Searching for Belonging: Parents' Storied Experiences of their Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder Transitioning to Kindergarten

by

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Abstract

The experiences of parents as their children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) transition to Kindergarten is lacking in the literature. This study asked, "How do parents of children with ASD make meaning of their children's transition to Kindergarten?" and "How do the stories of the teachers help inform the transition experiences?" Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four parents and one teacher. Thematic and structural narrative analytic methods revealed that parents made sense of their children's Kindergarten transition experience by positioning themselves as agents who were actively seeking out *belonging* in the school community. Three subthemes were identified: *adapting to the culture of the school, building trusting relationships with teachers, and emerging identities and hope.* Findings are conceptualized using Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) *Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition.* Counselling implications include helping clients overcome isolation, using narrative therapy approaches to explore alternative plot lines and identity, and facilitating parent groups.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder; Kindergarten transition; ecological framework; narrative inquiry; counselling; special education

Dedication

I dedicate this research project to the children and families with whom I have had the pleasure to work throughout the past eight years. I have been privileged to witness your joys and struggles as you created meaning in your stories. To the parents – you have taught me so much about unconditional love, acceptance, and patience. I am inspired by your openness and compassion. To the children – you have given me purpose and taught me to slow down and enjoy every moment in life. Your laughter never fails to brighten each day. My story is forever changed for having known you.

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Secondly, I would like to thank all the family and friends who have supported me unwaveringly throughout this project. Thank you, Mom for answering all those late-night, tearful phone calls. No matter what, you always believed in me. You taught me compassion and encouraged me to always follow my passions in life. I love you more than words can express. To my dear friend, Joy who has been at my side through the highs and lows of this project, thank you for your never-ending support. You helped me focus on my personal growth throughout this process, and always reminded me to breathe and keep putting one foot in front of the other. Perhaps most importantly, you kept me laughing. I feel so fortunate to have met you in this graduate program. You are truly a kindred spirit.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the five participants in this study. Your openness and transparency have created a rich, intriguing research project. I hope that your stories are heard by other families and professionals to help ease school transition for others. Your care for your children and students is remarkable.

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List of Acronyms

ABA   Applied Behaviour Analysis

ASD   Autism Spectrum Disorder

EA   Education Assistant

IBI   Intensive Behaviour Intervention

IEP   Individualized Education Plan

PAC   Parent Advisory Council

SEA   Special Education Assistant

Chapter 1.

Introduction

Do you remember your first day of Kindergarten? This simple question may evoke strong emotions linked to memories of experiences and faces from your past. Yet, we all have a different story to tell. My first day of Kindergarten was exciting, though I recall shedding tears. At the young age of four, I was a shy child with some separation anxiety. My mother was aware of this difficulty, so she wisely made a quiet exit when she saw me playing with a couple of children. Upon realizing that my mother had departed, I felt unsettled. I remember my Kindergarten teacher being kind and attentive. Despite the initial anxiety of that first day, I hold a positive set of memories of Kindergarten. I adored my teacher, made several friends that year, and felt accomplished and grown up like my two older brothers.

As I spoke with my mother about her experiences, I noticed instantly that her concerns before and during Kindergarten entry were minimal. Several factors influenced this self-reported ease of transition. My attendance at preschool during the year prior to Kindergarten entry instilled confidence in my mother concerning my academic readiness. Being the third child in my family to begin school, there was a familiarity with the process. Additionally, my Kindergarten teacher taught my brother three years earlier. Once I had begun school, my mother used opportunities before or after school to speak to the teacher about my progress and adjustment. She also established a role for herself as a classroom volunteer during my transition, allowing herself to feel actively involved and facilitate relationship building with the teacher and other parents. My mother's perspective illustrated factors in successful transitions, such as relationship building (Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufman, Gercke, & Higgins, 2001) and involvement in Kindergarten activities to increase awareness of expectations and progress (Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011). She held a fundamental understanding that her

relationships with teachers, school staff, students, and parents all influenced my transition to school (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

Aside from having an anxious temperament, I was a typical child. I enjoyed the supports of a middle-class family who spoke English at home. I was not challenged by special learning needs or diagnoses. My Kindergarten experience is an example of a successful transition of a typically developing child. Although my own transition to school is a distant memory, this topic surfaces regularly in my work as a behaviour interventionist. My experiences with children and families as they transition to Kindergarten have made me aware of the challenges families face during this process, and I share how my interest in Kindergarten transitions blossomed in the next section.

1.1. My Experience with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Kindergarten Transition

In 2007, I was completing my undergraduate degree in psychology. As is the case with many university students, my bank account was dwindling and I decided that I needed to look for some work to pay my way through the rest of my degree. Commonly, there are advertisements sent to undergraduate psychology students to work as a behaviour interventionist for children with ASD. This form of behavioural therapy uses applied behaviour analysis (ABA) to teach children anything from academic, social or personal care skills. I knew all the basics of behavioural psychology, so I applied for the position.

Once I was asked to participate in interviews, I became apprehensive about my ability to work with children with ASD. My anxiety stemmed from many unknowns and, in retrospect, the misconceptions I held about individuals with ASD. I had read about the symptomology and diagnostic criteria for ASD in some of my developmental psychology textbooks; however, I lacked awareness of the lived experience of children with ASD and their families. The majority of my understanding of ASD came from the media and its associated societal discourse around the topic. Images of children sitting alone with a dazed look in their eyes, a seeming lack of emotion in their facial expressions, and their unusual body positioning came to mind. Depictions of ASD in movies played a role in

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my confusion of the disorder. Leonardo DiCaprio played the role of Arnie, an 18 year old with ASD in the movie *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* In addition to the unusual mannerisms, different communicative competencies, and inappropriate emotional outbursts, DiCaprio's character is depicted as unkempt, intellectually challenged, and lacking empathy. In contrast, Dustin Hoffman portrayed Raymond, a man with ASD who possessed uncanny mathematical abilities in the movie *Rain Man*. Well-known organizations such as *Autism Speaks Canada*, dedicated to increasing awareness and funding for ASD, use a puzzle piece image to represent this disorder. The puzzle piece image strikes me as representing confusion, mystery, or the sense that children with ASD are somehow incomplete or missing a vital component to make them whole. Sarrett (2011) explained how the historical shifts in medical explanations of ASD have contributed to the current constructed understanding of the disorder. By reviewing articles on ASD from a number of media sources between the 1960's and early 2000's, she observed two main themes: fragmentation and imprisonment of the normal child. She stated that fragmentation refers to both the understanding that the child with ASD is not a whole person, and that this disorder inevitably will destroy families and its individual members. To exemplify this theme, she presented a dark, shadowy image of a child riddled with cracks, rendering the image difficult to identify as an actual child. The researcher captured the theme of imprisonment of the child by summarizing a section from an article written in 1960 by Dr. Herbert Eveloff stating, "[w]ithout professional intervention, autism may eventually encompass the entire child, erasing any aspects of normality, and he becomes irreparably 'defective'" (p. 149). At the time of my interview preparation, I possessed both of these assumptions. I wondered if individuals with ASD may lack certain neural connections or have underdeveloped components of self-hood; moreover, I assumed that many families would be fragmented by stress and grief over this seemingly devastating diagnosis and its related challenges. The research on developmental disabilities is filled with studies related to stress and negative outcomes, though many researchers indicate that the negative themes are overstated and are not supported by data (Helff & Glidden, 1998; Scorgie & Sobsey, 2000). Indeed, there is evidence that many parents who have children with ASD exhibit resilience and experience positive outcomes (Bekhet, Johnson, & Zauszniewski, 2012; Bayat, 2007).

Recalling those first interviews I participated in, I know that these were the beginning of my learning process about ASD. Immediately as I entered families' homes for the interviews, I observed how similar the surroundings were to my own childhood home. I saw photos of children proudly hung on the walls; I noticed the types of messes that children make while playing. Most notably, I saw the warm faces of parents greeting me with a smile. It occurred to me that the families were not fragmented, at least not outwardly. Nor did I see grief or devastation. The interviews themselves went well, considering my lack of experience working with children. I shared some information about myself and my educational background. They asked me a few questions about my knowledge of behavioural therapy and shared information with me about their child and the behaviour program. As we spoke over coffee, I felt more at ease. These interviews were not as formal as other job interviews I had in the past. The opportunity to briefly meet the children with whom I would potentially be working was also eye-opening. Initially, I noticed the behavioural characteristics of ASD – self-stimulatory behaviour such as hand flapping and repetitive vocalizations, rigidity in play, and lack of eye contact (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). I managed to engage in play with each child by showing interest in what they were interacting with, whether it be a spinning toy or a favourite train set. As these small connections were made, I began to consider that perhaps I could make deeper connections. I gratefully accepted my first behaviour intervention position that summer. Within a couple of months, I had accepted two more positions.

With time and training, I was having an impact on children's learning. Within a few months, the children who had limited speech when I began working with them were using speech to request items and to name various objects. One child surpassed the others I worked with in her verbal capabilities, as she was able to put sentences together and have basic conversations. When I began working with her, she struggled predominantly in areas of social interaction and emotional regulation. In the beginning, she found it challenging to follow directions; if she was asked to perform a task that she found undesirable, such as sitting at the table to practice academic skills, she often refused or began whining or crying, sometimes leading to tantrums and mild punishments in the form of time-out. Losing at games posed similar challenges for this five-year-old girl. I found it challenging to develop a strong relationship with the child

when I enforced session rules or required her to perform tasks she found frustrating or boring. However, I sectioned off time each session to bond with her through her play interests. She loved to play with dolls and toy animals, so I followed her lead and we played every session and connected through her interests. We both looked forward to this play-time each session, and I felt a relationship forming with her. During the teaching portions of each session, we practised skills to remain calm and increase flexibility in her play by allowing her play partner to contribute ideas in pretend play. I consistently reinforced cooperative behaviour with following directions, appropriate calming strategies, and flexibility in play. With time and daily repetition, this young girl was following directions without behavioural problems the majority of the time. Play dates became more frequent, and her independence increased with appropriate conversational responses, cooperative play, and negotiation and problem solving skills.

Each child I worked with made his or her own unique gains, and I found these accomplishments extremely rewarding. All the parents shared their excitement with me as they watched their children improve on a variety of competencies and obtain skills that were lacking, such as toileting or reading. Not only was I developing positive attachments with the children I was working with, I was establishing relationships with the parents as well. For some children, I was in their homes three or four times a week, so the parents began trusting me and sharing their experiences. It did not take long to realize that each milestone the child reached had been carefully planned, taught, and repeated. The children consistently worked harder than their typical age-mates to do things often overlooked; feeding, toileting, speech and pretend play were frequently skills that needed to be explicitly taught. I celebrated each milestone with families with a genuine excitement. I had become a part of each of these children's stories, and they in turn have become part of my story.

One milestone that seemed particularly challenging for families was transitioning to school. Parents often shared their anxiety about not knowing whether their child was ready for school, wanting to make sure their child had all the supports they needed in the classroom, and wondering if their child could cope with being away from home all day. Importantly, there is a qualitative shift in service delivery that occurs during this transition that has an impact on the family. Early intervention programs are family-centred and are

planned with large amounts of parental input. Family needs and supports are integrated, and often the services occur in the home. In contrast, the educational system can be described as child-centred, marking a philosophical shift in service delivery. Goals predominantly revolve around the child and the educational priorities of the school system (Fox, Dunlap, & Cushing, 2002). From my perspective, it seemed like families went through a whirlwind during and directly after diagnosis. According to the US National Research Council (2001), it is recommended that children with ASD receive at least 25 hours of intervention per week. Getting these services in place and scheduling cannot possibly be an easy task to undertake. Schieve, Blumberg, Rice, Visser, and Boyle (2007) investigated the impact of stress indicators (e.g., specific diagnosis and the use of community services) on aggravation levels for parents of children with ASD using data collected from the 2003 US National Survey of Children's Health (n=459 with ASD). The findings indicated that parents of children with ASD not only are more likely to score higher on aggravation levels than parents of children with other developmental disabilities, but also these aggravation scores are at their highest at times when parents were in need of specialized services. The researchers stated that they were unable to make claims about why service attainment is associated with higher levels of aggravation in parents; however, they hypothesized that it may have to do with severity or instability in symptoms of the disability. Additionally, it is possible that adjustments to routines and perceived loss of control over parenting and educational responsibilities may have influenced parents' aggravation levels. Despite this chaotic new reality, most parents have shared with me that they felt more comfortable with all these services after having received them consistently during the early years. Just as familiar routines with specialized services became routine for families, it was time to prepare for Kindergarten. As children embarked on their entry into school, their family members were faced with making several changes to routines and services.

