent fund sources." Another respondent said, "If there are quality early childhood programs available, then the future holds the ideal that there will be less poverty due to our students being ready for the global workplace in their future."

One superintendent finalized his comments by saying, "I am no whiner, but I promised to make this school system stronger, and with my funding being diminished I can't build a top-notch school system for all our children unless I can reach them before they come to school as well as their K-12 years of instruction."

**Challenges of Funding Pre-kindergarten Programs.** Although the overall perceptions of the respondents were in favor of funding pre-kindergarten programs in the public schools, there were a few challenges that emerged throughout this study, most of which were related to affordability (see Table 1.1). Challenges that surfaced in the response data (n=85) were 47 respondents concerned with lack of adequate funding sources and 34 concerned with availability of an affordable quality workforce in their rural areas.

As one respondent shared, "Many young families tell me that they have to think twice about locating here and buying a home. Not knowing if there are quality child care options, they cannot breathe a sigh of relief if they have no quality options for their children to go to when they have to work."

Twenty two respondents desire a stronger parent voice when making community decisions about early childhood curriculum. One superintendent on the e-survey shared, “I still encounter the philosophical debate over teaching pre-kindergarten content areas such as reading, math, and other content areas earlier, but teaching them early as possible will assist students in being ready for elementary curriculum.”

Superintendent Berry shared, “Parents count on me to assure them that all children have equal access to educational opportunities during their formative preschool years.” Another superintendent stated, “The frustration lies in unfunded mandates by the state, and an inequitable society not giving our children a level playing field even at their earliest ages of development.”

**Future Needs.** All forty-eight respondents desire to make pre-kindergarten implementation become a successful reality for all. Forty-one superintendents want their communities to create a local needs assessment, and 39 wanted all community stakeholders involved. Superintendent Adams shared, “Until all stakeholders take this discussion seriously on the local level as well as the national level, we will continue to get the same old circle of continuous patterns of the same decision-making.” Twenty-two respondents talked about a national focus of equity for all of America’s children as being an important step in the right direction, and ten responses talked about having more national surveys so that there can be a plethora of data to study. One respondent shared, “In the last two years this has been studied more closely at the national level looking to the local level. This dissection of the issue needs to get deeper and wider to find results that will work for everyone.”

Another educational author, Julie Biddle, of the Highscope Educational Research Foundation (2012), also stressed the importance of involving many stakeholders interested in universal pre-kindergarten in order to make this early childhood initiative a reality. In her book, *The Three R's of Leadership*, Biddle reported that she wishes to “de-bunk” the industrial paradigm of leadership which condones the use of only one leader. She wanted her book to explain the importance of many interested individuals supporting a change in policy, which is the model that the superintendents in this study also shared, and the model needed today to make changes happen. The future of early childhood education making a difference for all children will happen with a re-conceptualization of the definition of leadership. Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be more constructivist and not the rigid industrial model of the past. Biddle states, “My premise is that all of us have leadership capacity, not just those individuals with leadership degrees or leadership positions” (Biddle, 2012, p.17). The superintendents’ responses in this study aligned themselves with the idea of collaboration with all stakeholders. Therefore, Bourdieu’s framework also depicting this premise will be used as the primary structure for discussing the findings of this study.

Leadership involving many stakeholders was also discussed in the research found in Carr and Kefalas’s *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America*” (2009). This book supports the data from this study about NC rural community schools. The superintendents in this study believed that to boost academic success for their K-12 schools, all members of a community must reflect on their students’ readiness skills when entering kindergarten. The book’s authors typify the sentiments found in my research when they write, “Reinvigorating the school -- described as the ‘driving issue’ -- is vital for

the survival of any small town and it is a first step in arresting the hollowing-out process” (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p.158).

The findings of this research also link closely to Carr and Kefalas’s findings (2009). Below is a summary of each of this study’s findings.

### **Summary Finding 1: Perceptions of the Importance of Pre-K Implementation and Attributes of Residence**

The first research question guiding this study to answer the overarching research question was: What are the perceptions of rural superintendents about the importance of universal Pre-K? This research study found that while small school-district size and rural location correlated with rural North Carolina superintendents’ perceptions of Pre-K implementation as important and necessary, the availability of funding sources was the reason ultimately given for implementation decisions about pre-kindergarten by those superintendents. “Although the federal government provides significant funding for early childhood programs, most of these funds pass through to the states and all local programs are regulated by the state” (Cochran, 2011, p. 85).

“Recent economic woes have caused some of the 38 U.S. states that offer state-funded preschool to reexamine their commitments to early education for 3 to 5 year olds” (Bartik, 2012, p.32). In the same vein, the North Carolina rural superintendents in this study agreed that the state and national climate concerning tightening budgets played out in how they direct the use of available funds. While many superintendents expressed a desire to fund universal pre-kindergarten, the fact that Pre-K is not mandated led many superintendents to direct resources to focus on other, more immediate needs.

Public investment in Pre-K has doubled over the last decade. However, state budget crises led to reductions in support of Pre-K (Finch & Schott, 2011; National Institute for Early Childhood Research, 2011, Reynolds, Rolnick, Englund, & Temple, 2012, p. 30). Pre-K programming is an easy target since it falls outside the usual expectation for school districts.

The data from this study show that superintendents are concerned that low-income minority children's access to early childhood services has decreased in the past ten years due to the shrinking availability of those services and dwindling funding for public education as a whole. Further, the debate over the appropriateness of public Pre-K has become more polarized even as public coffers have shrunk.

Proponents of early intervention and universal pre-kindergarten agree that the current economic crisis is precisely why there should be a concerted effort to support at-risk children, as this investment in early childhood education during the formative years will pay off with a stronger economy and educational infrastructure in the future. Investments in Pre-K must be made during the most "malleable early years if society is to succeed in reducing inequality and promoting productivity in American society" (Zigler, Gilliam, & Barnett, 2011, p. 7). This was clearly the view of the rural superintendents in this study.

As one of the interviewees noted, "Superintendents must serve as champions for Pre-K, making the public and policy leaders aware of the importance of starting the formal education process as early as possible for children." This sentiment was echoed in another response by Superintendent Douglas, who stated, "Superintendents and the community and

parents must stay on the North Carolina General Assembly to not stop funding for pre-kindergarten.”

The demographic data from the four personal interviews of NC rural county superintendents showed that a county’s size and location in the state were not deciding factors in Pre-K implementation. Implementation was decided by the amount of funding available to the county’s superintendent. The county profiles showed that size of a county was not a determinant for pre-kindergarten funding. Both the county with the smallest population of under-five-year-olds (879) and the county with the largest population under age five (3917) had similar needs for and concerns about a lack of available early childhood programs.

Title I funds are given to North Carolina counties that have high percentages of free and reduced lunch students. One of the uses of Title I funds has been the creation of Pre-K four-year-old classrooms since 1987. The data from this study showed that some NC superintendents chose to use their Title I funds for four-year-old classrooms in existing elementary school campuses, but in the past ten years, due to diminishing amounts of federal funding and many mandated needs in K-12, many superintendents are choosing to close existing Title I Pre-K classrooms because Title I federal funds are needed elsewhere to fill budget deficits for K-12.

The Pre-K debate in the United States has largely been over whether to fund targeted or universal pre-kindergarten services. Of course, the major deterrent to universal pre-kindergarten was that it is such a large-scale endeavor. To recoup dollars used for Pre-K

implementation, a few states such as Florida and Georgia have created a sliding scale for tuition fees.

Previous studies by W. Steven Barnett, a Board of Governors Professor and Co-director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers, described a cost-benefit analysis that showed greater returns from targeting only needy preschoolers. Recently, however, Barnett has begun to advocate for universal pre-kindergarten rather than funding only for targeted services. Barnett explains, “The following four reasons that government should offer every child a high-quality preschool education rather than offer such programs only to poor children are:

1. Universal preschool programs will reach a significantly greater percentage of poor children.
2. Universal preschool programs will produce larger educational gains for disadvantaged populations.
3. Children from middle-income families account for most of the nation’s problems with inadequate readiness, school failure, and dropouts. Universal pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) can increase their readiness to succeed in school.
4. Universal Pre-K is likely to yield a larger net economic benefit to the nation” (Zigler, Gilliam, & Barnett, 2011, p. 34).

In this research study, where a child resides was not found to be the only reason for whether that child attended a Pre-K program. Rather, the desire of the citizenry of that locale to find funds to enable all children to attend high-quality early childhood programs can be and has been known to be a mitigating factor in early childhood implementation becoming a

reality. In the state of Florida, the following scenario occurred when stakeholders banded together to have their voices heard in support of pre-kindergarten services: “In 2002, with the full leadership of Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas, 772,000 Floridians signed petitions to put a constitutional amendment on the ballot that called for every four-year-old to have access to a publicly funded, “high-quality pre-kindergarten experience delivered according to professionally accepted standards. The voters of Florida passed the amendment, with 59 percent voting in favor. That constitutional amendment and voluntary universal Pre-K went into effect in the 2005-2006 school years. Today the state spends more than \$350 million each year on this program with approximately 161,000 enrolled 4-year-olds” (Zigler, Gilliam, & Barnett, 2011, p.41).

In 1996, North Carolina was touted as a shining star in provision of early childhood services with Governor James Baxter Hunt Jr.’s creation of Smart Start. On April 15 of that year, Vice President Albert Gore, Jr., after a visit with Governor Hunt to a North Carolina preschool, stated, “North Carolina is by far the leader among all 50 states in helping our nation understand the importance of focusing in the first years of a child’s life” (Thompson, 1996). However, by July 2012, the North Carolina legislature was in the throes of reversing the state’s status as a national leader in early childhood education. North Carolina’s early childhood proponents are now in disbelief over the diminishing support and funding for even the most minimal levels of implementation for pre-kindergartens.