Everyone has a unique Kindergarten transition story to tell, and certainly I have witnessed successful outcomes for many children. However, the Kindergarten transition process is often not carefree. There appears to be a substantial amount of pressure put on parents as they make decisions regarding their children's learning. Which school do I put my child in? Are they even ready for Kindergarten? How do I prepare my child to start school? Other questions may be outside of their control. Will my child receive

adequate support? Will my current service providers be able to communicate and work with the school team? What will my child learn in Kindergarten? All of these questions I have commonly heard from parents as they went through their child's transition to Kindergarten. In addition, each family had unique concerns for their child that added complexity to parents' experiences of Kindergarten transition. To exemplify this point, consider a young boy with ASD with whom I worked and who had a challenging time in day care. As a baby and into toddlerhood, this boy was described by his parents as being happy, easy-going, and friendly. He was often seen smiling and engaging with adults and other children. Upon his mother's return to work after her parental leave, he was placed in a day care centre during the day. High quality child care is associated with higher scores on achievement and language tests, increased social skills, and decreased problem behaviour (Lamb, 1998), and this family believed their son's placement in child care was an appropriate decision at that time. He appeared to be happy when they visited the day care for the first time. He had approached another child to engage in play and appeared comfortable in the new environment. However, the next visit to the day care was challenging. His mother left the room momentarily to see how her son would react without her there. She watched as he very quickly become inconsolable, to the point that one of the caregivers had a hard time holding him. The mother felt shocked, as she had never seen or heard of her son being so upset with another adult. Her friends and family assured her that this was a normal reaction that would dissipate, so she reluctantly persisted with the day care arrangement. Indeed, the majority of children become upset when separated from their parents; however, for most children this distress is temporary (Mash & Wolfe, 2005). Each day, she continued to drop off a crying child. To her disappointment and frustration, she received very little feedback or recommendations from the child care staff regarding his well-being and participation in activities during the day. She was also alarmed to learn that, despite the fact that he was no longer taking naps at home, he was sleeping for large periods of the day, sometimes three to four hours. She also noticed that he was eating very little from his packed lunch each day. His behaviour at home also started to change; he rarely seemed to smile anymore and his diet had become extremely restricted. She believed he was shutting down and sleeping through the day because day care was so unpleasant for him. Due to her concerns for her son's well-being, she made arrangements to care for him at home. She switched to a part-time position at her

workplace and enlisted the help of her child's grandmother to help with child care. The mother was certain that her son's experience at day care triggered or amplified his diagnosis of ASD. She harboured a sense of guilt for placing him in child care. When it was time to think about enrolling him in preschool, the mother was very apprehensive. She believed her son's day care experience was trauma provoking, and she feared a similar experience would occur with preschool. She chose to enrol him in a parent participation preschool, enabling her to observe him in the classroom, and to foster frequent communication and stronger relationships with teachers. This young boy had a positive experience in preschool; he engaged with children and participated in activities. At the time of his Kindergarten transition, the child's mother discussed her residual fear about placing her son in a new educational environment. She still harboured guilt for placing him in day care, and she worried that he may have another difficult adjustment. However, she explained that the relationships she made with her son's preschool teachers instilled hope and confidence in the potential for similar relationships at his new school. She felt supported by the preschool and the behaviour intervention team. When Kindergarten started, she was relieved that her son appeared to be adjusting well. He looked forward to going to school and he reported liking his teacher. She described her son's teacher as compassionate, and she was kept informed of her child's activities and progress. Overall, this mother reported a successful transition.

This story illustrates that the transition to Kindergarten is a relational process that involves changes to the child's ecological environment. In his original *ecological systems theory*, Bronfenbrenner (1979) asserted that a child's development is influenced not only by biological factors residing within the child, but also by several levels of environmental influences. The ecological environment of the child includes the immediate settings with which the child directly interacts, and the more distant cultural contexts in which the immediate settings are contained. According to *ecological systems theory*, these surroundings are organized into various system levels that have direct and indirect influences on the developing child. For example, a child's relationships with parents and teachers constitute immediate settings that directly influence the child's development; however, societal factors such as socioeconomic status or cultural beliefs constitute a system level in which the child does not actively participate, yet still indirectly influences the child. Therefore, one cannot simply study a

single setting, such as the classroom, to gain a full picture of a developmental process because this approach would ignore the interactions that occur among multiple contexts. Ecological transitions refer to changes that occur in a child's role or the settings in which the child is situated. Before school entry, a child generally has little direct involvement with the school or teachers. When the child begins the transition to Kindergarten, the school and teachers become part of an immediate system level in which the child directly participates. In this way, the child and classroom settings must now reciprocally adapt to one another. In the case presented above, the child had changes in both his role as an elementary school student and in the classroom setting, indicating an ecological transition. Not only is the Kindergarten classroom a new physical environment, but also the social and academic environment, including teaching ideology, changes as a child enters Kindergarten (Forest, Horner, Lewis-Palmer, & Todd, 2004; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). In addition, the role of an elementary student places increased demands on a child academically, socially, and emotionally. The child's diagnosis of ASD and his associated specialized learning needs may have also shifted how teachers from preschool and Kindergarten helped with transitioning, illustrating the bidirectional effects between the child and his or her surroundings. In addition to school influences, family, day care, and preschool contexts also influences the child's transition. Furthermore, the child's reaction to these different settings affected his mother; she sought out support from her mother and decreased her involvement at her workplace. An ecological framework acknowledges the influence of interactions with multiple contexts, and how these interactions shift and form patterns over time (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). I will provide a more detailed discussion of ecological frameworks in chapter two.

This story also highlights how narratives can be useful tools for understanding meaning making as individuals and families engage in relationships within various ecological systems. Narratives are embedded within a cultural context and give us an opportunity to focus on the details of an experience (Reissman, 1993). Deeper insights can be gained from stories that include the complexities of these experiences as shared by the narrator. Details provide opportunities for researchers to investigate interpretations made in the narratives, and allow researchers to understand how and why a narrative is told (Reissman, 2008). For the purposes of this research project, the

narratives of parents provide rich descriptions of detailed experiences in context. In addition, the very act of storytelling provides a process for creating meaning from our experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988). As Reissman (1993) writes, "[t]elling stories...creates order and contains emotions, allowing a search for meaning and enabling connection with others" (p. 10). We also use narratives as a means of constructing identity. As children engage in new settings during Kindergarten transition, the identity of the child makes shifts as well. They are no longer a preschool student, but perhaps a "big kid" who gets to take the bus to school. Understanding identity construction through narrative and placing this in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) *ecological systems theory* enables us to conceptualize how shifts in roles during ecological transitions profoundly impact both the child transitioning and those around him or her:

> Roles have a magiclike power to alter how a person is treated, how she acts, what she does, and thereby even what she thinks and feels. The principle applies not only to the developing person but to the others in her world. (p.6)

In the story presented, the mother made interpretations of her experiences, which impacted her subsequent decisions. For instance, she decided to decrease her work hours and become involved in her child's preschool program. Although this mother's experience was filled with fear, anger, and guilt, her story concluded with a recovery to a positive state as she witnessed her son adjust well to his Kindergarten classroom.

Each family I have worked with has their own unique story to tell. The concerns parents have about their children starting school stand out to me. For some parents, it has been getting their child toilet trained or weaned off a bottle before starting school; other parents are worried that their child will bolt out onto the street if they are not within arm's reach of teaching staff. Perhaps there is anxiety around their child fitting in with their typical age-mates. As an observer to families transitioning children with ASD to Kindergarten, I have learned that while there are commonalities in the concerns and contextual factors of the transition, every story has its own unique characteristics.

Eight years later, I continue to work with children with ASD. I have worked in home-based programs, day care, preschool, and K-12 classrooms in both senior behaviour interventionist and education assistant roles. How have I been transformed?

For one, my undergraduate part-time job has become my career objective in working with children with developmental disabilities and their families in a counselling setting. Additionally, I no longer hold the assumptions about children with ASD and their families that I did before those first job interviews. I now see every family and child as unique, and I continue to learn from their stories on a daily basis. The families and children I have been fortunate enough to work with have inspired me to do this research.

1.2. Literature Review

The following literature review provides details of the research conducted on the transition to Kindergarten for children with ASD specifically, and for students in special education programs in general.

1.2.1. Autism Spectrum Disorder and Kindergarten Transition

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder characterized by deficits in social communication and interaction, and restricted or repetitive behaviours or interests. Children who experience deficits in social communication and interaction often exhibit difficulties with social-emotional reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviours, and the development and maintenance of relationships. Children who experience restricted or repetitive behaviours may display stereotyped motor movements or speech, insistence on sameness, restricted or fixated interests, and hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory stimuli. Furthermore, symptoms must be present at an early developmental age, occur in multiple contexts, result in significant impairment in daily functioning, and cannot be better explained by an intellectual disability or global developmental delay (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The reality is that there are many families raising a child with the additional challenges associated with ASD. In British Columbia, 6,750 students had a confirmed ASD diagnosis out of a population of 558,985 students attending public school in the 2013/2014 school year, equating to a 1.2% school reported prevalence rate of ASD (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2014). In an epidemiological study, Ouellette-Kuntz and colleagues (2007) reported that the prevalence of ASD for children aged four to nine in British Columbia schools in 2004 was 0.43%. However, other epidemiological research on ASD has shown that the

prevalence rates have been increasing dramatically. For instance, Ouellette-Kuntz and colleagues (2014) reported on more recent data accessed from the National Epidemiological Database for the Study of Autism in Canada, which included data from the years 2003-2008 for Newfoundland and Labrador (NL), and 2003-2010 for Prince Edward Island (PEI) and southeastern Ontario (ON) (n=2,377 ASD cases). These researchers reported an average annual increase in the prevalence of ASD for children aged 2-14 years ranging from 9.7% to 14.6%. Actual ASD prevalence percentages were 0.83% in 2008 for NL, 0.91% in 2010 for PEI, and 1.29% in 2010 for southeastern Ontario. Data from the US also indicates increases in prevalence rates. Pinborough-Zimmerman and colleagues (2011) reported that the prevalence of ASD in three densely populated Utah counties doubled from 2002 to 2008 for children aged eight years. In 2008, these researchers reported the prevalence of ASD at 1.3% of the total population of children at age eight, similar to Canadian findings. There is debate about whether there are true increases in incidence of the disorder or if other factors, such as changes to school diagnostic codes for children (Coo et al., 2008), varying diagnostic practices, or increased awareness of ASD (Ouellette-Kuntz et al., 2006), may be influencing the number of children with an ASD diagnosis. Nevertheless, larger numbers of children receiving an ASD diagnosis necessitates an understanding of the needs of children, families and the education system, along with recommendations or policies to foster successful transition outcomes.

As discussed above, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) describes ASD as a developmental disability that is associated with extreme distress when changes to routines or transitions occur. Noncompliance, tantrums, or aggression may result when children with ASD are required to make changes to environments or routines (Sterling-Turner & Jordan, 2007). In addition, research suggests that elementary school students may spend up to 25% of their school day engaged in transitions (Schmit, Alper, Raschke, & Ryndak, 2000). Therefore, children with ASD are at increased risk for difficult school adjustment. In a qualitative study investigating parental perspectives on transitions of their children with ASD, Stoner, Angell, House, & Bock (2007) used multiple interviews, observations, and documentation collected from four pairs of parents. The study discussed the experiences of parents with both vertical and horizontal transitions of their children.

Vertical transitions were described as developmental transitions that included movement from early intervention to preschool, elementary school to middle school, high school to post-secondary or employment, etc. Horizontal transitions were described as daily or weekly occurring movements from one situation to another, such as going from home to school or switching activities during the school day. Parents in this study discussed horizontal transitions most frequently, as parents were spending a great amount of time dealing with these types of transitions. Two of the primary findings were the child-centred perspective parents took when discussing transitions and the value of communicating with educational professionals. Parents found it particularly helpful to communicate information about their children in order for educators to understand each child's characteristics and their unique reactions to transitions in order to plan effectively. Daily opportunities for communication including written communication logs were also discussed. Parents used a three-step transition strategy with their children that they believed was effective: (1) identifying potentially difficult transitions, (2) allowing the child to observe the new setting, and (3) allowing the child to explore the setting before the transition occurs. Aligning with the primary findings of the study, constraints to successful transitions included lack of communication between children and educators, lack of preparation, and lack of recognition of transition strategies. This study illustrates the importance parents of children with ASD place on focusing on the unique needs and challenges of their children during transitions, communicating with educators to prepare and carry out individualized transition plans, and consistently using transition strategies throughout the school years. Interestingly, the occurrence of a vertical transition, such as the transition to Kindergarten, also signifies the emergence of new horizontal transitions, such as the movement from recess to the classroom or circle time to the gym. While the focus of this research project is on the vertical transition of children to Kindergarten, it is important to keep in mind the many horizontal transitions that are embedded within the transition to Kindergarten, creating an understandable concern for parents and educators. Indeed, there is a body of literature discussing intervention strategies for children with ASD who struggle with transitions, aiming to ameliorate the problem behaviour associated with transitions for this group of children. Sterling-Turner and Jordan (2007) provided a review of the literature on transition interventions, and indicated that the use of verbal and auditory techniques, visual supports, and video priming were most effective in decreasing transition times and increasing the level of

independence with initiating transitions. These findings offer strategies for parents and educators to help children with ASD cope with the many new transitions that they face throughout the school day.

While there is an extensive literature on transition to Kindergarten for children with disabilities, a thorough search of the relevant databases found five peer reviewed articles and three doctoral dissertations that addressed transition to Kindergarten for children with ASD specifically. The findings of these studies and how they informed my research will be outlined in this section. In a study implementing structured interviews with preschool teachers, Kindergarten teachers, and parents of three children with ASD, Forest et al. (2004) created a tool listing transition activities after reviewing the recommendations in the Kindergarten transition literature. These researchers used their 26-item *Elements for Transition to Kindergarten (ETK)* interview to investigate both the usage and importance of each transition activity. Transition activities were separated into time periods, which included one year prior to Kindergarten placement, twelve to six months prior to Kindergarten placement, six months prior to Kindergarten placement to actual placement, followed by a three-month and twelve-month review of transition process. Interviews also included an opportunity to rate the success of the child's transition. Results of these interviews showed that all the transition activities were rated as highly important, except for one item stating that the child's placement should be known six months prior to transition, and these ratings were consistent across groups. Results from perceived levels of implementation were not as consistent. Overall, participants reported that close to half of the planned transition activities were actually implemented. Of note was that none of the participants reported creating a timeline with milestones for transition, and there were no follow up meetings to review the efficacy of the transition. The authors also noted that activities that involved coordinating between preschool and Kindergarten teachers and visiting respective classrooms were implemented at the lowest rates in the six months prior to Kindergarten placement and actual placement time frame. Finally, the mean rating for transition success was 4.7 on a 6-point Likert-type scale. Parents rated the transition success lower than the other two groups (4.3 versus 5.3 for preschool teachers and 4.7 for Kindergarten teachers). Of interest in this study was the moderately positive average rating of transition success, despite the low implementation rate of transition practices. This study did not link the

quantity or types of transition practices used with actual transition outcomes. Further research is needed to explore this area.

The *ETK* (Forest et al., 2004) was used by Denkyirah and Agbeke (2010) to create a 10-item open-ended survey to identify the importance of transition activities for children with ASD as reported by preschool teachers from the US (n=210) and Ghana (n=65). Both groups agreed that the most important items included in the survey were timing of planning and preparation, helping family find resources, sharing information with the family, and home visits. The preschool teachers from the US indicated that all 10 items were highly important, similar to the finding by Forest et al. (2004). The only discrepancy between the two groups was that the preschool teachers from Ghana did not report assistive technology and parent training as being as important. Participants commented on the importance of transition teams and early planning for transition; collaboration between sending schools, receiving schools and parents; and sharing information about the child between schools (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010). This study highlighted the similarities and differences between two different countries in transition planning, and the need for collaborative approaches to transitions to Kindergarten for children with ASD. Again, this study did not address transition outcomes related to the specific usage of transition practices. Additionally, although it was reported that preschool teachers valued collaboration with the receiving school, Forest et al. (2004) reported that these types of transition practices are least commonly used. More research is needed to investigate constraints to collaboration between sending and receiving education programs.

In her doctoral dissertation, McCumber (2011) surveyed school psychologists, special education teachers, speech and language pathologists, and Kindergarten teachers (n=66) to discover how educators prepared students with ASD for Kindergarten with the use of the recommended transition practices in the literature. Results from the surveys indicated that there were discrepancies between actual use and perceived importance of transition practices, corroborating with findings presented by Forest and colleagues (2004). Although most of the transition practices were seen as important, many of these practices were not implemented. For example, about 75% of participants reported identifying Kindergarten and related service placement, identifying goals and

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educational plans, and selecting specific classroom, while less than 25% of participants reported observing the child in the preschool setting, evaluating transition process with administration, or receiving information from the preschool about the student. The most commonly reported constraints to using transition practices were the summer break, the time consuming nature of the practices, and the philosophical differences of the sending educational services. Importantly, 29.6% of participants indicated that their lack of knowledge and training about ASD acted as constraints to using transition practices. In addition, 33.3% of participants stated that they lacked knowledge about the child before Kindergarten entry, indicating a need for transition practices that allow for sharing information between sending and receiving educational services and opportunities for Kindergarten teachers to meet with children before school begins. Unfortunately, this study did not report on perceived outcomes of transitions when specific transition practices were used.

Quintero and McIntyre (2011) studied the transition practices used by preschool teachers. Comparisons were made between a group of children with ASD (n=19) and a group of children with other developmental disabilities (n=76). The only difference that emerged between the groups in actual transition practices was more visits to Kindergarten classrooms for the group of children with ASD. Preschool teachers most frequently engaged in monthly contact with parents, transition meetings with preschool staff, and written communication with parents. They did not always engage in transition practices they thought were important, such as meeting with the Kindergarten teacher, classroom visits, more collaboration between schools, and formal transition plans. Lack of time, number of districts, difficulty collaborating with the Kindergarten teacher, and distance from the elementary schools were all obstacles cited by preschool teachers. Parents reported that Kindergarten teachers were involved in fewer transition practices than preschool teachers, and that these practices generally occurred at the beginning of school with all of the children in the class. These researchers also examined teacher concerns regarding transition and parent involvement. Teachers reported significantly more concerns for transitioning children with ASD versus children with other developmental disabilities. Furthermore, parents in both groups reported similar levels of involvement. However, parents of children with ASD were less likely to attend transition-planning meetings and receive written communication about transition from the

Kindergarten teacher than the parents of children with other developmental disabilities. The researchers did not hypothesize why parents of children with ASD were less involved in these activities. This study indicated that although preschool teachers have more concerns about their students with ASD, it does not appear that transition practices differ from other special education students, except that they are more likely to visit Kindergarten classrooms. This study illustrated that parents and preschool teachers both value collaborative relationships during transition, but they report that there is less collaboration with the elementary school than they would like. Kindergarten teachers have also reported difficulties collaborating with parents and preschool teachers elsewhere in the literature (Forest et al., 2004; McCumber, 2011).

The previous study was reported as part of a doctoral dissertation by Quintero (2009). Of interest in this larger project was the finding that parents of children with ASD reported higher stress levels at first testing (the spring prior to Kindergarten entry) and more transition concerns than the parents of children with other developmental disabilities. Although stress levels may not be the result of the transition process, Quintero (2009) did find that parental stress was correlated with transition concerns. Parents cited adjusting to a new school and staff, behavioural concerns, and the child's speech being understood by peers and staff as the main concerns about starting Kindergarten. This research project offered some important insights into the experiences of parents of children with ASD and the concerns and practices of preschool teachers. However, I would have been interested to hear the perspective of the Kindergarten teacher, as well as reports from teachers and parents regarding perceived success of transitions. As well, further research is needed to understand how parents experience stress as their children with ASD transition to school and to extend our knowledge of the relationship between parental stress and transition concerns.

In a Canadian study, Levy and Perry (2008) examined the beliefs and experiences of intensive behaviour intervention (IBI) staff and school staff regarding children with ASD transitioning from IBI programs to school. Twenty-six IBI staff and 11 school staff were given questionnaires related to transition beliefs and transition practices that participants thought were ideal versus actually used. Questions relating to transition practices were discussed in the context of when practices began, who was

involved, and what practices were used. Findings from the questionnaires indicated that IBI participants held stronger beliefs than school staff about teaching prerequisite skills and collaborating and cooperating as important aspects of the transition process. Furthermore, significant differences were found between IBI and school staff on beliefs about ideal timing of transition planning. About 50% of IBI participants believed that transition planning should begin 7-12 months prior to transition, opposed to over 70% of school participants who believed that transition planning should begin 4-6 months prior to transition. The actual time frame in which both groups reported planning for transition reflected their respective beliefs about when to start planning for transition. The authors noted that these findings made sense in light of the fact that children are not registered for school until about six months prior to school entry, whereas IBI staff likely begin preparing children for transition at home long before school registration. No significant differences were found between the two groups about who they believed should be involved in transition planning and who was actually involved, although the authors noted that IBI participants were much more likely to point out that behaviour consultants and transition coordinators should be involved in planning. Furthermore, although school staff indicated that parents should be involved in transition planning, only 10% of school participants stated that parents were actually included. Finally, no significant differences were found between groups regarding the beliefs and actual experiences of what should be included in transition planning. However, the authors again noted interesting differences between the groups. Almost all of the IBI participants thought that IBI and school staff should meet to discuss challenges that the child may face at school, whereas only 46% of school participants thought this was necessary. This study offered a contribution to the literature by reporting on constraints to collaboration between IBI and school staff. School staff in this study discussed the incompatible philosophies between IBI programs and schools. IBI participants also indicated that they believed school staff did not understand their role on school teams and IBI involvement was not welcomed. Negative attitudes on the part of both systems and lack of communication were reported by both groups of participants. While there were barriers to collaboration and differences in actual transition experiences, this research illustrated that, in many ways, the beliefs and goals surrounding transition to school were similar for IBI and school staff. Parent perspectives were not included in this study, though I wondered how parents manage these conflicting philosophies from IBI and school programs. Did

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parents feel supported during this transition process? Did they feel included in the transition planning? Another limitation of this study was the lack of measures of student success with transition planning.

Another Canadian perspective was presented in a recently published study by Starr et al. (2014), offering a qualitative view of the experiences of ethnically diverse parents, teachers, and early intervention service providers of children with ASD. This group of researchers used focus groups to facilitate discussions around the experiences with Kindergarten transitions, definitions of transition success, and any unique challenges faced by culturally diverse parents. Overall, most parents indicated that their children's transitions were challenging. This finding lies in contrast to the moderately positive transition success cited by Forest et al. (2004). The differences between these studies could be that Starr et al. (2014) seemed to be describing the process of the transition, rather than an end result. Furthermore, "transition success" can have different definitions for each person (Forest et al., 2004). Four themes were apparent across all groups in the research by Starr et al. (2014): relationship building, communication, knowledge, and support. The first theme identified was "relationship building," which described the importance all groups placed on building solid relationships with all members of the transition team. Parents expressed that building these relationships actually relieved their stress. Quintero (2009) found that parents of children with ASD scored higher on stress levels than parents of children with other developmental disabilities though could not claim that the transition itself had caused these stress levels. Although no direct causation could be confirmed, there was a link found between parental stress and transition concerns. The current study also pointed to a relationship between parental stress levels and transition. Teachers also discussed anxiety related to transitioning a child with ASD. Although teachers said that informal meetings with parents before the start of school helped with their anxiety, they also discussed the stress that can be associated with relationships with parents who frequently question teaching staff or bring up concerns with administration. Both the parents and teachers reported that observing the child before Kindergarten entry was important. However, Forest et al. (2004) found that Kindergarten teachers rarely visited preschool classrooms. An interesting finding is that Kindergarten teachers stated that they were often left out of the transition process. In light of the fact that parents and preschool

teachers desire the involvement of Kindergarten teachers (Forest et al., 2004; Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Quintero & McIntyre, 2011), this finding is surprising. Determination of the factors that constrain involvement of teachers in the transition process needs more attention in the research.