However, other state leaders stress the importance of young children being exposed as early as possible to learning new things. In the summer of 2011, Superior Court Judge Howard Manning Jr. ruled against the North Carolina legislature’s limiting of pre-

kindergarten slots to only the at-risk four-year-olds in the state. In the summer of 2012, Manning's ruling was challenged in the Court of Appeals. The legal question under consideration was whether North Carolina must expand early childhood services to admit any eligible at-risk four-year-old in the state. The existing NC pre-kindergarten program was renamed NC Pre-K, a continuation of the original early childhood program created under Governor Mike Easley called More at Four.

Will North Carolina continue to be a visionary state in serving its youngest students, or will it now lose its footing due to leadership that does not agree with this philosophy of the importance of funding early learning programs?

Knowledge of the needs of young children in small communities in NC rural areas is not a revelation for politicians and communities. On November 13, 1979, Governor Hunt made a speech in Charlotte to the Southern Growth Policies Board in which he stated, "Five years ago today, another southern governor named Jimmy Carter received this board's report of the commission on the Future of the South and made this strong point:...to achieve a South of which we can all be proud in the future is not simply a responsibility of government. Leaders in the private sector of our society have an equally important, if not greater, responsibility. We must act in concert with public and private leaders, sharing leadership to ensure that our dreams and hopes for the South now and in the future are realized" (Mitchell, 1982, p.626).

Appendix H is a compilation of the superintendents' responses from the e-survey and personal interviews outlining the structure of a needs assessment for improvement of early childhood services for all young children and their families. The assessment would show

present assumptions about the lack of early childhood programming, possible inputs and activities, outputs that would give outcomes initially, as well as mid-range and long-term outcomes that would have a major impact in terms of sustaining improved early childhood programming while creating the greatest impact on school readiness for all populations of entering kindergarten students. Some of the key ideas from this study to create an early childhood needs assessment for North Carolina are:

1. The impact that early childhood programming will have by making rural counties attractive places to work, live, and play;
2. The impact of a school infrastructure that will create citizens ready to work in a global community; and
3. The impact of poverty rates decreasing due to students being better prepared for the workplace.

Early childhood programs with parenting and family components help decrease the number of students needing special remediation programs, and if children are successful at school, fewer of them will need to be retained, will get into trouble at school, and will incur suspensions.

According to the data extrapolated from this research study, many stakeholders believe that a needs assessment is a valuable tool for a community to use. Thirty-two respondents out of forty-eight mentioned the use of a needs assessment as a tool to help communities prioritize their needs and be successful in achieving any goal.

If a needs assessment has been created carefully and systematically by studying available resources and the means to achieve end results for a certain target population, then

policies and future programming will be structured with a clearer and more systematic choice of early childhood venues so as to attain the desired end results.

**Summary Finding 2: Superintendent’s Pre-K Experiences Impact on  
Funding of Pre-K**

Pierre Bourdieu’s depiction of historical influences and global trends in his theoretical framework diagram were also often commentary topics in my study as the superintendents expounded, in their personal interviews, on their perceptions of the importance of universal pre-kindergarten. As one of the North Carolina rural superintendents stated in his interview, “Expectations of all students are higher from Pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grades, and that is why building the foundation in Pre-K is so important.”

In his personal interview, Superintendent Adams responded that in terms of curricular expectations for early childhood, there “has been a layered and significant change towards higher academic expectations for pre-kindergarten while still having concerns for being age appropriate and developmentally appropriate, trying to make sure children are prepared for kindergarten and first grade because kindergarten and grade one expectations have increased dramatically.”

The superintendents’ responses in this study showed an increase in the desire for all students to have access to pre-kindergarten services. A historical shift in the realization that all students can benefit from early childhood experiences was demonstrated by the volume of comments made by the superintendents interviewed. For example this statement by one of the superintendents affirms the hopes for the expansion of Pre-K: “We are hoping to expand to universal Pre-K. This would be an essential piece of our total approach to ensuring that all

students graduate from our district ready for college and are career-ready.” Superintendent Berry shared, “We would love to make pre-kindergarten universal for all children in the community.” By this comment the superintendent is meaning access to all of his children in his district.

Many superintendents shared their desire to fully implement pre-kindergarten by offering services for all entering kindergarten students, which would assist all children in being ready to learn the extensive curriculum mandated by the Common Core standards that came into effect for all North Carolina school district students in 2012.

The *American School Superintendent* (Carter & Cunningham, 1997) talks about critical issues for superintendents in the future. It states that preschool and early childhood education have been in the limelight not only in North Carolina but also nationally. In this text, a quote given by a superintendent in another state aligns itself with the findings of the quotes from the superintendents in rural North Carolina in this research study:

“Superintendent Mary Nebgen of the Washoe County School Distribution Reno stated her belief that ‘our best hope in terms of encouraging improved student performance is to get our students earlier. Some of our students who enter school in kindergarten are already experiencing problems with self-esteem and are clearly not ready for school. We as, educators, will be arguing strongly for state funding of preschool during upcoming legislative sessions” (Carter & Cunningham, 1997, p.213).

Fifteen years later, educators in most states, including North Carolina, continue the funding argument each year as the legislative session heats up. As the July 1 presumed deadline for the North Carolina 2012-2013 school year budget began to loom closer, the

education budget Senate Bill 795, The “Excellent Public Schools Act”, proposed to curtail funding for the public schools in North Carolina in all areas. It had also eliminated the discussion of full funding of pre-kindergarten services for all young children at that time. It remains to be seen if the wishes of the North Carolina superintendents will be heard to expand Pre-K for all students as future budgets are tweaked before voting by the North Carolina legislature, and with the election of a new governor who will take office in 2013.

As President Barack Obama stated during the presidential candidates’ debate in South Carolina on January 21, 2008, “Change does not happen from the top down. It happens from the bottom up... (People) arguing, agitating, mobilizing, and ultimately forcing elected officials to be accountable, that’s how we’re going to bring about change” (Shapiro, 2009, p. 179). Though it is proceeding slowly, the movement to make pre-kindergarten services for all children a reality rather than pure rhetoric has grown consistently in the last decade in most states in America.

However, the United States has shown a fragmented approach to instituting public school early childhood programs for decades. Many states and cities have had successful pre-kindergarten programs when led by a superintendent with a visionary approach to early education. For example, even as far back as in 1972 in Brookline, a suburb of Boston, a public school superintendent named Robert I. Sperber “reasoned that if schools paid more attention to children at a young age, the schools could reduce the extent of remedial resources required for students during their later school years” (Hauser-Cram, Pierson, Walker, & Tivnan, 1991, p.42). Sperber is an example of Bourdieu’s theoretical framework of a superintendent as a leader, with a combination of stakeholders who have a clear vision and

who value pre-kindergarten experiences for all children, making early childhood services a reality for a community. This vision of early childhood education has been around for a long time; but it often takes years for new ideas to take root. An example of this is how many years it took for kindergarten to become an integral part of our public school system.

In 1981, Governor Hunt spoke to the North Carolina Public School Superintendents Association, describing them as “the key educational leadership of North Carolina”, and stood by the premise that education is an important North Carolina commodity with these comments: “Well, my friends, I say to you today that North Carolina can’t afford to retreat in education. The friends of education have fought a long, hard battle in this state. We are making progress in the war against illiteracy and ignorance. Now is not the time to take away the very programs that are helping our children move up those national rankings and that are moving our state forward. Now is the time for the friends of education, citizens and educators alike, to stand and fight and send this message to Raleigh and to Washington: We will not let you sell North Carolina’s children - and North Carolina’s future - short” (Hunt, Crow, Poff, North Carolina, & Mitchell, 2000).

Thirty-one years later, superintendents in North Carolina are grappling with the same issues of priorities in terms of how best to use funding in Raleigh and Washington to meet the educational needs of our children. One of the rural North Carolina superintendents from County A interviewed for this study commented that there is a “need to push money down also for Pre-K to have ADM funding, and fund it fully in the same way that years ago kindergarten was given full funding with ADM monies. You will hear over and over from legislators that Pre-K implementation would be too expensive. The U.S. heard the same

arguments when advocates of young children wanted kindergarten in the public school, so it is at the point if you truly want us to accomplish the North Carolina standards for all and superintendents are expected to be successful, I cannot align this for all students unless I do it earlier and I cannot do this relying on parents or privatization because we have such a wide range out there of readiness for kindergarten, and it is critical for the schools systems to ban together.”

In this study, out of the 85 rural North Carolina superintendents who were sent the e-survey, all forty-eight who participated in the research were males. The four personal interviews consisted of three white males and one African-American male. No women superintendents participated in the e-survey. There were ten women superintendents who could have responded to the request for the e-survey and the interviews, but none of them replied so as to participate in the study. A woman superintendent’s perspective would have been interesting to explore in comparison to those of her male counterparts. In the book *Women Leading School Systems: Uncommon Roads to Fulfillment*, Cryss Brunner and Margaret Grogan share a study that stated that size of a school district did not determine whether women aspired to the superintendency. However, that study, which covered the southeastern US, stated that “Most superintendents served in rural small-town districts, with 60% of the women serving in districts that were under 3,000 students” (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 85).

Women and men superintendents both agree on reasons for their ineffectiveness at times. The top four factors inhibiting a superintendent’s effectiveness in being a change-agent were described as “inadequate financing of schools, too many insignificant demands,

state reform mandates, and board micromanagement' (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 93). However, a woman superintendent who had personally experienced a dearth of available early childhood care for her own children might have offered an especially interesting viewpoint to have studied due to the personal and intimate nature of her observations.

The replies from this study's respondents also agreed that the lack of funds for educational budgets have stymied all NC rural superintendents' ability to be leaders in state educational reform. However, this study recommends the use of all stakeholders as leaders in order for real and sustaining change to occur in education. A true result of great leadership occurs as Lao Tzu, 604 B.C., stated: "When a task is accomplished, the people will say, 'We have done it ourselves.' No individual is singled out; rather the collective work of all creates the strong sense of ownership, of accomplishment, of renewed sense of purpose, of solidarity. It is this leadership all should aspire to" (Biddle, 2012, p.75).