The second theme identified by Starr et al. (2014) was "communication." Parents stated that they were frequently required to advocate for their children, and these efforts were often described as "battles". For parents whose first language was not English, this task was more challenging. Parents described the balance they needed to figure out in terms of what "battles" to fight, and what to let go so that communication and relationships with teachers could remain strong. Although parents desired the same amount of communication with Kindergarten teachers as they had with early intervention service providers, teachers said that this was not a possibility given the number of children they must attend to. Some participants reported that these differences in viewpoints have sometimes led to adversarial relationships between home and school. More research is needed to gain a better understanding of how parents negotiate their needs to advocate for their children and build relationships with teachers. Additionally, how do different communication patterns lead to positive versus adversarial relationships?

The third theme discussed by Starr et al. (2014) was "knowledge." Parents reported that it was overwhelming attempting to learn the Ministry of Education special education legislation. Parents who were not proficient in English had more difficulties, especially due to the jargon and the fact that there were often cultural differences in the understanding of ASD. Knowledge was also reported to be lacking in teachers. Even teachers themselves acknowledged that they lacked the necessary training in working with children with ASD. This lack of training and knowledge also posed challenges in consistency between home and school, as many participants reported that expectations for the child were lowered at school. This finding leads me to wonder how effective communication between parents and various educational teams are if there are discrepancies in expectations or perhaps a lack of understanding of different teaching approaches. For example, if the Kindergarten teacher used a different form or ideological approach to teaching, was this being effectively communicated to early

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intervention teams and parents? Is it possible that a lack of understanding on the part of the parents or early intervention team on the teaching approach used by the Kindergarten teacher could be mistaken for lowered expectations? Nevertheless, it appears that knowledge, or lack of knowledge about special education legislation and teaching approaches for children with ASD, may impact the transition process for all parties involved.

The final theme reported by Starr et al. (2014) was "support." The researchers discussed supports that were deemed helpful for parents and for teachers. Parents spoke about informal supports, such as community organizations or early intervention service providers, and informal supports, such as family and friends. Community organizations were of particular importance for the Arabic and Mandarin-speaking parents in the focus groups. The level of support parents had during transition impacted its reported success. The focus groups indicated that the early intervention service providers were often used as a link between families and schools, but that parents sometimes became reliant on them instead of focusing on building strong partnerships with the Kindergarten teachers. Kindergarten teachers also stated that they required supports such as education assistants, school resources, suitable physical environments for teaching, and administrative support to facilitate successful transitions.

A doctoral dissertation by Joseph (2012) examined the potential effectiveness of providing educators with a manual that includes evidence-based intervention methodologies for working with children with ASD. This author's focus was on improving the transition experiences of children moving from early intervention services to school-based programs. She argued that due to the gains children make as a result of their early intervention services, parents are apprehensive about trusting the approaches of the school system because they are unsure if these gains will be maintained or exceeded with the use of different teaching approaches. As Joseph (2012) states, "some families can become stuck, putting on blinders, narrowly focusing on trying to maintain their current individualized services" (p. 67). Recommendations were made for early intervention teams to communicate to parents what to expect in transition, and that parents should be made aware of their rights and helped to feel empowered and learn their role on individualized education plan (IEP) teams. Furthermore, schools should

attempt to build trust with families as soon as possible. Schools having access to and implementing a range of evidence-based teaching approaches for children with ASD can address part of this need. Using the 11 evidence-based treatment category approaches listed in the *National Standards Report* (National Autism Center, 2009, as cited in Joseph, 2012), this researcher created a prototype manual that included two of the treatment categories (story-based and joint attention interventions) that could act as a toolkit for educators to use when planning IEPs and teaching in the classroom setting. For each of the treatment categories, descriptions of all the necessary information needed to implement and evaluate strategies were given to educators. The manual was presented and distributed to eight participants, which included school psychologists and professors from an educational psychology doctoral program. Feedback forms indicated that the participants believed this toolkit would be useful for schools to communicate with families how they intended to meet the needs of children with ASD, thus encouraging trust formation. While the majority of the feedback was positive, concerns about actual implementation and getting educators to read the large amount of information provided were also discussed. These findings provide a potential solution to teachers' reported lack of training in teaching children with ASD reported in the literature (Starr et al., 2014); however, this study was limited because implementation of this manual in classrooms was not carried out. Nor were parents' perspectives obtained. Thus, the actual effectiveness of this approach to building trust with families is unknown.

1.2.1.1. Summary of literature on transition to Kindergarten for children with ASD.

The research discussed illustrates that the transition to Kindergarten for students with ASD is met with concerns for parents and teachers (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011), and is associated with increased levels of stress for both parties (Quintero, 2009; Starr et al., 2014). Although parents and teachers reported that the vast majority of the commonly suggested transition practices in the literature were important (Forest et al., 2004; Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; McCumber, 2011), only about half of planned activities were actually implemented (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011). Of the transition practices, the least used were those that required collaboration and visits to sending and receiving classrooms (Forest et al., 2004; Quintero & McIntyre, 2011; McCumber, 2011), though Quintero and McIntyre (2011) did find that preschool teachers were more likely to

visit Kindergarten classrooms for students with ASD than children with other developmental disabilities. Unfortunately, these types of collaborative transition practices were highlighted as being imperative for transitions (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Quintero & McIntyre, 2011; Starr et al., 2014), but constraints such as time (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011), difficulty collaborating (Starr et al., 2014), and perceived differences in philosophical approaches between sending and receiving programs (Levy & Perry, 2008; Joseph, 2011) made these practices challenging to implement. Starr and colleagues (2014) illuminated other salient themes in the experience of transitioning a child with ASD to Kindergarten, including relationship building, communication, knowledge, and support. While this body of research has made important contributions to the knowledge base on transitions to Kindergarten for children with ASD, some questions remain unanswered. Most of the research presented focused on the perspectives of educators, while parental viewpoints were rarely explored. The stress experienced by parents during school transition has been documented (Quintero, 2009; Starr et al., 2014), yet it is still unknown how parents experience this stress and how it relates to transition concerns and outcomes. Furthermore, more research is needed to understand how parents build relationships with teachers while still advocating for the needs of their children. Although communication is highlighted in the literature as being key to successful transitions (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Quintero & McIntyre, 2011; Starr et al., 2014), no research to date has investigated how communication patterns form between parents and teachers of children with ASD and how these patterns lead to positive or adversarial relationships. Finally, the conflicting ideologies and difficulties collaborating between schools and early intervention programs necessitates the need to study how parents manage these conflicting ideas, and how these challenges may impact their transition experiences.

I now turn to the literature on Kindergarten transition relevant to special education students and provide links to the research discussed above.

1.2.2. Kindergarten Transition Literature Relevant to Special Education

As I have immersed myself in the literature, three themes have become prominent: transition concerns, transition activities, and family involvement and collaboration. It is important to note that these themes are all interconnected. Though discussing the themes independently appears somewhat artificial, I have categorized them only to provide organization and structure to my literature review. From an ecological perspective, studying these themes in isolation limits understanding, as each system is impacted by and impacts another. In actual lived experience, none of these themes occur in isolation. Literature pertaining to general education students is identified and presented where I believe it is relevant, and when no similar special education data could be found.

1.2.2.1. Transition concerns.

The literature points to the reality that many parents and educators experience stress and have concerns about special education students as they begin school (McIntyre Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro Reed, & Wildenger, 2010; Janus, Kopenchanski, Cameron, & Hughes, 2007; Jewett et al., 1998; Johnson, Chandler, Kerns, & Fowler, 1986; Quintero & McIntyre, 2011; Starr et al., 2014). In a study exploring parental concerns of their children transitioning to Kindergarten (n=29 special education students; n=103 general education students), McIntyre et al. (2010) found that parents of special education students had significantly more concerns about transition than the parents of general education students. This finding is supported by Janus et al. (2007), reporting that most parents felt uncertain and apprehensive prior to transition. Additionally, these findings are corroborated by the studies conducted by Quintero and McIntyre (2011) and Starr et al. (2014) in the literature specific to transition for children with ASD.

Several researchers have investigated specific concerns for parents during this transition process (McIntyre et al., 2010; Jewett et al., 1998; McIntyre et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 1986). For instance, McIntyre et al. (2010) found that parents of special education students had significantly more concerns about their children following directions, making needs known, academics, problem behaviour, Kindergarten readiness, and toilet training than for general education students. Both groups of

parents had comparable levels of concern about their child going to a new school, getting along with peers, being separated from family, and getting along with the new teacher. These concerns were similar to those cited by Quintero (2009) for children with ASD. Johnson et al. (1986) supported the finding that parents had significant concerns about Kindergarten placement, but they also discovered that parents held concerns about the timing and process of the transition, how to prepare their child, and who would be the communication link between preschool and Kindergarten.

Offering the perspective of early childhood teachers, Jewett et al. (1998) implemented a narrative inquiry with the use of journals. In these teachers' experiences, they also identified families having concerns about Kindergarten placement, as well as safety, acceptance, friendship, and grief over the loss of normalcy. Although these concerns were not verified by parents, it is interesting to hear the perspective of teachers on what they believe families are experiencing.

Dockett and Perry (2004) also explored aspects of beginning Kindergarten for general education students that were important for parents, educators, and children. Results from the small group interviews with children will be reported in a subsequent section. Using a questionnaire, parents (n=289) and teachers (n=280) were asked to list five things that came to mind when they thought about their/a child starting school. Eight categories of responses were identified: (1) knowledge, (2) adjustment, (3) skills, (4) disposition, (5) rules, (6) physical, (7) family issues, and (8) educational environment. Of particular importance to parent and teachers was the adjustment of the child to the classroom community. Parents shared their concern for their children fitting in and becoming members of the group, while also communicating their desire for teachers to view their child as special and important. In addition to concerns over being separated from family during school hours, parents reported being concerned about their children being labelled uncooperative by teachers. In contrast, teachers reported more concerns about children following directions and functioning as part of the group. The second most reported category for parents was the child's educational environment. Parents had concerns about whether the school was a right fit for their children and if the school could meet the special needs of their child. Parents also expressed concern about the teachers' ability to make their child feel welcome in the classroom. Teachers discussed

the challenges related to getting to know a new group of children and families, and addressing the individual and group needs of the class. The third most commonly reported category for parents was disposition. For parents, this category frequently signified their children's enjoyment of school. Parents discussed children being excited about starting school, while also mentioning feelings of loss as their child began school. In contrast, other parents reported a sense of freedom that comes with sending their child to school. While this study focused on the concerns of parents and teachers of general education students, some of these concerns have been reported in the literature for special education students, such as school placement (Johnson et al., 1986; Jewett et al., 1998), following directions (McIntyre et al., 2010), and acceptance (Jewett et al., 1998). Although knowledge has been gained from the research on the amount and types of concerns parents have about their child with special needs beginning school, no research to date has investigated how parents experience these concerns or the relationships between concerns, stress, and transition outcomes.

1.2.2.2. Transition practices.

A series of articles was published as a result of The National Center for Early Development and Learning's (NCEDL) (1996) *Transition Practices Survey*, which included a large sample of Kindergarten teachers in the US (n=3595). Pianta, Cox, Taylor, and Early (1999) reported that most of the transition practices used by Kindergarten teachers occurred at the beginning of the school year and were often generic practices that are used for the entire group, such as flyers or open houses. The four most commonly used transition practices were talking to parents (95%), sending a letter to parents (88%), open house (82%), and sending out a flyer (77%). The least commonly used transition practices were ones that occurred prior to school starting and/or involved personal contact with parents or other professionals, such as preschool teachers. The four least commonly used transition practices were home visits (12%), visit preschool (17%), phone call to child (25%), and coordinate curriculum (21%). Although these results were from a mixed, representative sample of US classrooms, transition practices for special education students have also been found to have low rates of collaboration between preschool and Kindergarten (Forest et al., 2004; Quintero & McIntyre, 2011). Interestingly, Pianta and colleagues (1999) stated that they are uncertain if these practices were specific to Kindergarten transition or procedures used

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by the entire school at the start of a new school year. They noted that some of the practices, such as flyers or letters to parents, potentially only provided information about logistics such as room numbers and school supply lists which, although important information, is far from best practice for smooth Kindergarten transitions.

There are several factors that influenced the usage of transition practices. Although the amount of experience and education of the teacher had very little impact on the amount or type of transition practices they used, teachers who had training specifically in Kindergarten transition reported using more of all types of transition practices. In addition, larger class sizes were found to be correlated with less individualized and group practices before the beginning of Kindergarten. Receiving class lists early was associated with increased usage of transition practices before the start of school, individualized practices, group practices, and less frequent usage of transition practices after school began. (Early, Pianta, Taylor, & Cox, 2001). Unfortunately, Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, and Cox (2000) found that 56% of teachers reported that the class lists were generated too late, making it difficult for many transition practices to be used before school started. Other constraints to carrying out transition practices that Kindergarten teachers thought were important were the lack of salary for summer work, transition plans not being available, amount of time involved, and lack of funding. Teachers from schools in urban areas with higher populations of minority students and higher poverty rates reported additional challenges, such as being unable to reach parents, feeling unsafe visiting students' homes, parents not bringing their child to school, and parents being unable to read.

The Kindergarten teachers in this large sample stated that about 50% of children had successful transitions, while 16% of children were described as having difficult transitions. Several problems were identified that made Kindergarten transition challenging for children: (1) difficulty following directions, (2) lack of academic skills, (3) disorganized home environment, (4) difficulty working independently, (5) lack of formal preschool experience, (6) difficulty working in groups, (7) problems with social skills, (8) immaturity, and (9) difficulty communicating (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). Many of these skills have been cited as important school readiness skills elsewhere in the

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literature (Kemp & Carter, 2005; Chandler, 1993; Rule, Fiechtl, & Innocenti, 1990; Hains, 1992; Sainato, Strain, Lefebvre, & Rapp, 1990).

La Paro, Pianta, and Cox (2000) explored the data set for transition practices used by Kindergarten teachers who had at least one child with special needs in their classrooms. They found that the most commonly used transition practices specifically for students with special needs were reading written records and contacting the preschool teacher. Nearly 10% more teachers who had a special needs student in their class reported using at least one individualized transition practice occurring before school began, and at least one transition practice that involved coordinating with other professionals. However, the authors concluded that not many differences were found in the usage of transition practices between classrooms with all general education students and classrooms that included at least one special education student. Additionally, teachers did not implement multiple, individualized transition practices for their students with special needs.

Janus and colleagues (2007) conducted a large survey (n=2624) of Canadian parents with and without children with special needs. They found that both groups of parents thought the transition practices used were important, similar to findings by Forest et al. (2004) and Denkyirah & Agbeke (2010). However, parents of children with special needs were more likely to report not being satisfied with the transition (33%) compared to parents of typically developing children (15%) (Janus et al., 2007). Similar findings of difficulty with transition were reported by Starr et al. (2014) in the ASD specific literature. In another study, Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron, and Hughes (2008) used a cross-sectional design to explore the transition experiences of 40 parents of students with special needs who attended either preschool (pre-transition) or Kindergarten (post-transition). While pre-transition parents reported more satisfied levels of care, these results were not statistically significant. Other research has shown that preschool teachers are more involved in transition than Kindergarten teachers, which may account for any difference in the two groups (La Paro, Kraft-Sayre, & Pianta, 2003).

Kindergarten transition practices have been presented and encouraged in the literature (e.g., Pianta et al., 1999; Early et al., 2001); however, there is not a large amount of evidence indicating that these practices have an effect on academic outcomes. To investigate this link, Schulting, Malone, and Dodge (2005) used a subset of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, which included 21,260 children from representative US schools. The subset data used in this study consisted of 17,212 children. Cognitive assessments were given to all students in the fall and spring of their Kindergarten year. The assessments measured competence in language use and literacy, mathematics, and knowledge of the social and physical world. The researchers also collected data from parents on their involvement in the transition, and from Kindergarten teachers on the transition practices used. Results of the analysis showed that the use of transition practices by the Kindergarten teacher had a positive impact on school achievement measured in the spring of the Kindergarten year. Specifically, school achievement can be predicted to increase by 0.5 standard deviations for every transition practice used. This correlation was strongest for children with moderate to low socioeconomic status. The most commonly used transition practices were telephone calls/sending information to parents, parent orientation at the school, and parents visiting classroom, reflecting similar practices reported by Pianta et al. (1999). Another important finding of the study was that transition practices used by teachers increased the amount of parent-initiated contact with the schools. Previous research has pointed out that communication with Kindergarten teachers is more commonly teacher-initiated with more negative content (such as academic or behaviour problems) than contact with preschool teachers (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 1999). One caution about Schulting et al.'s study is that the linkages found between transition practices, academic outcomes, and parent-initiated contact were correlational. Thus, we are uncertain whether the transition practices actually caused increases in academic achievement or parent-initiated contact, or if there were other factors involved. Another important consideration is what constitutes a successful transition. Outcomes may not only include academic achievement, but perhaps also social adjustment, enjoyment of school, reduced anxiety, or parents' sense of connection with the school community. Additionally, none of the current literature has explored transition practices that parents initiate to help their children transition to school.

1.2.2.3. Parent involvement and collaboration.

Several authors discussed the importance of parental involvement and collaboration between families, schools, and other service providers to improve school transitions for young children (e.g., Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011; Pianta et al., 2001). Children with special needs may benefit even more from collaborative approaches due to their complex learning needs and the amount of professionals providing services for each child (Fowler, Schwartz, & Atwater, 1991; Janus et al., 2007; Villeneuve et al., 2013). As Kindergarten transition has been described as an experience that involves multiple individuals, building relationships between family, school, and community is key (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). As Dockett and Perry (2001) assert, the types of relationships between these various individuals significantly impact a child's sense of belonging within the school. Therefore, involving parents in the transition process is integral in beginning the formation of relationships within the school community.

Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, Cox, and Bradley (2003) obtained teacher reports of parent involvement for 223 children transitioning to Kindergarten. Information was gathered about families' incomes, mother-child interactions, parent attitudes and involvement with school, and Kindergarten outcomes. The researchers found that increased rates of parental involvement, as reported by teachers, were associated with higher scores in language and math, and more peer interactions. While family socioeconomic status and mother sensitivity also played a role in Kindergarten outcomes, parental involvement was more predictive of impacting these outcomes. Because this sample consisted of general education students, I am curious if parental involvement would still have an effect on peer interaction for children with ASD, given that children with this disorder struggle with social skills (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Interestingly, parental attitudes towards school, such as holding similar goals as the school and ability to listen openly to teachers' ideas, appeared to be more predictive of social and academic ability in Kindergarten than parental involvement in activities (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2003). This study points to the fact that parental involvement is associated with successful child outcomes in Kindergarten, and provides a justification for encouraging partnerships between schools and families. In addition,

teachers' involvement and implementation of transition practices have positive impacts on children's school achievement (Schulting et al., 2005).

Johnson et al. (1986) explored family involvement in school transitions retrospectively with 19 parents of children with various disabilities. All parents reported that they were involved in planning for their children's transition either formally or informally. However, parents indicated that most of these contacts related to their children's progress and day-to-day concerns rather than discussions about transition. Most parents found IEP meetings helpful, but a minority of parents were not able to follow what was being discussed. Two-thirds of parents visited the Kindergarten classroom before transition and found this helpful for themselves and their children. In addition, 75% of parents stated that there was information exchanged between schools. As has been reported by other researchers (e.g., Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 1999), parents in this study reported less frequent contact with Kindergarten teachers versus preschool teachers, though they discussed wanting more contact with Kindergarten teachers (Johnson et al., 1986). This desire for more frequent contact with Kindergarten teachers was also discussed in the literature specific to parents of children with ASD (Starr et al., 2014).

The experiences and involvement of families during their children's transition to Kindergarten were also investigated by McIntyre et al. (2007). One hundred thirty-two caregivers completed surveys to reflect their experiences. Over 20% of the sample included children with special needs, as reported by caregivers. Approximately half of the caregivers reported that they took part in annual meetings with the preschool and had monthly contact with preschool staff. Hamblin-Wilson and Thurman (1990) found similar rates of parental involvement in a sample of 91 special education students. However, McIntyre et al. (2007) found that only 26.5% of respondents indicated that meetings with preschool staff were about transitioning, which was also reported by Johnson et al. (1986). Only 10.6% of caregivers thought that they were members of a transition team. Despite the low rate at which caregivers felt involved with their children's transition, the researchers found that caregivers had a desire to be more involved, but they often did not know how to prepare their children. Specifically, the majority of caregivers wanted more information about academic expectations and what

they could do to help prepare their children for school. They also reported wanting to have written communication with their child's future Kindergarten teacher, visit the Kindergarten classroom, and attend a transition planning meeting (McIntyre et al., 2007). Wildenger & McIntyre (2011) found similar results from parents of 86 general education students, reporting that parents involved themselves in the transition process when they were given opportunities to do so.

Canadian data on parental involvement appear to have similarities to findings reported from the US in that parents report being involved in transitions and desiring more communication with schools.   Janus et al. (2007) found that most parents participated in transition planning and reported these practices to be helpful. However, professionals involved in transitioning the children in this study reported lack of communication between sending and receiving schools, and between parents and the elementary school, which has been reported in the US literature (e.g., McIntyre et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 1986).   They also reported lack of case management, service funding difficulties in the time between preschool and Kindergarten, and lack of flexibility in switching to a different support system. These researchers did find that there was not as much difficulty exchanging information, such as medical records, as they had hypothesized. The professionals working with each child (except for the Kindergarten teacher) had been involved prior to the transition, so there may have been strategies in place for transitioning the child and transferring information (Janus et al., 2007). Villeneuve et al. (2013) used a case study approach to gain information about the transition of three children with developmental disabilities as they transitioned to Kindergarten.   These researchers used observations and interviews with parents, education professionals, and health care professionals over a 14-month period. In the beginning stages of transition, all three families felt involved and supported in the process. Transition planning meetings were held for all students, and these meetings often included more than one individual from the child's education or health care team. Similar to findings from Janus et al. (2007) and other US researchers (e.g., Johnson et al., 1986), it was reported that information was shared between professionals, and there was inter-professional collaboration at the transition meetings. Soon after the meetings had taken place, parents reported feeling satisfied with the ability to share information about their children and the process and outcome of the meetings.   However,

communication between parents and the school decreased substantially after the initial transition planning meeting. Parents felt unprepared for school entry due to a lack of specific information surrounding this part of the transition process. Parents wanted to know about the types of supports available to their child, decisions that were made, and special education procedures (such as the IEP) (Villeneuve et al., 2013). Johnson et al. (1986) also discussed the confusion that some parents had with special education procedures. Although the planning process starts well, parents may feel alone when trying to figure out the process of school entry; parents may have to advocate for certain services and decisions, often by initiating contact with school professionals when needed (Villeneuve et al., 2013).

Given the importance of involving parents in children's transitions to school and creating collaborative partnerships between families and schools, several researchers have developed transition models and interventions to facilitate collaboration and inclusion of all parties involved (e.g., Conn-Powers, Ross-Allen, & Hoborn, 1990; Redden et al., 2001; Pianta et al., 2001). For instance, Conn-Powers and colleagues (1990) formulated a five-step transition intervention for children graduating from an early childhood special education program to Kindergarten. The five steps in the intervention included (1) establishing a planning team, (2) developing goals and identify problems, (3) developing written transition planning procedures, (4) gaining system-wide support and commitment, and (5) evaluating the transition process. These authors described characteristics of a best practice approach. Such approaches are individualized, collaborative, and prepare the child for a different environment and expectations. The transition team also provides support and empowerment to families. This transition model was piloted in five school districts in Vermont. Results were obtained from parents and teachers using Likert scales to rate satisfaction with transition practices and Kindergarten placement. Both parents and teachers reported high levels of satisfaction for both the transition process and the Kindergarten placement, providing support for the use of collaborative transition models.