### **Summary Finding 3: Quality Early Childhood Experiences Affect Academic Success**

The United States is comprised of immigrants from many nations. This pluralistic society brings challenges for equal services due to the varied needs of citizens in different subgroups. Americans value equal opportunity; our belief in the importance of delivering services fairly and equitably for all subgroups continues in this 21st century. To aspire to conflict resolution for all educational subgroups, "It behooves superintendents and principals to develop a strategy that will recognize pluralistic, conditional, and incompatible values without advocating some specific value. Support for individual freedom to make defining decisions in all areas of human interaction would constitute a safeguard of values" (Rebore, 2003, p. 112). Public schools were originally structured in a yearly progression with a

uniform course of study. “Now, with greater concerns over equity and over high school dropouts in particular, dynamic perspectives have emerged in questions about whether test score gaps widen or narrow over time, in language about student trajectories through schooling, and in recognition of a fourth grade ‘slump’ and problems with ninth grade transition” (Grubb, 2009, p. 277).

As one of the rural superintendents interviewed shared, “Our present North Carolina kindergarten curriculum is not effective for all students because one shoe does not fit all, and I am dealing with the Native American population, whose culture is different which makes it more difficult. We must be more flexible with different cultures and their views.” Another issue for North Carolina has been an influx of immigrants with young children who do not speak English and also are unable to read in their native language. In the past five years, this has considerably increased the numbers of our subgroup populations needing to show growth academically in order to meet the North Carolina Public Schools determination of adequately yearly progress (AYP).

Usually the emphasis in AYP has been on improving a school’s performance, but other crucial modifications are needed at the district, state, and national levels in order for a successful change to occur for all student subgroups. More realistic goals must be adopted, not a cookie-cutter approach that expects all students to achieve proficiency by 2014, especially since more of our kindergarten students are arriving at school not speaking English and having had early life experiences drastically different from those of their peers. This life scenario is putting them behind before they even begin their school experience. “We demand equity without providing either the school resources or the foundational economic and social

conditions that might enhance equity. Our demands and our actions are impossibly contradictory, and schools are caught in the middle” (Grubb, 2009, p. 288).

“A variety of intervention studies indicate that ability gaps in children from different socioeconomic subgroups can be reduced, if remediation is attempted at early ages. The remediation efforts that appear to be most effective are those that supplement family environments for disadvantaged children” (Reynolds, Rolnick, Englund, & Temple, 2010, p. 381).

At present, the amount of money spent for young children before they enter kindergarten is quite minute in the United States. But shifts in political thought on budgetary funding usage can happen suddenly. As in the case of Great Britain, where preschool became universal in 1998, “A 2005 study of preschool says one of its authors, Oxford professor Kathy Sylva, ‘it has been used by ministers as the “evidential base” for expanding universal service.’ Free pre-kindergarten became available to all four year olds in 1998, and a year later it was expanded to include all three-year-olds in England. By 2003, 98 percent of four-year-olds and 88 percent of three-year-olds were enrolled” (Kirp, 2007, p. 236).

“The British study breaks new ground by specifying the importance of the social background of a four -year-olds classmates. Poor children who went to preschool with middle-class kids performed better in school than those educated in social-class isolation. That’s intuitively right and consistent with American research showing that the background of a child’s classmates exerted a powerful argument for making pre-kindergarten open to all, rather than treating it as the twenty-first century version of the old paupers’ schools” (Kirp, 2007, p. 237).

To begin the dialogue in the United States about expanding pre-kindergarten services, then, an in depth study is needed to show whether a universal program would attain public support as it has in Great Britain, because it would demonstrate benefits to all subgroups financially, socially, and academically.

“A universal program not only benefits middle- and upper-income children but also may have larger effects than a targeted program for the most at-risk children” (Reynolds et al., 2010, p. 339). Disadvantaged students will have role models for language and social interactions when around children from higher income levels.

The early childhood research literature in the past five years shows an interest in universal pre-kindergarten advantages for all subgroups rather than targeted pre-kindergarten services for the lower socioeconomic subgroups, as was thought to be the best venue a decade ago.

Superintendent Douglas stated in his personal interview that “Three and four year olds need to be introduced to certain educational concepts early on in order to be ready for school. All children can learn, though maybe in different ways and at different rates.”

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study’s findings have important implications for all stakeholders in rural North Carolina in deciding the best use of dollar funding amounts for the implementation of pre-kindergarten programming in order to create a cost-benefit analysis that impacts all Americans. Multiple perspectives have been shared from the rural North Carolina superintendents in this study’s findings. The majority of the school leaders in this study believe in the fiscal cost-benefit analysis of quality pre-kindergarten services administered

through the public school system. The superintendents interviewed believe that the infrastructure afforded for curricular alignment will support our young students entering kindergarten.

Any educational program in the process of coming into being presents idiosyncrasies during implementation. Challenges to a smooth startup of early childhood programming can be met, if all stakeholders support the vision that young children deserve an equal chance at access to learning before entering kindergarten regardless of where they live.

Challenges and benefits always arise when an innovative program is newly implemented. In research literature, there is a wealth of studies concerning early childhood programming in different states, but few take a cohesive look at America as a whole having a narrowing focus in this area. Often in education it is difficult to generate comparative types of cost-benefit analyses. Different districts in different states usually find it difficult to share their findings because their cost-benefit analysis of early childhood programs is based on assumptions of the impacts those programs will have on their specific school system's crime, retention, and graduation rates. They feel that their data may be incomparable because their demographics and environments, both economically and socially, could be quite different from others (Oppenheim & MacGregor, 2002).

The respondents to this study showed by their dialogue that even though educational expenses, salaries, and transportation are rising dramatically and the cost is great, American students -- especially our growing Hispanic population and low socioeconomic subgroups of all nationalities -- need the benefits of intervention in order to be given a chance to enter kindergarten ready to learn alongside their middle-class counterparts.

In this study, small rural school system superintendents in North Carolina were interviewed. In the same manner, in the book *Small Districts, Big Problems*, an analogy of a school district's rebirth was made comparing building educational infrastructures to building your dream home. As in the past with architects such as Thomas Jefferson, pilasters or columns were used "to help buttress the superstructure of the roof". Three figurative pilasters for support mentioned in this book were transactional communication, where stakeholders communicate to help each other; polyarchic influence, which is shared power; and respect for the individual (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992, pp. 167-169). Having been one of the first North Carolina Title I preschool coordinators in 1988, I understand the challenges and benefits of funding early childhood programs, especially with meager funding sources. It is the purpose of this research study to reflect upon the findings and suggest possible practical and theoretical implications of this study for working together and not in isolation.

This study's findings have important implications not only for educators, but also for stakeholders such as politicians, families, and communities, who are concerned with dwindling funding sources and finding the most cost-effective ways to utilize existing monies for the benefit of the greatest number of citizens. One of the first theoretical implications brought out in this study is how important the decision-makers' philosophy concerning early childhood is in prioritization of budgeting for pre-kindergarten program implementation becoming a reality for all of America's children. This study indicates that superintendents are part of an infrastructure determining the cost-benefit analysis of pre-kindergarten implementation. Justification of any investment in this decade of dire fiscal need must study benefits to the public at large and not only to the participants in a given program. The

superintendents in this study's dialogue explained that the state legislators made decisions impacting how the superintendents' budgets were created, and determined whether early childhood was already carved into the legislation of state funding before it came to the school districts. Pre-K Now executive director Libby Dogget stated that "Picking the states in which to invest was almost a science. We had reams of data on the political climate, the budget situation, and the child advocacy organizations. I was looking for two things: experienced advocates and someone high up in government who could make something happen" (Kirp, 2007, pp. 162-163).

As the respondents in this study showed, superintendents are the voice of the future in their systems and states, but funding is a larger issue involving politicians at the local, state, and federal levels. Superintendents as well as all stakeholders can keep the vision and dialogue for pre-kindergarten programming at the forefront of budget decision-makers' minds. "With increasing demands for academic accountability, the focus for superintendents and other district-level personnel has moved toward instructional accountability" (Cooper & Fusarelli, 2002, p.193).

As more research begins to show the benefits for all students in attending a pre-kindergarten program, those benefits will be demonstrated in students' spiraling and vertical alignment from K-12 grades to be effective 21<sup>st</sup> century learners ready to advance vertically through the Common Core infrastructure scaffolded by expert teachers in their field.

### **Theoretical Implications**

I propose several theoretical implications from this study. One of the first is how important superintendents are as leaders to first- and second-order changes in educational

program implementation. Those superintendents must also realize how important it is to utilize all stakeholders in making decisions to improve education for all students. Throughout the review of literature, three main ideas were shared: Bourdieu's Social Field Theory Theoretical Framework of Decision-Making, Policy Change in a Micro-Political Context, and Early Childhood Research.

**Bourdieu's Decision-making Process.** Pierre Bourdieu's framework shows the interactions and communications between stakeholders in decision-making processes for successful policy changes and implementation. Educational leaders are challenged not only with the new conceptualization of a new policy, but also with the interplay amongst stakeholders in communicating their understanding of a new program's implementation. Leaders must focus on understanding the idea of the importance of early childhood education as well as the reality of finding funding sources for implementation.

It is my recommendation to train school leaders in distributive and transformational leadership techniques to benefit their leadership capabilities in making innovative changes. An important and immediate benefit is the disbursement of implementation duties to many stakeholders to drive forward the impact of a more immediate change taking place. True empowerment of all stakeholders, developing a culture that takes risks, must be modeled by school and district leadership (Rebore, 2003). "Good human relations does not just happen because of noble intentions but rather must be inaugurated through a strategy (Rebore, 2003, p. 99). Therefore, it is my recommendation to educate administrators on the fact that the strategy of working with all stakeholders on studying their district's needs and creating a workable plan to move forward to create educational change is crucial in order for change to

happen in a timely fashion. In the past, too many early childhood entities were working in isolation instead of together, which would enable them to have a larger impact for all students. It is past time for all concerned with early childhood education to be at the same table, in dialogue, to make change occur.