When using a team approach to transition planning, formulating the roles of each team member is imperative. Parents often feel confused about how to help their children make smooth transitions (Johnson et al., 1986; McIntyre et al., 2007; Wildenger &

McIntyre, 2011; Villeneuve et al., 2013). Teachers also feel overwhelmed with the amount of responsibility they hold for children's transitions, and they report that building collaborative relationships with parents and other service providers helps relieve the stress associated with assuring the transition success of children with special needs (Jewett et al., 1998). Higgins Hains, Fowler, and Chandler (1988) offer suggested roles for members of a transition team to facilitate collaborative, successful transitions from special education preschool placements to general Kindergarten classrooms. The authors first point out that the child's readiness skills, including developmental skill level, behavioural challenges, and demands of the new classroom environment must be considered prior to transition. Families should be viewed as sources of support for the transition. In addition, parents should be encouraged by early childhood educators to identify their needs and concerns, level of involvement, and required information or strategies for decision making (Johnson et al., 1986). Higgins Hains and colleagues (1988) also point out that parents may differ on the amount and type of roles that they take on. Frequently, parents fulfil the role of advocate, teacher, decision maker, and partner to professionals. Teachers also have crucial roles in the transition. Sending teachers (e.g., preschool teachers) have the important job of teaching the child the skills necessary to succeed in a Kindergarten classroom. Specifically, the authors suggest that the preschool teacher be familiar with the learning goals and routines of the receiving school and visit the child's Kindergarten classroom the year prior, if possible. The sending school also has an important facilitative role for planning and supporting parents, such as describing the roles of team members and providing support for parents' roles. Sending schools may also be a liaison between sending and receiving schools. Kindergarten teachers share the role of transition facilitator with the preschool teachers. They are also encouraged to evaluate the routines and make accommodations for the child with special needs where possible, teach skills that are lacking, and establish communication with parents. Finally, the authors discuss the need to establish communication both within and between agencies to allow for efficient exchange of information. In Jewett and colleague's (1998) study of early childhood educators' journaled experiences of the transition of children with special needs, the authors identified similar roles of sending schools as cited by Higgins Hains et al. (1988), but also included the role of advocate for system improvements to support transitions. Teachers discussed many of these roles in their journal entries, including acting as an

information liaison and supporting families. However, the authors found a lack of discussion around including parent input into the planning and implementation of transition strategies. Discussion of child-level strategies, such as teaching specific skills, and discussion about the system in which the child was transitioning was lacking from journal entries. Additionally, while preschool teachers discussed creating detailed transition plans, they neglected to discuss administrative support to teachers and evaluating the success of transitions. Overall, the findings showed that these four teachers discussed many of the roles and strategies described as best practice; however, child-level and system-level strategies appeared to be lacking (Jewett et al., 1998). This study provides an interesting insight into the experiences of early childhood educators around Kindergarten transition for children with special needs, but it would also be helpful to hear the experiences with the roles of parents and Kindergarten teachers.

1.2.2.4. The child's perspective on starting Kindergarten.

The literature discussed thus far has focused on the perspectives of parents, Kindergarten teachers, and early childhood educators. However, the child is an important component of the transition, as he or she is the one encountering this developmental milestone and holds a unique point of view. Typically developing children in the literature have revealed several meaningful components of beginning Kindergarten. Friendship (Einarsdottir, 2010; MacDonald, 2009; Joerdens, 2014) and play (Di Santo & Berman, 2012; White & Sharp, 2007) have been cited as important components of this transition for children. In addition, children acknowledge that being a Kindergarten student requires them to follow rules and routines (Joerdens, 2014; Di Santo & Berman, 2012; Dockett & Perry, 2004). However, this milestone also indicates that they are growing up (White & Sharp, 2007; Di Santo & Berman, 2012; Dockett & Perry, 2004). Important moments such as losing a tooth or going to a birthday party (Joerdens, 2014) are also meaningful components of children's transition experiences. White and Sharp (2007) found that children worry about heavier workloads and having less time to play. In addition, many children report negative feelings such as sadness and anxiety the first day of Kindergarten due to unfamiliar children and separation from parents, even when teachers report that children adjusted well (MacDonald, 2009).

Dockett & Perry (2004) used a grounded theory approach to analyze small group interviews with children who had just started school or were about to start school (n=310). These children indicated the most important aspects of beginning Kindergarten for them: disposition toward school, which included their feelings about starting school; rules, which included fitting in with the school and its expectations; and physical aspects of school, which included topics such as the size of the school and the physical activities that children were expected to carry out. Child-specific skills or knowledge were not often mentioned by children as important aspects of beginning school.

Offering a Canadian viewpoint, Di Santo and Berman (2012) investigated the expectations of preschool students before they began Kindergarten. Using focus groups with 105 general education students, the researchers found that play was discussed frequently, while few children indicated that they would be doing work at Kindergarten. Furthermore, children also related transitioning to Kindergarten with getting older and bigger, yet they believed they would still need help with personal care skills such as getting dressed and putting on shoes. The final theme discussed was the importance of knowing and following the rules; when asked about the kind of rules they may encounter at Kindergarten, there was evidence that children had a good understanding of behavioural expectations. These authors urge researchers, early childhood educators, teachers and policy-makers in Canada to "...begin to view children as competent active agents and co-constructors of knowledge, who may, alongside other key stakeholders, contribute their ideas to their transition to Kindergarten" (Di Santo & Berman, 2012, p. 477).

Other researchers have shown that these types of themes play a prominent role in a child's sense of belonging at school. For instance, roles, rituals, routines, relationships with peers and teachers, and special moments that stand out to a child, such as losing a tooth, contribute to a child's sense of belonging in Kindergarten. Through this sense of belonging, children's identities as Kindergarten students begin to form (Joerdens, 2014). Entwisle, Alexander, Pallas, and Cadigan (1987) agree that starting formal education is a milestone that contributes to a redefined self-image. As children enter school, social groups and expectations change. Children become increasingly aware of their own abilities or differences through comparisons with other

children and their academic performance. The authors point out that the construction of the academic self and self-worth can be impacted for children with cognitive or physical challenges.

I was unable to locate any studies in which the perspective of a child with ASD or any specialized learning needs were presented. This may likely be due to differences in communicative competencies for children with ASD. While I had hoped to include children's narratives in my study, the children of my participants were unable to communicate their stories through speech or art.

1.2.2.5. Summary of the Kindergarten transition literature.

Parents and teachers report higher levels of stress and more concerns for special education students than general education students (McIntyre et al., 2007; Janus et al., 2007; Jewett et al., 1998; Johnson et al., 1986). While some concerns are shared among both groups of parents, such as going to a new school, getting along with peers and teachers, and being separated from family (McIntyre et al., 2010), other concerns are more common with children with special needs, such as child-specific abilities (McIntyre et al., 2010) and the transition process itself, including how to prepare their children for Kindergarten (Johnson et al., 1986). These concerns are realistic, as children need to be able to use social, classroom, communication, self-help (Kemp & Carter, 2005; Chandler, 1993) and group work skills (Rule et al., 1990; Hains, 1992; Sainato et al., 1990) to successfully adjust to the new classroom environment. However, no links have been made between transition concerns and parental stress. It is also unknown how parents experience the concerns and stress associated with Kindergarten transition. Transition practices that are used by teachers are often generic, low-intensity strategies, such as open houses or sending information to parents, typically occurring after Kindergarten has begun (Pianta et al., 1999). Despite parents of children with special needs being more likely dissatisfied with the transition (Janus et al., 2007), teachers report little changes in transition strategies when at least one student in their classroom has special needs (La Paro et al., 2000). Transition strategies used by teachers (Schulting et al., 2005) and parental involvement (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2003) have been shown to have a positive impact on school achievement. There is no research available that discusses in depth the informal transition practices used by

parents and early intervention staff before the beginning of school. Furthermore, questions remain about which transition practices parents find most helpful and how these practices address specific transition concerns. Most parents are involved in the transition process (Janus et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 1986; McIntyre et al., 2007; Hamblin-Wilson & Thurman, 1990); however, there is a lack of communication reported between sending and receiving schools and parents (Janus et al., 2007; McIntyre et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 1986). More research is needed to explore how these relationships between parents and teachers form. Children also have unique perspectives on their transition experiences, reporting that friendship (Einarsdottir, 2010; MacDonald, 2009; Joerdens, 2014), play (Di Santo & Berman, 2012; White & Sharp, 2007), rules and routines (Joerdens, 2014; Di Santo & Berman, 2012;), growing up (White & Sharp, 2007; Di Santo & Berman, 2012) and important moments such as losing a tooth or going to a birthday party (Joerdens, 2014) are meaningful components of their transition experiences.

1.3. Significance of the Research

The present study aims to contribute to the literature by addressing some of the gaps that I have identified throughout the literature review. First, the research that specifically investigated Kindergarten transition for children with ASD mainly focused on the experiences of educators. This research project focuses on the storied experiences of parents as their children with ASD began school. Previous research has indicated that parents of children with special needs experience greater amounts of stress and have more concerns than parents of general education students (McIntyre et al., 2007; Janus et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 1986; Quintero, 2009; McIntyre et al., 2010). However, little is known about the subjective experiences of parents and how they experience this stress. Through the use of narrative interviews, more information can be gained about parents' emotional experiences, as well as potential connections between transition concerns, stress, and outcomes. Furthermore, transition practices used by educators are well documented in the literature (e.g., La Paro et al., 2000; Pianta et al., 1999; Quintero & McIntyre, 2011), but the usage of informal transition practices that parents engage in before the beginning of school are largely unknown. This research

project also aims to address how relationships form between parents and teachers and how these relationships may affect transition experiences. Communication has been highlighted in the research as being imperative to relationship building and successful transition, yet several researchers have reported a lack of communication between parents and schools (Janus et al., 2007; McIntyre et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 1986). I was interested in understanding how communication patterns are formed and how parents experience their perceived roles in their children's transitions.

Second, the study aims to contribute to the literature by sharing the storied experiences of Kindergarten transition from parents. I was also interested in hearing the perspective of the Kindergarten teachers to add depth to the stories. By looking at the experience from different perspectives, more information can be gathered about thought processes, emotional reactions, decision making, and collaboration. The research conducted to date has focused on specific practices, concerns and the level of collaboration between parents and educators; however, many of these studies have discussed results within limited contexts (e.g., preschool, Kindergarten, and home). The role of early intervention programs is often neglected in the Kindergarten transition literature, but Canadian research has reported tensions between early intervention programs and schools (Levy & Perry, 2008). These findings open up questions about how parents manage these conflicting ideologies and how this early intervention-school tension impacts parents' experiences of transition. While these studies have provided useful information, it remains unclear how families negotiate the transition from a family-centred set of educational services to another ecology of child and school-centred systems. In this study, contextual information has been presented on the child, family, school, and neighbourhood for each parent participant in order to present the complexity of each child's transition ecology. In chapter four, I conceptualize the findings using Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) *Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition*. The goal of this research is not to generalize or solve the problem, but rather to open up the problem with rich description and develop a greater understanding of the meaning making process of parents as their children with ASD transition to Kindergarten. The results of the study add to the knowledge base on Kindergarten transition and will allow researchers to investigate the constructed realities of parents, determine how systems

can work effectively with one another, and promote policies backed by research to encourage successful transitions into Kindergarten for children with ASD.

Finally, parents have an opportunity to have their voices heard in the literature. It is imperative to me as a researcher that my participants' voices be heard, as they can tell their stories infinitely better than I ever could. When we hear the detailed stories of others, it seems to touch us in a much deeper way. Sometimes the best way to get an important message or need across is to personalize an experience so that others may connect in small or large ways to the joys and struggles within that story. Parents and educators may also benefit from this research by hearing these important perspectives. Moreover, the implications for counsellors have not been addressed for parents of children with ASD transitioning to school, and I provide recommendations for practice in chapter four. This perspective taking speaks to the importance of relationships and collaboration highlighted in the Kindergarten transition research (Pianta et al., 2001; Rous et al., 2007; McIntyre et al., 2010; Quintero & McIntyre, 2010; Forest et al., 2004; Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; McIntyre et al., 2007).

1.4. Summary of Chapters

The purpose of this chapter was to discuss my experiences with ASD and Kindergarten transition, to give an overview of the literature on school transition for children with ASD, and to present the broader literature pertinent to special education transitions. In addition, I have made an argument for the need to study the experiences of parents who have children with ASD transitioning to school using a narrative approach to inquiry. In the next chapter, I lay out the theoretical foundations that guided this research project. I also discuss the methodology, research questions, procedures, and steps taken to establish trustworthiness. Chapter three contains the detailed findings of my study. Finally, chapter four includes a discussion of the theoretical interpretation of the results, limitations of the study, implications for counsellors and educators, recommendations for future research, and conclusion.