**Policy Change in a Micro-political Context.** Many researchers agree that administrators should not assume that only some students can be reached by public education. Many educators are stuck in an outdated mindset in terms of educational structure. If we are to close the achievement gap, leaders must believe that education is the vehicle to make positive change happen successfully. Fullan (2003) wrote about system transformation as the ultimate goal of reform efforts (Lyman & Villaini, 2004, p. 3). It is my recommendation that educators must stop the outmoded practice of looking at education as an isolated paradigm, and work with all stakeholders to make change happen. “Fullan contends a leader’s beliefs rather than particular leadership strategies are of primary importance in any process of changing and improving a school” (Lyman & Villaini, 2004, p. 4). It is my recommendation that district leaders understand the connections between political, economic, and social institutions, and the major impact that factors such as the national economy have on decision-making. “Superintendents exist in a political web of pressures with the local actors all coping with external influences that create conflict locally” (Kirst & Wirt, 2005, p.187). School district leaders should be leaders in the conversation about making change happen by finding the stakeholders willing to go past the rhetoric and strive for strategies for transformative change.

State funding has often been contingent on which political party is in office.

The platforms of the Republican and Democratic parties during the 2012 state and national elections were quite different concerning education and early childhood initiatives. In the 18-page Democratic state proposal entitled “Great Jobs Grow from Great Schools”, the Democrats share their interest in expanding early childhood initiatives. “The platform also sought to improve teacher training and expand the state’s pre-kindergarten program. In a nod to exposing the youngest citizens to books, Dalton even wants to ensure every newborn goes home from the hospital with a local library card.” Dalton is an advocate of early childhood programs. Pat McCrory, the incoming Republican governor, did not mention expansion of early childhood programs in his state platform. He did state that he acknowledged the educational needs of families of low socioeconomic status by supporting family literacy programs; however, he did not give a description of how these programs would be funded in NC, or what they would look like. McCrory supported vouchers for private schools and parent choice, as well as home schooling. He was concerned with federal and state budget deficits, supported the legislature’s education cuts of the past two years for public schools, and believed in tax credits for families whose children attended private schools. McCrory put together a task force during the first week after his election to begin planning how to implement the educational platform that helped him win election as the first Republican North Carolina governor since 1993, when Governor James Martin left office.

The presidential candidates for 2012 also differentiated themselves when discussing education. President Obama, as the Democratic candidate, believed in initiatives to close the academic divide amongst all Americans by funding early childhood programs. The Republican candidate, Mitt Romney, was concerned with the high levels of federal spending

and wanted to make drastic cuts in such education programs as Head Start and Pell Grants to help trim the deficit.

President Obama was re-elected, but in the state of North Carolina, Romney was the president of choice. NC voters chose a Republican governor by a large majority, and they showed a strong belief in cutting state and federal budgets by not endorsing such programs as early childhood initiatives, compared to the majority of voters elsewhere in the United States.

**Early Childhood Research.** Early childhood programs have the primary goal of contributing to a child's educational development. What delivery model can best accomplish that is a widely discussed educational concern. Research has shown that improving a child's kindergarten readiness is crucial for students' long-term progress. Varied findings have shown early childhood education creating positive academic change. For that reason, there is a need to study and reflect on which delivery model should be implemented. "Among the multiple issues identified as needing follow-up through further research, issues of particularly high priority include the following: understanding the Pre-K enrollment patterns of key population subgroups, examining the sequencing and dosage of early childhood services for children and families across the birth-to-5 age range, considering the effects on program quality when higher education degree-granting programs and ongoing professional development involve direct observation of specific classroom practices, going beyond separate domain-specific curricula to consideration of coordinated curricula, and understanding the effects of differing instructional approaches and teacher preparation for those working with dual-language learners" (Zigler, Gilliam, & Barnett, 2011, pp. 216-217).

## **Implications for Practice**

As shown in this study, the creation and implementation of early childhood programs are enabled by the commitment and strong belief in the importance of early childhood programming on the part of the stakeholders making funding and budgetary decisions. The rural North Carolina superintendents who responded to this study unanimously saw the importance of intervening before kindergarten entry with early childhood programming. Although these superintendents believed in pre-kindergarten services as beneficial programs to improve academic and social skills, Pre-K was not implemented in all districts for all children due to the balancing act required with funds at the superintendents' district level and the many other mandates that needed prioritization.

In order for future pre-kindergarten implementation to occur at the same level for all American children, the federal and state funding sources need to be revisited and revamped so that a possible blending of future funds would be available no matter where a child is born in the United States. All stakeholders in all states must have the same information and resources available to create an equitable national educational experience for all our children.

The recommendation would be that to transform America's educational system, pre-kindergarten must be an integral part of the new visionary conversation, rather than our "perpetuating two separate silos of early learning" (Duncan, 2009). In 2009, Arne Duncan, the U.S. Secretary of Education, made a speech to a conference of the National Association for the Education of Young Children in which he alluded to the importance of integrating pre-kindergarten with K-12 instruction by giving the silo example. Even President Barack Obama began the discussion of transforming the outline of the American public school

system. “However, the position of his administration shifted to a more integrated, multiyear strategy” (Duncan, 2009). “Like everything, the devil – implementation - remains in the details” (Zigler, Gilliam, & Barnett, 2012, p. 181).

The findings of this research suggest a need for legislators to study a renewed vision for political decisions regarding budgetary priorities affecting all of America’s subgroups. “At issue is whether a new kind of constructive politics can be created so that fragmentation (be it racial or regional in nature) can be replaced by a broad-based coalition for greater redistribution of resources to address the rich-poor gap. The first step is for governors to be willing to take risks in promoting a collective vision for the next generation, despite resistance from taxpayers” (Wong, 1999, p. 90). Opening up a national dialogue with a professional learning community of governors all at the same table -- many of whom have already made pre-kindergarten implementation happen in their states -- would be a great opportunity to share ways of budgeting to make universal pre-kindergarten successful, and to discuss a national model.

In addition to prioritizing budgetary decisions for early childhood initiatives, some of the superintendents in this study also discussed how they blended federal, state, and local funding sources. They also shared how they combined some district programs that had similar outcomes as well as eliminated any redundant initiatives in order to redirect funds to create early childhood programs in their schools.

The results of this study showed that superintendents were sometimes overwhelmed with constrictive mandates, and with the realization that decisions about how to fund them were a looming concern. “Top-down models based on the search of certainty are likely to

lose sight of the surprising, promising and innovative effects and outcomes of early childhood practices. Rather, we are in need of alternative and secure policy frameworks that provide funding resources to gather, document, disseminate and theorize these experiences as practice-base evidence. The discussion of Pre-K has only begun” (Miller, Dalli, & Urban, 2012).

Often new superintendents think that they have joined a school system that is fiscally stable, but many unforeseen issues arise, such as “plummeting state tax revenue, military downsizing, or newly legislated limitations on districts’ taxing capability” (Chapman, 1997, p. 210). The major finding of this study was the often subjective decision process by each school superintendent founded on their knowledge base and philosophical opinion of the importance of a pre-kindergarten experience for entering public school kindergarteners, and on their opinion about whether it is the public schools’ obligation to fund this early childhood experience for some, none, or all of the young children in their district.

Four major themes evolved from the findings in Chapter Four of this study. One is that quality pre-kindergarten programming is critical if it is to be beneficial in making differences in K-12 education. A second is that children in poverty who come to kindergarten struggling and without interventions in place will continue to struggle in K-12. Another very important indicator is that parental involvement is of the utmost importance in helping all children be successful in school. Finally, a child’s school readiness index as he enters kindergarten determines his rate of learning and his successful growth in all grade levels.

In recent research it has stated that the nation, as well as local school systems, do not utilize the data from research studies as much as they should in order to make effective

budgeting decisions in a seamless fashion. Our country can be compared to a patchwork quilt when looking at how our budgeting decisions for educational programming are made.

In future research studies, if they come armed with the data that universal pre-kindergarten works they would be more likely to get the funding and a larger amount to implement it. I would also recommend a larger sample size for the personal interviews; because the dialogues with the individual superintendents and the length of our interaction allowed for an in-depth discussion that permitted me to really hear their opinions. The e-survey was a great way to reach out to all 85 rural North Carolina superintendents, but with only a 55 percent response rate, I still conjectured as to whether my findings would have changed or remained the same had the other 45 percent replied. Another research study could look at all or varied stakeholders' opinions about budgeting prioritization for pre-kindergarten, enabling the researcher to hear the opinions of the full range of stakeholders in Bourdieu's framework, and allowing a picture to emerge that looks at all facets of the discussion and their varied perspectives.

The debate over early childhood program implementation is not new to America. Neither is the debate over whether early childhood services should be funded by the public or private sector, and if services should be only for indigent populations or for all children. Future longitudinal studies can assess whether funding of pre-kindergarten is reaching appropriate populations and if its delivery is consistent with program expectations, so as to determine whether the achievement gap will be eliminated for all subgroups (Buysse, Castro, West, & Skinner, 2004; Smith, Kleiner, Parsad, & Farris, 2003; Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). Jean-Paul Sartre is known for stating that everyone is alone in making

decisions; the same is true for “superintendents and principals who assimilate the policies, and make them their own policies when they choose to enforce them” (Rebore, 2003, p. 69).

This qualitative, multi-case study was designed to examine rural North Carolina superintendent perceptions of what kindergarten readiness looks like, and their opinions about whether the use of public school universal pre-kindergarten had an impact on student achievement. The scope of the study was limited to four rural school system superintendents in one southern state. The researcher was contemplating a narrow case analysis involving purposive sampling of four superintendent interviews. However, once a research process begins, “new factors may emerge and the researcher may want to increase the sample in order to say more about superintendents as gatekeepers of their school systems (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008, pp. 170-171). This limitation may come up in the advanced stages of research and require that the research be broadened; this is often called the “hour-glass metaphor” (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008, p. 171). As research grows, a discussion of more detailed entities may materialize.

Perhaps one limitation to this study may be that it looked only at superintendents’ perceptions. This narrow focus does not allow the researcher to learn from different sides of the discussion, with large polarities in the thinking of various stakeholders about the topic of the study.

“Any researcher, no matter how unstructured or inductive, comes to fieldwork with some orienting ideas, foci, and tools”, and this could be a huge limitation if the researcher does not keep that fresh in their mind during the research process (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 27). The researcher needs to decide if all interviews should be face-to-face. If online

interviews are considered, then factors such as legal, ethical, and interpersonal demands of a digital interview need to be considered as another possible limitation of the study (Klenke, 2008).

The researcher wanted to come to the study with no preconceived notions of what the superintendents' perceptions are of universal pre-kindergarten (Sousa & Hendricks, 2006). Grounded theory analysis generates theory from minimum prior knowledge. Therefore, as this researcher attempted to inductively study the topic, the hope is that the limitations of some previous background knowledge by the researcher only acted as a structure, rather than bending the findings (Glaser, 2001). It was the desire of the researcher to conduct her research of the multiple case studies rigorously so that the researcher's biases would not try to confirm any preconceived notions on her part.

“Case study research is remarkably hard, even though case studies traditionally have been considered to be ‘soft’ research. Paradoxically, the ‘softer’ a research technique, the harder it is to do” (Yin, 1994, p. 26). It is hoped that this study will contribute to the leadership field of study impacting our youngest children in North Carolina.

This study did not focus on whether pre-kindergarten impacted student achievement. However, this is a crucial question for a future study. In order that superintendents will prioritize their funding sources most wisely and judiciously, future studies must be continued. Strategies to find funding for early childhood programs must be studied to further impact student achievement for all subgroups.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Historically, the United States has created a non-cohesive system of funding early childhood programming including federal, state, and local implementation plans. “An implementation model working well in one locale may or may not work in another due to changes in political climate” (Hustedt & Barnett, 2011, p. 187). North Carolina stakeholders would find it beneficial if a study would release information showing who exactly is receiving early childhood education services in North Carolina and with what funding sources. This study needs to address the growing number of students who would qualify with academic need, but do not qualify because of their family’s earnings, for NC Pre-K or Head Start. Often these middle-class NC families cannot afford quality child care in the private sector. Future studies need to examine these students’ falling through the cracks because they are defined as middle-class and their families make too much money to qualify for publicly funded early childhood programs. Wealthier families have affordable access options for their children, and the lowest socioeconomic subgroups have subsidized options available, but a growing middle class has no such available early childhood resources.

Continued future research on a national pre-kindergarten model, using the results from the states that have already created successful universal pre-kindergarten program funding is an imperative step in the effort to close the achievement gap for all Americans. Many major philanthropic funders have become advocates for creative early childhood programming for disadvantaged children, to make a difference in young children’s lives. A program called Educare, which is a comprehensive model approach to high-quality child care and early learning, has been part of an implementation study since 2005. The model stresses

continuity of care, strong parent involvement, and teachers staying with the same child from birth to age three in a child care setting. Young children attending Educare are coming to kindergarten with verbal and academic skills that are on an equal footing with their peers who have attended private pre-kindergarten (Rasicot, 2012).

Many researchers and educators are bringing up the idea of restructuring the paradigm of K-12 education. That conversation has begun with some educators looking critically at the need and importance of continuing to have 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Many students are taking advanced placement classes during the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade years. By 12<sup>th</sup> grade many students have already been accepted to the college of their choice in the fall semester, and have accumulated all necessary credits to graduate high school. Therefore, many of them take frivolous classes to fill in time, or do not take courses but rather leave school for part-time jobs since they have enough credits to graduate already.

With an eye on the money currently used for 12<sup>th</sup> grade implementation, the dialogue has begun by some to restructure our schools into an age three to 11<sup>th</sup> grade infrastructure. In order to free up funds to pay for early childhood education, “state legislators could enact two changes that would bring major long-term academic gains with no additional cost to the taxpayer: mandating full-day education for all 3- and 4-year-olds, and eliminating the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The new and improved public-school system would begin with preschool and conclude with 11<sup>th</sup> grade” (Wright, 2012, p. 1). “Indeed, a fully financed mandatory-early childhood program would do more to change the culture and academic outcomes of students than any other area of reform” (Wright, 2012, p. 2).

Thinking out of the box about educational reform with a total reconstruction of the K-12 education system could not only change the academic outcomes of students, but could save huge amounts of money in other areas, such as drop-out prevention and the prison system. These finances could then be used to implement early education programs to jumpstart a child's learning capabilities. Why is this important? Many preschool-aged children do not have the appropriate daily experiences that they need in order to learn due to the dearth of quality early childhood programs that are affordable, and this impacts their ability to catch up with their peers in our current K-12 educational structure.

“The Center on the Developing Child, at Harvard University, found that in the first few years of life, 700 neuron connections are formed every second. If children do not receive sufficient nurturing, nutrition, interaction, and stimulation during this period of remarkable growth, then they may have deficiencies that will affect the rest of their lives” (Wright, 2012, p. 2).

### **Chapter Summary and Conclusion**

Presently, public school education seems to be at the precipice of a leap into the future. Superintendents, as leaders of the educational institutions in their communities, are expected to produce results to eliminate the achievement gaps between all subgroups in their school districts. Viewing the industrial paradigm that has been used for generations in our schools, stakeholders from our communities, parents, business partners, educators, and researchers are looking at revamping our educational infrastructure in order to reach all subgroups. The populace of the United States is changing, and with that change young children are entering our schools unable to speak the English language, not possessing

background knowledge and readiness skills to match their peers entering kindergarten. Therefore, many states in the past ten years have begun the study of why entering kindergarteners are stratified so drastically by ability upon their entrance to our public school classrooms. Head Start, Title I Pre-K slots have been created based on socio-economic status. These have been excellent programs, but the funding does not include enough slots for those who actually qualify let alone all those middle-class children who do not qualify but yet who cannot afford private pre-kindergarten tuition.

This qualitative multiple-case study examined the priorities that North Carolina rural superintendents establish in considering funding pre-kindergarten programs in their public schools. Data for this multiple-case study were drawn from an e-survey sent to the 85 rural North Carolina superintendents, as well as from four in-depth personal interviews -- two with superintendents who largely fund Pre-K programs and two with superintendents who barely fund Pre-K programs – and from each superintendents’ personal Timeline of Significant Events which outlined events in their own lives that may have influenced their ideas about early childhood programming.

Analysis of data involved open coding to identify emergent themes. Themes that emerged were:

- Urgency of the absence of quality pre-kindergarten programs available to all students;
- Increasing numbers of children in low socioeconomic groups entering our school house doors in kindergarten;
- Crucial importance of parental involvement;

- Need for a parental knowledge base on how to assist their children academically; and
- The grave importance of a child's school readiness index at the entrance to kindergarten.

Factors influencing Pre-K program implementation by superintendents are:

- Diminishing funds;
- Many mandates already needing funding in K-12;
- Disagreement over the need for targeted or universal pre-kindergarten implementation; and
- Philosophical differences over whether young children in the United States should start school at an early age.

These findings show that the discussion of a Pre-K-12 school system has already begun, as well as the idea of restructuring to a birth through 11<sup>th</sup> grade educational model. Major change in infrastructure on a national level would necessitate that all governors and state and local government officials come to the table ready to roll up their sleeves and make a concerted effort to have an open dialogue. To make the greatest impact for our youngest students, a national dialogue must occur. Also, researchers must continue to study the importance of the early years. Superintendents can lead the charge for change with all stakeholders by having a clear and consistent vision of a successful academic outcome for all children in America.

The real world may necessitate a shift in the historically held position regarding the American educational infrastructure. Based on all that the researcher has learned in this study

and through researching recent literature about this topic, I think that moving forward should include helpful strategies such as looking at a new three-year-old to 11<sup>th</sup> grade infrastructure, having all stakeholders enter the dialogue about funding alternatives for early childhood programming, and promoting a comprehensive, high-quality child care and early learning system from birth through age five that will easily interlock with the K-11 educational system.

This study found that superintendents want to make access for pre-kindergarten available for all their entering kindergarten students in order to effect change in their school districts. However, they are becoming highly frustrated with dwindling funding sources and do not know how and where to begin to make access to pre-kindergarten programs available for all their entering kindergarten students. Many superintendents stated that they are about to give up hope for pre-kindergarten access for all to become a reality anytime soon in their rural county.

I believe that our youngest children do not have a voice, and that until we as adults see the importance in making access for early childhood a priority for all children the achievement gap in this country will continue to be a glaring and pervasive issue irresolvable until all stakeholders are serious about coming together to think out of the box and find funding to make it a reality. Proponents for young children must begin to become politically savvy and find new ways to make creative funding suggestions by possibly reorganizing our traditional educational infrastructure that often is not meeting the needs of our 21<sup>st</sup> Century skill sets. Research needs to be used to drive our budgetary decisions instead of competing for the same funding. Early childhood and K-12 education should begin to work together to

make an even stronger institution of academic excellence for all our children, using funds to get at the heart of why so many of our students are not being successful at the end of the 12th grade spectrum. Our 21<sup>st</sup> century goal of all children being college and career ready may be more successful, if we begin sooner to support their educational journey. Early childhood and public school educational entities are beginning to see the value in sharing ideas and funding sources in order to reach more children in our communities earlier in their lives, so that they will be more successful in their K-12 grade curricula (Brown, Casto, & Sipple, 2011). For decades brain research has demonstrated that we must activate learning for a child immediately to activate his potential to learn at the highest level. I believe that this time period has researchers and stakeholders beginning to dialogue with educational leaders and politicians. They are learning to use research to make funding decisions in order to make the best impact for all Americans. Superintendents want to be change agents. However, they have learned that leading all stakeholders to be part of the solution, instead of working in isolation makes improvements happen as a team much quicker in order to impact their communities. Time will tell if we are on the precipice for a major impact on outcomes by changing such things as our educational infrastructure and creative use of funding sources shared by private and public educational entities in a thought-out research-based plan of action.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Sample Letter Requesting Participation in E-Survey

Dear Superintendent:

My name is Judith Stover, and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Administration and Supervision at the North Carolina State University. I am also the Assistant Principal at Louisburg Elementary School in the Franklin County School System.