Chapter 2.

Method

2.1. An Ecological Approach to Understanding the Transition to Kindergarten

The literature reviewed in the previous chapter has illustrated that the transition to Kindergarten is not solely experienced by the child. Indeed, there are several people who may be involved in each transition, such as teachers, parents, and various service providers. Broader influences, such as the school system, policy makers, community and culture are also involved. Likewise, the experiences of the child transitioning are impacted by more than a set of skills he or she may possess. Relationships with and between parents, teachers, and service providers have an impact on the transition experience (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

An ecological framework provides a systems theory lens through which to understand and describe the development of the child during the transition to school. This framework views the transition to school as the result of an interplay of systems and contextual factors (Pianta et al., 2001). The outcomes of Kindergarten transitions are not solely based on the identified skills of the child at school entry, as La Paro and Pianta (2000) pointed out that these child-specific variables only account for one quarter of the variance in deciphering how outcomes are influenced. Therefore, we must consider other factors. As a child engages with the world around them, he or she is impacted by environmental factors, system interactions, and the timing of the process (Rous, Hallam, Harbin, McCormick, & Jung, 2007). For example, the child directly interacts with new peers and teachers as he or she begins school. Children also encounter philosophical shifts between the preschool/early intervention systems and the school system (Forest et al., 2004). In addition to these direct influences, the child also

becomes impacted as parents form relationships with individuals within these systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Ecological frameworks have been used by other researchers to discuss the transition to Kindergarten (e.g., Pianta et al., 2001; Arndt, Rothe, Urban & Werning, 2013; Rous et al., 2007; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Starr et al., 2014).

Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) developed their *Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition* to conceptualize the transition to Kindergarten. Their work borrows ideas from Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), Pianta and Walsh (1996), and Sameroff (1995). Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) model distinguishes itself from other ecological models based on the attention given to relational changes across systems over time. Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains that the transition to school is an ecological transition that involves changes in roles, not only for the child but for other people in the child's environment. Roles are significant because they change the way others view and treat us, which alters how we behave, think and feel. Entwisle and colleagues (1987) have also discussed the importance of school transition in the formation of self-image. Bronfenbrenner (1979) states that "the ecological environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (p. 3). His original model focused great attention on contextual influences, including the microsystem, which is the immediate settings of the child; the mesosystem, which includes the interactions between settings; the exosystem, which includes broader social influences such as neighbourhood or community resources; and the macrosystem, which encompasses the organization of social structures and culture attitudes. In recent years, the *bioecological mode*l discusses the additional influences of the processes of interaction between the person and his or her environment, personal characteristics, and time periods (the *Process-Person-Context-Time model)* (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) model explains that the child, family, teacher, peers and neighbourhood form networks of relationships with one another and the child, creating both direct and indirect influences on the child's transition. These relationships change over time and ultimately form patterns. The authors argue that for this reason, relational variables should be viewed as outcomes of transition, as these patterns have significant impact on a child's transition process.

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2.2. A Social Constructionist Lens

Social constructionists reject the idea of an objective, knowable reality. Rather, reality is created as we attempt to make sense of our experiences. These constructed interpretations are continually shifting moment to moment as we encounter new experiences and modify our understanding to fit with these experiences. Furthermore, the interpretations we make about our experiences are a social and cultural phenomenon (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). To elaborate, each of us is situated within a historical and cultural context. Our beliefs, values, and ways of interpreting experience are influenced by the shared, constructed beliefs of our culture. Therefore, language plays a vital role in sharing, shaping, and constructing our subjective knowledge of the world. Importantly, social constructionists assert that we are self-interpreting beings who create meaning from experience through our interactions with others (Schwandt, 2000). In the research process, participants shared storied interpretations of experiences, which were influenced by historical and social contexts. The interpretation shared is one possibility out of many potential interpretations. Furthermore, participants' understanding of their experiences is constantly in flux, so the findings generated only capture a snapshot of what is actually a constantly shifting process of interpretation. As a researcher, I then created an interpretation of the participant's interpretation. My past experiences, biases, and assumptions undoubtedly shape my interpretations of participants' narratives. The meanings generated can thus be thought of as co-constructed between participant, researcher, and the broader cultural context. Like their view on reality, social constructionists do not believe there is a meaning "out there" that can be somehow accessed or discovered; meaning is not an object, but exists only in relation to the interpreter. Therefore, researchers who adopt a social constructionist epistemology are interested in how meaning comes into being, rather than seeking out an objective truth (Schwandt, 2000).

In the previous section, I discussed how ecological factors contribute to the complexity of the transition process. Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains that roles are an inevitable component in developmental transitions. These roles shape an individual's behaviour, thoughts, and feelings. But where do these roles originate and how do they alter the development of the individuals involved in transitions? Bronfenbrenner (1979)

explains that the overarching belief systems and social organization within a particular culture or subculture affect all other aspects of the lower-level systems. That is, the overarching macrosystem plays a substantial role in the structure and characteristics of the micro-, meso-, and exosystems. The roles taken up by the child are thus created as a result of the shared ideologies of the society in which the child is a part and the influences of the various systems they encounter. Martin and McLellon (2013) provide a social constructionist viewpoint of the development of students as psychological selves. They argue that the progression of professional psychology over the last 60 years has "...transformed the ways in which students understood, experienced, and conducted themselves and the ways in which teachers, parents, and the broader society thought about and interacted with them" (p. 2). In other words, as constructed understandings of the psychological self shifted in professional psychology, so too did the way students were taught and how students thought about themselves. Students were no longer thought of as simply needing to be filled with information or knowledge; rather, students were seen as self-expressive, self-managing, and entitled, requiring education not only in knowledge, but in the enhancement of their personal development. As Martin and McLellon (2013) point out, our understanding of student identity and educational goals in the broadest sense (e.g., a unique, independent psychological being versus a productive member of a larger community) are not fixed concepts; these ideas reflect historical shifts in thinking and contribute to our constructed understanding of what it means to be a student.

Reissman (1993) states that narratives are useful tools in discussing, developing, and even reconstructing the psychological self. Through storytelling, we make sense of experiences and the world around us. The act of narrating a life experience allows us to create order and interpret meaning. I chose to use narrative inquiry in this research project because I am interested in how parents incorporate various roles into their narratives about the transition process and how they create meaning out of these languaged experiences.

2.3. Narrative Research

Perhaps one of the first forms of expression and learning we encounter as human beings is through telling and listening to stories. Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) assert that, along with the goal of understanding behaviour, "...the mission of psychology is to *explore* and *understand* the *inner world* of individuals" (p. 7). These inner worlds are influenced by contextual factors such as time, societal and personal factors, and the places in which the stories are situated (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narratives can take many forms, including oral, written, and visual accounts of life experiences (Reissman, 2008). They are viewed not only as a means of gaining insight into the subjective meaning-making of individuals, but also as a process by which to construct identity (Reissman, 1993; Bruner, 1996). Importantly, narratives do not allow researchers to access direct experiences because these stories are constructed in a specific social context and are influenced by the storyteller's perspective or purpose at that given moment. In addition, the researcher plays a role in co-constructing the participant's narrative. Thus, narratives are suitable to analyze in research that aims to gain insight into subjective meaning-making processes and issues of identity.

Narrative theory proposes the existence of multiple realities, aligning itself with a social constructionist worldview (Polkinghorne, 1988). The self is a construct that is continually shifting throughout an individual's life (Lieblich et al., 1998), and is influenced by social and situational contexts (Rogers, 2007). For example, a narrative may take different forms depending on the audience, setting, reasons for telling the story, or even variables such as an individual's mood. My presence as a researcher also affects how my participants' narratives are told. Narrative researchers do not claim to analyze participants' stories objectively. The questions and responses I give and the biases I may have play a role in how the narrative is constructed. I was reflexive in the research process by monitoring my biases and assumptions and considering how these beliefs may have impacted the construction, analysis, and representation of the narratives. This reflexivity was carried out by sharing my experiences with Kindergarten transition for children with ASD, journaling my thoughts and feelings regarding the field texts, and consulting with my supervisors. As previously discussed, the narratives generated through interviews provided merely a snapshot of one point in time; however, the

meaning-making process is actually fluid and dynamic, continually shifting even as the narrative is being told. Although the narratives voiced in this research have narrative truth in that they represent a constructed understanding of participants' subjective realities, they may not accurately reflect historical truth. The goal of narrative research is not to generalize findings to larger populations; rather, narrative research attempts to capture the complexity of subjective life or personal experience stories and understand how individuals create meaning in those stories (Lieblich et al., 1998). By studying individual cases or making thematic comparisons among cases, knowledge can be generated about a social process or phenomenon. While narrative research findings cannot be generalized like in quantitative approaches, case studies do allow for conceptual inferences to be made about the social phenomena under study (Reissman, 2008). New categories of knowledge generated from cases can inform future research.

There are several reasons why I chose to use a narrative approach in this research project. First, as a counselling student my work primarily involves the personal stories of my clients. These stories, often filled with emotion, struggle, and resilience, are powerful tools that clients use to create meaning in challenging experiences. I have also worked with child clients who have used art or sand play to share their subjective experiences in storied form. As a student therapist, I have seen both these verbal and visual stories change over the course of therapy. Although I believe that clients create their own change, I acknowledge the role I play as co-constructor of this new-found meaning and identity. Through these experiences with clients, I have developed a comfort and a fascination with personal narratives. Therefore, it seemed appealing to me to conduct research using participant narratives.

Second, narrative research also provided an opportunity to work with a rich set of data to make space for the voices of participants. While narrative studies may use smaller numbers of participants than quantitative approaches or even other forms of qualitative research, such as grounded theory or ethnography (Creswell, 2007), interviews can provide large amounts of data. Stories also provide vast amounts of description, including emotions and thought processes. In addition, the unique nature of each participant's story adds to the complexity of the experience being studied (Lieblich

et al., 1998). I think it is important for research to include the voice of parents and teachers on issues related to transition of children with ASD to Kindergarten.

Finally, I wanted to capture the complexity of transition experiences by focusing on contextual and relational factors. I was particularly interested in how child, family, school, and neighbourhood contexts influenced Kindergarten transition experiences. Furthermore, I wanted to gain a better understanding of how the relational interactions among these various contexts impacted the transition stories. In my experience with families going through Kindergarten transitions, these contextual and relational factors have played important roles in their experiences. Narrative researchers investigate the stories of participants, paying particular attention to personal, cultural, and historical contexts (Creswell, 2007). This attention to contextual factors made narrative inquiry well-suited to be used with an ecological framework to interpret findings.

2.4. The Research Questions

The purpose of this research project was to develop a greater understanding of how parents experience their children's transition to Kindergarten, and what meanings they make out of these experiences. I was also interested in teachers' stories surrounding these transitions. As any qualitative researcher, my goal was not to generalize the results, but rather to open up the research problem and provide a detailed, rich description of the experience to help inform future research (Creswell, 2007). With these goals in mind, I generated the following research questions:

- How do parents of children with autism spectrum disorder make meaning of their children's transition to Kindergarten?
- How do the stories of the teachers help inform the transition experiences?

I will now discuss the specific steps I took to recruit participants, collect and analyze the data, and how I attempted to build trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004) in my findings.

2.5. Participants and Data Collection

2.5.1. Participant Recruitment

As a qualitative researcher, I selected my participants using purposeful sampling. In purposeful sampling, the goal is to find participants who will provide the richest amounts of information to help form a better understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2007). One of the ways in which I purposefully obtained research participants was by using inclusion and exclusion criteria. My inclusion criteria included:

- Prospective participants will have a child diagnosed with an ASD (parent reported). These diagnoses may include autistic disorder, pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), Asperger's syndrome, Rett syndrome, or childhood disintegrative disorder.

- The child will have attended a public or private Kindergarten classroom.

My exclusion criteria included:

- The child must not have any other developmental or physical disabilities, as the purpose of this study is to focus on the experiences associated with ASD in particular.

- Prospective participants not proficient in English or who live outside of the Greater Vancouver area will not be included in the study, as data will be collected via in-person interviews.