I am requesting your assistance in completing my dissertation by taking a web-based survey of superintendents' perceptions of the most beneficial setting to prepare children to enter kindergarten ready to learn, and what superintendents perceive as the skills that are necessary to enter kindergarten ready to learn.

According to DPI records your school system contains kindergarten classrooms in your elementary schools.

The purpose of this research will be to ascertain how public school superintendents in rural North Carolina elementary schools prioritize funding programs to prepare their students prior to kindergarten entry to maintain a smooth transition for the academic rigors of the North Carolina kindergarten curriculum.

Knowledge gained from this study will provide information to parents, legislators, administrators, teachers, and the community, who want to know what type of care will better prepare children to enter school, both academically and socially.

Please reply to this email to signify your permission to participate in being surveyed as the school system superintendent.

Your personal identity and the school district identity at no time will be utilized in the research study's narrative. Readers of the research study will not be able to conjecture by the data given what person or district may have been part of this study.

Your assistance in this study is greatly appreciated.

If you would like to participate in the e-survey, please click on the link below for the survey. After the e-survey, a subset of four superintendents will be asked to participate in an in depth interview.

**<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/5WV7X26>**

Knowing your extremely busy schedule, I personally want to thank you for considering participating in this brief five minute or less e-survey.

Sincerely,

Judith Stover, Ed.S.

## APPENDIX B

### E-Survey and Protocol for Rural North Carolina Superintendents

#### Regarding Prioritization of Pre-kindergarten Funding

**Request for Participation:** You are invited to participate in a study that will try to ascertain how public school superintendents in rural North Carolina elementary schools prioritize funding programs to prepare their students prior to kindergarten entry to maintain a smooth transition for the academic rigors of the North Carolina kindergarten curriculum.

It is up to you whether you would like to participate. If you decide not to participate, you will not be penalized in any way. You can decide to stop at any time without penalty. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions, you may simply skip them.

**Research Method:** The research involves participating in a web-based survey. You will be asked nine open-ended questions about rural North Carolina superintendents' thinking processes in prioritizing funding for public school pre-kindergarten programs.

The study will take approximately 5 minutes to complete.

**Privacy:** All of the information I collect will be anonymous. I will not record your name or any information that could be used to identify you or your school system.

**Risks:** The risks associated with participating in this study are non-existent.

**Benefits:** This study will inform parents, administrators, teachers, legislators, and the community about how rural North Carolina superintendent prioritize public school funding for pre-kindergarten in their local rural school districts.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about this study, please contact Dr. Bonnie C. Fusarelli. She can be reached at (919) 515-6359. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board. Deb Paxton is the Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus at (919) 515-4514.

**Below is a copy of what the e-survey questions are when you press the e-survey link:**

**<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/5WV7X26>**

**RURAL SUPERINTENDENT E-SURVEY QUESTIONS**

**1. Please rate the following:**

**Rate the**       High       Above  Average       Below       Deficient  
**level of**  
**readiness to**  
**learn for**  
**kindergarten**  
**students in**  
**your school**  
**system**

**Rate the**       High       Above  Average       Below       Deficient  
**availability**  
**of private**  
**early**  
**childhood**  
**programs in**  
**your district**

**Beyond  
federally  
mandated  
pre-  
kindergarten  
services for  
exceptional 3  
& 4 year olds,  
rate the level  
of other pre-  
kindergarten  
programs in  
your district**

- High     Above Average     Average     Below Average     Deficient

**Rate the  
degree your  
district  
prioritizes  
funding for  
Pre-K**

- High     Above Average     Average     Below Average     Deficient

**2. If you rated the students in your district as "average", "below average" or "deficient" in terms of school readiness, what factors do you believe are contributing to the students not being ready?**

**3. What funds do you use to implement the early childhood program?**

- 
- NC Pre-K (Smart Start, More at Four)
- Exceptional Children
- Local
- Other
- All the Above

**4. What do you believe is the appropriate role of school districts in helping ensure children are ready to learn in kindergarten?**

**5. How have curricular expectations changed in early childhood education over the last five years?**

**6. Do you believe the current design of the kindergarten model in NC and your district is meeting the needs of all students to make them school ready? Please explain.**

**7. Has this district ever conducted an evaluation of your kindergarten program? If so, what were the results?**

**8. Looking ahead, where do you see the use of pre-kindergarten programming in your district in the next five years? Ten years?**

**9. Is there anything else you would like to share about how superintendents can help bolster student school readiness for kindergarten?**

Done

## APPENDIX C

### E-mail Invitation to Rural North Carolina Superintendents

#### For Personal Interview

Date

Dear (Participant Name),

My name is Judith A. Stover, and I am currently a North Carolina State University student working on my dissertation research. I am also the Assistant Principal at Louisburg Elementary School in the Franklin County School System. I hoped that you might be interested in participating in my study. The purpose of my study is to ascertain how public school superintendents in rural North Carolina elementary schools prioritize funding programs to prepare their students prior to kindergarten entry to maintain a smooth transition for the academic rigors of the North Carolina kindergarten curriculum. The study utilizes a qualitative multiple-case study design, and relies on my ability to gather the information of superintendents on this topic from those currently working as a North Carolina rural district superintendent. My desire is that through the data collection of this information, I may be able to gather valuable insight into what strategies are of importance to the early childhood curriculum implementation equitable journey for all North Carolina children.

This letter is requesting your assistance in gathering this data through the form of a structured interview that I will administer to you in regards to your prioritization of funding for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs. If you agree to participate in the study, the researcher will tape record and transcribe the information after the interview. This data will be compared and contrasted with other superintendents' responses like you in summary form. Your responses will remain confidential. You do have the right to refuse to answer any question during the interview. You may terminate the interview at any time or choose to have any or all responses deleted from those analyzed. Once all participants have completed the interview data gathered from the study, the data will be included in my dissertation which will be on public file. However, no one who reads the study will be able to conjecture by the data given from which district responses were made.

I am very excited about the opportunity to listen to superintendents' personal stories of their lives and how they developed careers leading them to the superintendent office, either through the venue of the educational field or other paths to this career, and how they make funding choices for their school system.

If you choose to participate in the study, your commitment would be approximately one hour with one personal interview, and a five minute web-based e- survey. Additionally, I would request that you complete a five minute biographical timeline worksheet as a tool to support our in person interview. Depending on your schedule, I anticipate completing the interviews by March, 2012.

Please let me know if you are interested in participating in the study or would like to discuss the opportunity in more detail. As soon as we have confirmed a date and time for the first interview, I will send you a list of proposed questions along with the biographical timeline worksheet. If you have questions or concerns about this proposed research study, please contact me at (919) 495-0656 or (919) 496-2180. You may also contact me via email at [jastover@ncsu.edu](mailto:jastover@ncsu.edu). Please feel free to contact the IRB Regulatory Compliance Administrator at the North Carolina State University, Deb Paxton, at (919) 515-4514.

If you are not interested in participating in a study at this time, I understand and thank you for reviewing my invitation.

Let me thank those in advance for your assistance with this study. I do realize that your time is very valuable, however this interview should be brief and to the point. I am sure the results of this study will be valuable to educational leaders in North Carolina.

Sincerely,

Judith Ann Stover, Ed.S.  
Assistant Principal, Louisburg Elementary School

## APPENDIX D

### Interview Guide for

#### Personal Interviews of North Carolina Rural Superintendents

**Purpose of Study:** Many superintendents see their elementary student subgroups struggle as they enter and leave kindergarten. The purpose of this study is to ascertain how public school superintendents in rural North Carolina elementary schools prioritize funding programs to prepare their students prior to kindergarten entry to maintain a smooth transition for the academic rigors of the North Carolina kindergarten curriculum.

**Research Question:** How do rural North Carolina superintendents prioritize funding for public school pre-kindergarten in their local school system budget funding? Why or why not?

**Participant Selection Criteria:** Participants included in this study will be rural North Carolina superintendents employed full-time.

**Participant Selection Procedures:** Purposeful sampling will be used to identify eligible participants. Potential participants will be contacted via e-mail and or phone. Details about the study will be shared, and once participants have confirmed their participation the first interview will be scheduled. The principal investigator will follow all IRB guidelines and ensure full and informed consent of the research participants.

Your signature on the informed consent form signifies your consent to participate.

## **APPENDIX E**

### **Interview Protocol**

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Introduce myself and my interest in pursuing this research. Thank the informant for participating in the study and review the stated purpose of study.

#### **II. INFORMED CONSENT**

Review and sign the informed consent document. Ask the participant if he has any additional questions before beginning the interview.

#### **III. BACKGROUND/DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

Collect the following information from the informant: age, race or ethnicity, number of years employed as a teacher, a principal, and number of years employed as a superintendent.

#### **IV. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

- 1. How have curricular expectations changed in early childhood education over the last five years?**
- 2. From a superintendent's perspective, what comments would you like to share about preparing three and four year olds to be successful in public school kindergarten?**
- 3. Would you say the current design of the kindergarten model in this state and district is meeting the needs of young students adequately? Are they effective for all populations? Please explain.**
- 4. Has this district ever conducted an evaluation of your kindergarten program? If so, what were the results?**
- 5. Where do you see the use of pre-kindergarten programming in your district in the next five years? Ten years?**
- 6. Describe your resource allocations for kindergarten programming in this district as well as the resource allocations for pre-kindergarten programming in this district.**
- 7. Are there any other thoughts you would like to share about the prioritizing of funds for the use of pre-kindergarten services in a public school system?**

## APPENDIX F

### North Carolina State University

#### Informed Consent Form for Research

**Title of Study:** North Carolina Rural Superintendent's Quest for Prioritizing Early Childhood Initiative

#### **Funding**

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**Principal Investigator:** Judith Stover, Ed.S      **Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Bonnie C. Fusarelli, Ph.D.

**What are some general things you should know about research studies?** You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of this qualitative bounded multi-case study will be to ascertain how public school superintendents in rural North Carolina elementary schools prioritize funding programs to prepare their students prior to kindergarten entry to maintain a smooth transition for the academic rigors of the North Carolina kindergarten curriculum. This research study is a requirement for a doctoral student's dissertation for the Ed.D.

#### **What will happen if you take part in the study?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a brief e-survey to answer nine survey questions lasting about five minutes, and you may be chosen to be one of four rural superintendents that will take part in a personal interview including eight questions that will not last longer than an hour. The e-survey will be online at the participant's discretion, and the personal interviews may be done at the office of the

participant or by phone depending on the choice of the superintendent for location for the interview to be done taking into consideration their busy schedules.

### **Risks**

There are **NO** foreseeable risks (PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, PHYSICAL, FINANCIAL, LEGAL OR OTHER) or discomforts to anyone who participates in this study. Careful steps will be taken to not use any methods or narratives that could help the reader to construe the identities of any of the participants. The narrative and tables will be written in such a way that they will not identify any research participant or county school district specifically by description of any kind. No information will be requested from the subjects that might be personal or sensitive. None of the study procedures will produce stress or anxiety, or be considered offensive, threatening, or degrading.

### **Benefits**

While there are no direct benefits to the participant as a result of this study, there are expected benefits to the field of education. The benefits of this research include better informed practices with regard to how funding decisions are made with regard to academic achievement as well as the implementation and facilitation of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs in the public school elementary schools. The research will take place by phone or location depending on the desire of the interviewee to accommodate their busy schedule.

### **Confidentiality**

The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in computer files that are password protected. Once the information is utilized, it will be deleted. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.

### **Compensation**

Participating in this study is voluntary, and you will not receive compensation.

### **What if you have questions about this study?**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Judith Ann Stover, at home 919-496-2180, cell 919-495-0656 or work 919-496-3676 ext. 120, or Dr. Bonnie Fusarelli at her office 919-515-6359.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus, 919-515-4514.

**Consent to Participate**

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

**Interested participants can access the e-survey by going to the link provided:**

**<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/5WV7X26>**

## APPENDIX G

### Evolution and Implementation of Federal Aid Timeline

DECADE	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	FUTURE
<b>Administration</b>	Truman, Eisenhower	Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon	Nixon, Ford, Carter	Reagan, G. Bush	G. Bush, Clinton	G.W. Bush	Obama
<b>Public Concerns</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sputnik and the Cold War</li> <li>2. Civil Rights</li> <li>3. Decline in student achievement in math and science</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Poverty</li> <li>2. Civil Rights</li> <li>3. Vietnam</li> <li>4. Protest marches</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Vietnam</li> <li>2. Watergate</li> <li>3. Inflation</li> <li>4. First gas crisis</li> <li>5. Iran hostage crisis</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Competing with Japan</li> <li>2. Trickle- down economics</li> <li>3. <i>A Nation at Risk</i></li> <li>4. American student achievement vs. other nations</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. “Read My Lips, No New Taxes”</li> <li>2. “It’s the Economy, Stupid”</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 9/11</li> <li>2. War on terrorism</li> <li>3. Global competition</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Failing economy</li> <li>2. Job losses</li> <li>3. Shrinking government budgets</li> <li>4. Failing confidence in schools</li> <li>5. Universal Pre-K</li> </ol>
<b>Legislation and Supreme Court Rulings</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Brown v. Board of Education</i> ruling of 1954</li> <li>2. 1957 National Defense Educ. Act</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Economic Opportunity Act of 1964</li> <li>2. Civil Rights Act of 1964</li> <li>3. Elementary &amp; Secondary Act of 1965</li> <li>4. Head Start</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142)</li> <li>2. <i>Swann v. Charlotte</i>, 1971</li> <li>3. <i>Goss v. Lopez</i>, 1975 (due process for students)</li> <li>4. <i>Lau v. Nichols</i>, 1975 (ESL Instruction)</li> <li>5. Creation of Education Dept.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Implement policy shift diminishing federal role as initiator of education change</li> <li>2. Title I Pre-K</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990</li> <li>2. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990</li> <li>3. Goals 2000</li> <li>4. Some states use state funding for universal Pre-K</li> </ol>	No Child Left Behind	The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009

**Appendix G (continued)**

<b>DECADE</b>	<b>1950s</b>	<b>1960s</b>	<b>1970s</b>	<b>1980s</b>	<b>1990s</b>	<b>2000s</b>	<b>FUTURE</b>
<b>Characteristics of Federal Education Programs</b>	Competing with the Soviet Union	Expanding programs and expenditures and increasing oversight	Embellish and refine categorical approach and focus on school desegregation	Block grants and deregulation	Reading First and Early Reading First (all 3 <sup>rd</sup> graders reading at grade level)	More testing, enhanced account-ability	Testing, data collection, focus on student achievement
<b>Mode of Federal Influence</b>	Differential funding for science, math and foreign language education	Differential funding, regulate, discover knowledge, provide services	Differential funding, provide services, federal enforcement of restriction on local spending	General Aid, deregulation	“Bully pulpit” and character education, and Federal “standards-based systemic reform”	Differential funding, regulate, provide services	Differential funding, regulate, provide technical assistance and “bully pulpit”

## Appendix H

### Needs Assessment of Early Childhood Program Conceptual Outcome Design

#### Logic Model Created by NC Rural Superintendent Responses in 2012

ASSUMPTIONS	INPUTS	PROPOSED ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	INITIAL OUTCOMES	MEDIUM OUTCOMES	LONG-TERM OUTCOMES	IMPACT
TARGET POPULATION NO EQUAL ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD INFORMATION	<u>PARTICIPANTS:</u> RECRUITMENT AND OUTREACH TO ELL/SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED 3- AND 4-YEAR-OLDS AND THEIR FAMILIES	<u>AWARENESS EVENT:</u> FAMILIES ATTEND WORKSHOP FOR INFO ON ACCESS OPPORTUNITIES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS	<u># OF STUDENTS &amp; PARENTS:</u> INITIAL WORKSHOP, FOLLOW-UP MEETINGS/ PARTICIPATING IN REFERRAL PROGRAMS	<u>COMMUNITY AWARENESS:</u> VALUE OF YOUNG CHILDREN LEARNING/ KNOWLEDGE OF AVAILABLE SERVICES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN	POSITIVE OUTLOOK FOR FUTURE/ INCREASED FAMILY AWARENESS OF PRE-K PROGRAMS/ FAMILY PARTICIPATION	IMPROVED SCHOOL PERFORMANCE & SUCCESS IN KINDERGARTEN TRANSITION/ INCREASED LEVELS OF SCHOOL READINESS	DEVELOPMENT OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES THAT ATTRACT RESIDENTS DUE TO GREAT SCHOOLS
1 <sup>ST</sup> GENERATION ELL & LOW-SOCIO-ECONOMIC SUBGROUPS DO NOT HAVE EQUAL ACCESS TO PRE-K PROGRAMS IN THEIR COUNTY	<u>FUNDING:</u> NCPRE-K ,EC, SMART START, TITLE I, LOCAL, OTHER FUNDING SOURCES FOR PRE-K PROGRAMS/ EVALUATION	<u>FOLLOWUP ACTIVITIES/ SERVICES:</u> MONTHLY SATURDAY OR EVENING PROGRAM FOR ELL & OTHER LOW SOCIOECONOMIC SUBGROUP PARENTS FOR INFO ON EARLY CHILDHOOD ACTIVITIES IN COUNTY	<u>NUMBER OF MEETINGS:</u> ELL & COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS WITH PARENTS & STUDENTS/ AT LEAST MONTHLY ACTIVITIES.	REFERRAL TO COMMUNITY EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES FOR FAMILIES TO PREPARE CHILDREN FOR SCHOOL/ PARENT EDUCATION SUPPORT GROUPS	INCREASE IN PARENT-CHILD ACTIVITIES  INCREASE IN PARENT AND CHILD INTEREST IN SCHOOL ACTIVITIES	IMPROVED FAMILY PARENTING	LAYING FOUNDATION FOR A LOVE OF LEARNING AND A STRONG WORK ETHIC

**Appendix H (continued)**

ASSUMPTIONS	INPUTS	PROPOSED ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	INITIAL OUTCOMES	MEDIUM OUTCOMES	LONG-TERM OUTCOMES	IMPACT
IF ALL CHILDREN & PARENTS RECEIVE INFORMATION ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS, THEN STUDENTS WILL BE BETTER PREPARED FOR KINDERGARTEN ENTRANCE	<u>STAFFING:</u> ESTABLISHMENT OF NETWORK OF PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN FAMILIES, PUBLIC SCHOOL, NC PRE-K, SMART START, TITLE I, EC FUNDING	CREATION OF MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS WITH ELL TEACHERS AND COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS	<u>NUMBER OF PARENT WORKSHOPS/SESSIONS:</u> HELD ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT, EARLY LANGUAGE, SOCIAL, AND ACADEMIC SKILLS	ACCESS TO PERIODIC DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING SUPPORT FOR PARENTS WHOSE CHILDREN NEED BEHAVIORAL SUPPORT OR EC SERVICES	PARENT INCREASES IN EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS FOR THEIR CHILDRENS' FUTURE	REDUCED NUMBERS OF CHILDREN NEEDING SPECIAL EDUCATION	CREATING CITIZENS READY TO LEARN AND WORK IN A GLOBAL COMMUNITY
IF YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES RECEIVE THE SAME INFORMATION AND PRE-K RESOURCES, THEY ALL WILL BE BETTER PREPARED TO ENTER SCHOOL AND BE SUCCESS-FUL. THEY ALSO WILL HAVE POSITIVE PEER AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AS THEY ENTER KINDERGARTEN	<u>FACILITIES:</u> INFRASTRUCTURE FOR PROGRAM AND PARENT MEETINGS <u>ASSESSMENT:</u> DATA COLLECTION SYSTEM AND MEASURABLE PROGRAM GOALS WILL ALSO BE EQUITABLE GIVING EQUITABLE OUTPUTS FOR ALL CHILDREN	SUMMER PROGRAMS FOR ELL AND OTHER LOW SOCIO-ECONOMIC 3- & 4-YEAR-OLDS SUCH AS KINDERMUSIK, GYMNASTICS, DANCE , CHERUB CHOIR, AND MOTHER MORNING OUT PROGRAMS AVAILABLE FOR ALL CHILDREN	<u>NUMBER OF CHILDREN ACTIVITIES:</u> SUMMER PROGRAMS, DAYTIME, AND EVENING EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS FOR FAMILIES	FAMILIESLINK ED TO QUALITY PRE-K ACCESS	SELF-CONCEPT FOR CHILD AND PARENTS INCREASES	FEWER CHILDREN IN SCHOOL RETAINED AND SUSPENDED	RURAL COUNTIES BECOME ATTRACTIVE PLACES TO WORK, LIVE, PLAY. POVERTY RATE DECREASES IN RURAL AREAS

## APPENDIX I

### Timeline of Significant Events

**Purpose:** This worksheet is a reflection tool to support our in-person interviews by encouraging you to think about important events throughout your life that may have molded your views of early childhood education.

**Instructions:** In the spaces provided below, describe any significant events or relationships you feel contributed (or continue to contribute) to your decision to pursue education as a career. Please feel free to use as much space as you need for each section.

#### Early Childhood (ages 0-5)

#### Childhood (ages 6-12)

**Adolescence (ages 13 – 18)**

**Adulthood (age 18+)**

**Appendix J**

**Interview Personal Data**

**Counties A –D**

<b>COUNTY</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>GENDER</b>	<b>ETHNICITY</b>	<b>TOTAL YEARS IN EDUCATION</b>	<b>TOTAL YEARS AS SUPERINTENDENT</b>
A	51	MALE	CAUCASIAN	28	1
B	60	MALE	CAUCASIAN	28	14
C	55	MALE	CAUCASIAN	20	8
D	57	MALE	AFRICAN- AMERICAN	34	15

## Appendix K

### Population Data for Counties A – D in 2010 Census

#### County A – Population Data

<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Total Population Under 5 Years Old</b>	<b>Males Under 5</b>	<b>Females Under 5</b>	<b>Total Households</b>	<b>Family Households</b>
63,505	3,917	1,973	1,944	25,845	17,941

#### County B – Population Data

<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Total Population Under 5 Years Old</b>	<b>Males Under 5</b>	<b>Females Under 5</b>	<b>Total Households</b>	<b>Family Households</b>
14,793	879	435	444	6,059	4,163

#### County C – Population Data

<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Total Population Under 5 Years Old</b>	<b>Males Under 5</b>	<b>Females Under 5</b>	<b>Total Households</b>	<b>Family Households</b>
40,271	2,035	1,045	990	16,446	9,270

#### County D – Population Data

<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Total Population Under 5 Years Old</b>	<b>Males Under 5</b>	<b>Females Under 5</b>	<b>Total Households</b>	<b>Family Households</b>
59,916	2,991	1,763	1,623	20,628	14,697

**Appendix K (continued)**

**Demographic Data for Counties A – D**

<b>County Profiles for Four North Carolina Rural Counties from <a href="http://www.ncrural/center.org">www.ncrural/center.org</a></b>				
	<b>County A</b>	<b>County B</b>	<b>County C</b>	<b>County D</b>
<b>Population</b>				
Median Age (2010)	43.6	44.8	36.3	39.8
Percent American Indian (2010)	1%	0%	9%	1%
Percent Asian (2010)	1%	0%	1%	1%
Percent Black (2010)	13%	34%	2%	33%
Percent Born in NC (2005-2009)	56%	66%	62%	69%
Percent Hispanic (2010)	13%	3%	5%	7%
Percent of Population Over 65 Years Old (2010)	18%	20%	15%	12%
Percent Population Change (2000- 2010)	29%	2%	22%	24%
Percent Under 18 (2010)	22%	22%	18%	22%
Percent White (2010)	71%	61%	81%	58%
Total Population (2000)	49,329	14,526	33,121	48,498
Population (2010)	63,505	14,793	40,271	59,916
Population Density (2010)	93	86	82	113
<b>Income and Poverty</b>	<b>County A</b>	<b>County B</b>	<b>County C</b>	<b>County D</b>
Child Poverty Rate (2005-2009)	17.60%	31.30%	26.30%	18.50%
Elderly Poverty Rate (2005-2009)	8%	16%	16%	11%
Median Household Income (2005- 2009)	\$55,333	\$37,825	\$37,672	\$48,186
Per Capita Income (2005-2009)	\$28,448	\$19,994	\$20,219	\$21,201
Percent Receiving Food Assistance (2010)	7%	20%	10%	11%
Poverty Rate (2005-2009)	12%	19%	20%	12%

**Appendix K (continued)**

<b>Housing</b>	<b>County A</b>	<b>County B</b>	<b>County C</b>	<b>County D</b>
Home Ownership Rate (2005-2009)	78%	70%	65%	75%
Percent Substandard Housing (2005-2009)	2.90%	1.20%	2.70%	2.70%
Percent Unaffordable Housing (2005-2009)	24%	23%	24%	25%
<b>Health</b>	<b>County A</b>	<b>County B</b>	<b>County C</b>	<b>County D</b>
Infant Mortality Rate (2005-2009)	6.8	9.7	8.2	5.4
Percent Uninsured (2009)	19%	21%	21%	18%
Physicians Per Population (2009)	6.6	22.3	20.4	15.5
<b>Education</b>	<b>County A</b>	<b>County B</b>	<b>County C</b>	<b>County D</b>
American Indian Students Passing End of Grade Exams (2010)	0	0	96	9
Graduation Rate (2010)	74%	75%	77%	65%
Per Student Expenditures K-12 (2010)	\$9,576	\$10,025	\$9,068	\$8,009
Asian Students Passing End of Grade Exams (2010)	78.90%	*	82.40%	44.00%
Percent With a Bachelor's Degree or Higher (2009)	31%	14%	25%	13%
Black Students Passing End of Grade Exams (2010)	45.10%	42.90%	47.60%	41.20%
Hispanic Students Passing End of Grade Exams (2010)	44.30%	44.70%	51.00%	47.80%
Percent With High School Diploma (2005-2009)	25%	32%	27%	34%
Percent With Less Than High School Diploma (2009)	17%	23%	19%	21%
Students Passing End of Grade Exams (2010)	52%	56%	53%	45%
White Students Passing End of Grade Exams (2010)	80%	80%	73%	70%

**Appendix K (continued)**

<b>Labor Force and Employment</b>	<b>County A</b>	<b>County B</b>	<b>County C</b>	<b>County D</b>
Average Wage for Manufacturing (2009)	\$21,056	\$18,476	\$18,692	\$20,516
Female Labor Force Participation Rate (2009)	59.70%	49.00%	56.00%	58.70%
Labor Force (2010)	33,124	6,189	19,147	25,021
Manufacturing Layoffs (2010)	346		120	135
Percent Working in Manufacturing (2009)	26%	9%	4%	42%
Percent Working In Professional and Business Services (2009)	19%	2%	6%	7%
Percent Working Age Population (2005-2009)	80%	79%	85%	80%
Total Announced Layoffs (2010)	172	1	43	7
Number Unemployed (2010)	2,285	682	1,847	2,487
Unemployment Rate (2010)	6.90%	11.00%	9.60%	9.90%
<b>Other</b>	<b>County A</b>	<b>County B</b>	<b>County C</b>	<b>County D</b>
Crime Rate (2010)	25	26.5	31.2	36.5
Voting Rate (2008)	80.60%	74.30%	64.20%	78.60%
Property Tax Rate (2010)	\$0.61	\$0.69	\$0.28	\$0.83
<b>Agriculture and Natural Resources</b>	<b>County A</b>	<b>County B</b>	<b>County C</b>	<b>County D</b>
Total Agricultural Receipts (2007)	\$171,749,000	\$41,085,000		
Total Livestock Receipts (2007)	\$164,879,000	\$6,811,000		
Percent Family Owned Farms (2007)	94.70%	79.80%	94.80%	93.20%
Total Farms (2007)	1,089	190	229	673

## **Appendix L**

### **E- Survey Results**

The e-survey yielded a high response rate with 48 respondents out of 85 sent or 55% response rate. Superintendents responded that the majority of their districts and counties did not have enough available slots for the amount of entering kindergarten students they had in their county. The majority of respondents were frustrated with the amount of available pre-kindergarten funding in their district. All respondents believed it was the school district's responsibility to be an advocate for early childhood funding in their communities. All of the superintendents are highly aware of the high expectations for curricula in the last five years for all grades including kindergarten. The superintendents who participated in this study used varied funding sources to create pre-kindergarten classrooms in their counties.