The main recruitment technique I used in this study was snowball sampling, which describes a recruitment method in which participants or individuals known to the researcher can identify or pass information to other potential participants. Having worked as a behaviour interventionist for a number of years, I have worked closely with several behaviour consultants who work with children with ASD. Therefore, I sent copies of my parent recruitment letter (see Appendix A) and inclusion/exclusion criteria to behaviour consultants and asked them to pass them along to clients who may fit the criteria. I also provided instructions to the behaviour consultants to ask participants to contact me directly if they were interested in participating. I also distributed information about the study through friends and family who may have known families interested in participating.

The second recruitment method I used was homogenous sampling, which refers to selecting sites or individuals who have a specific characteristic that the research aims to study (Creswell, 2007). In this case, I posted recruitment advertisements at child development agencies and online ASD support groups for parents. I also had recruitment advertisements placed in a province-wide ASD information and referral service newsletter and in a newsletter sent out to parents who have previously participated in research at an autism and developmental disabilities lab at the university.

2.5.2. Pre-contact

Once potential participants contacted me through email, I arranged a telephone conversation to ensure that they met the criteria to participate. I introduced myself, explained what my study was about, and what would be required of them if they chose to participate. I also informed potential participants of my interest in speaking to their children's Kindergarten teachers, though teacher participation was not required for parents to participate in the study. For ethical reasons, I did not want the teachers' decisions regarding participation to have any negative impact on parent participants. Requiring teacher participation may have also resulted in teachers feeling coerced to participate so as to not harm existing relationships with parents. For parent participants who met the criteria for the study and who were interested in participating, interview times and locations were arranged. I offered to either book a room at SFU, meet at the participant's home, or meet in a private neutral location (such as a private room in a neighbourhood coffee shop) - whichever was more comfortable and convenient for the participant.

This recruitment process resulted in four families that met my inclusion criteria. Two of these parents had children currently enrolled in Kindergarten, while the other two parents had children currently in grade three. Detailed descriptions of each parent participant will be provided in chapter three.

School district and school principal approval was gained before I contacted any Kindergarten teachers. Two of the Kindergarten teachers declined participation, while

one parent did not want me to contact her child's teacher. These refusals to participate resulted in only one teacher participant.

2.5.3.   Interviews

Two parent participants chose to carry out the interview in their homes, and the other two parent participants chose to do the interview in a reserved private area of a coffee shop. The teacher participant requested that I meet her in her classroom after school hours. Once we met, I did my best to make each participant feel as comfortable as possible by engaging in small talk or offering them a coffee. Before any data was collected, I went over informed consent with each participant. I let them know that their participation was voluntary and could be revoked at any time, even after the interview was complete with no negative consequences to them. I also discussed how the data would be used, and what steps I was taking as a researcher to protect their confidentiality. I encouraged participants to ask questions if they needed clarifications or had any concerns before signing the consent form. All participants were given a copy of the consent form.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and the teacher to allow participants the opportunity to share what they deemed to be important, while still acquiring information that I believed may have been integral to the stories based on the literature review I had conducted. I divided each interview into three chronological sections: before Kindergarten began, Kindergarten entry, and present time. For parent interviews, I began by asking questions relating to relationships and support systems prior to Kindergarten entry, descriptions of their child and of themselves as a parent of a child with ASD, Kindergarten preparation and placement, and parents' hopes and fears at this time. I began the second section of the interview by asking parents to tell me the story of their child's first day of school. I was interested in knowing about the emotional experiences of parents and children at this time and how those first few days of transition unfolded. Finally, the third section of the interview addressed any perceived changes in parents' beliefs or experiences around parenting a child with ASD. I closed by inviting parents to create an ending to their story, followed by an opportunity to share

anything they thought I missed (see Appendix B for parent interview protocol). On average, parent interviews lasted approximately an hour and twenty minutes.

The teacher interview began by asking the participant to tell me the story of her first contact with the student and family. I also asked questions pertaining to the participants' view of ASD at this time, and transition practices she may have been involved in for the child. Throughout the interview, I encouraged the teacher participant to reflect on her own emotional experience. The second section of the interview echoed the corresponding parent interview, focusing on memories of the first day of school, hopes and concerns, relationships, and how the transition proceeded. Finally, the last section of the interview on present time consisted of a question about how the participant's ideas and perspectives about teaching a child with ASD may have shifted throughout the transition process. I also encouraged the teacher participant to create an ending for her story, asking her to include her own thoughts and feelings as this version of the story was hers. As with the parent participants, I provided an opportunity for her to share any information she thought I had missed. The teacher interview lasted approximately an hour and a half (see Appendix C for teacher interview protocol).

2.5.4.   Follow Up Interviews

An important component of narrative research is collaboration between the researcher and participants throughout the research process (Creswell, 2007; Reissman, 2008). As such, I requested follow up meetings with each parent participant after I had generated themes from the narratives. Three participants responded to my request and spent approximately 45 minutes conversing about the findings and answering some contextual follow up questions (e.g., information regarding family composition and neighbourhood factors). These member checks are also an important aspect in establishing credibility (Shenton, 2004).

2.6. Data Analysis

Narrative analysis involves investigating stories. These stories can come from many sources, including individuals, groups, or even nations (Reissman, 2008). This

research project solely looked at the stories of individuals, namely parents of children with ASD, and one of the children's Kindergarten teachers. Narrative analysis explores not only the content of the story, but also how and why the story has been told. There are many ways in which researchers can analyze these narratives, and I chose to conduct both thematic and structural analyses to examine participants' stories. In this section, I will outline the steps I took to analyze the narrative interviews, which began with transcription.

2.6.1.   Transcription

Data analysis began as I transcribed interviews. I decided to transcribe interviews myself, rather than have a third party transcribe the interviews, in order to immerse myself in the data as deeply as possible. As I re-listened to the participants' stories, I was able to hear aspects of their experiences that I may have missed in the initial interviews (e.g., depth of emotional experiences, causal links made in stories, etc.). Furthermore, I was able to attend to not only *what* was said by participants, but what was *not* said. This awareness aided my understanding of the meanings created within each story. I wrote memos to record my initial thoughts, feelings, and hunches about the interviews. The transcripts were displayed in a form cleaned of false starts, speech dysfluency (e.g., um, uh), and my minimal encouragers (e.g., mmhmm, yes) in order to make the narrative texts easily understood for analyzing and displaying in the final report. The narrative texts were printed out on large sheets of paper to accommodate five columns. The first column on the left displayed the narrative text. The other four columns were used for coding and memoing in the analysis process.

2.6.2.   Thematic Analysis

First, I used a categorical-content analysis, otherwise known as a content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998). This type of analysis breaks down the story into smaller pieces. By breaking down the text in this manner, data can be coded and used to identify the themes flowing throughout the story. Creswell (2012) explains that using a thematic analysis in narrative research "...adds depth to the insight about understanding individual experiences" (p. 511). These themes can also be compared to stories from

other individuals. Content analysis is appropriate to use when the researcher is investigating a problem or experience that is shared by a group of people. In this research project, I was interested in the storied Kindergarten transition experiences for parents who have children with ASD. While I attempted to keep in mind the whole story as I performed a content analysis with each narrative, this form of analysis necessitates breaking down the story into smaller units in order to code and categorize text segments. In this way, a content analysis captures what is within the narrative, but does not offer a method to investigate how or why a narrative is told (Lieblich et al., 1998; Reissman, 2008). Thus, some of the complexity of each narrative is lost when it is deconstructed.

Creswell (2007) depicts a data analysis spiral to illustrate the interrelated components of general data analysis procedures. Each spiral is depicted not as a distinct step in analysis, but as "the process of moving in analytical circles rather than using a fixed linear approach" (p. 150). Although I present my data analysis as a series of steps, in reality I actually went back and forth between steps before arriving at my results. Lieblich et al. (1998) outline four steps that I used to carry out the categorical-content analysis. First, I selected the subtext that I planned to use for analysis. The subtext consists of portions of the story that are relevant to the research questions. Because I used an interview protocol in which I asked questions related to my research questions, the entire narrative for each participant was used for analysis. Second, I spent time reading over the transcripts several times to familiarize myself with the details and gain a better understanding of each story as a whole. As I read, I wrote memos in the margins of transcripts related to important concepts or ideas. I also used a journal to write down any of my thoughts, feelings, hunches, or questions throughout the analysis process. Both Creswell (2007) and Lieblich et al. (1998) recommend moving back and forth between the reading and memoing phase and the code generation and sorting phase. In this initial phase of reading through the transcripts, I began creating emergent codes for text segments in the second column of the transcripts. I used both in vivo codes, which use the exact wording of participants (Creswell, 2007), and created my own code names if I thought that it better described the information. Leiblich et al. (1998) do not offer a specific guideline about the number of codes to generate, but state that a researcher must find a balance between creating a large number of codes that are difficult to collapse into a small amount of themes, and creating a few codes that do not

represent the complexity of the data. After the first round of coding, I had generated approximately 100 codes. Third, segments of the text were sorted into the various categories that I believed captured the majority of the data. During this categorization process, I moved back to the transcripts to decide in which category the coded segments fit. These categories were recorded in the third column of the transcripts. Finally, the categories generated were then used to create themes and draw conclusions in the research. Theme generation was accomplished by drawing out concepts maps to gain a better understanding of how the categories interacted with one another (e.g., the relationship between inclusion and transition practices). The nine categories were finally reduced to one superordinate theme and three subthemes, which were recorded in the fourth column of the transcripts. Throughout the coding process, I revisited the stories with an openness to alternative codes and themes. I also discussed emerging themes with my supervisors and shared my detailed memos with them throughout the analysis process. Furthermore, I collaborated with three of the research participants once I generated the themes, ensuring that I had captured their storied experiences as accurately as possible.

2.6.3. Structural Analysis

Although thematic analysis was my primary means of data analysis, I also conducted a holistic analysis of form for each of the narratives. While I was in the process of carrying out the content analysis, I noticed that some of the richness and complexity of my participants' stories were being lost when I solely dissected the content. For instance, the emotional experiences and the ways in which participants constructed their stories seemed neglected. I noticed that portions of the plot seemed absent or avoided when the narratives were told, especially those portions that involved looking toward the future. Intuitively, these missing pieces felt like important aspects of the stories and of the identities of the participants. Holistic approaches to analysis keep the narrative intact; that is, the researcher analyzes the story as a whole. Lieblich and colleagues (1998) state that the form of the story includes "the structure of the plot, the sequencing of events, its relation to the time axis, its complexity and coherence, the feelings evoked by the story, the style of the narrative, the choice of metaphors or words (passive versus active voices, for example), and so forth" (p. 13). Structural methods of

analysis, such as a holistic analysis of form, can be used in varying degrees with thematic analysis to provide insight into the constructed meanings embedded within participants' narratives. Structural analysis is especially useful in studies that create case studies (Reissman, 2008). I wanted to present the parent participants as cases because I did not want their personal stories lost within a cross-case thematic analysis. I also wanted to preserve the unique characteristics and contextual factors of each participant.

I chose to use Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional space narrative structure to analyze the narratives because it provided a structure in which to organize and analyze aspects of the narratives that seemed integral to understanding how the stories were constructed. The three-dimensional narrative space includes: (1) interaction, which describes the personal and social interactions and experiences within the narratives; (2) continuity, which includes stories from the past, present, and potential plot lines for the future; and (3) situation, which includes a situational context or setting for each individual's narrative. This three-dimensional space narrative structure allowed me to organize data and keep intact the complexity of my participants' stories in my analysis. The fifth column of the transcripts was used to categorize elements of the narratives relating to interactions (e.g., personal reflections and relational interactions and influences), continuity (e.g., the series of events from past, present, and future that made up the plot), and situation (e.g., the context, time, and place in which the narrative is situated). Because participants often did not tell their stories in chronological order, I constructed time lines for each participant that included events that appeared to be significant in their stories. These time lines allowed me to create a chronology of participants' experiences and helped to organize and understand the narratives more clearly. With this visual representation of the plot, I was also better able to recognize missing components within the stories, which turned out to be integral in my understanding of the third subtheme relating to emerging identities and hope. Memoing was another crucial method at this stage of analysis in that I was able to write down thoughts and reflections on the stories as I thought about them throughout my daily activities. Finally, many of the findings relating to the setting, time, and context in which the narratives were situated allowed me to write the participant introductions at the beginning of chapter three.

2.7. Establishing Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide four constructs to consider when evaluating qualitative research. Due to the fact that qualitative research has different aims than quantitative research, such as rich description of a research problem versus generalizability, using the criteria for evaluating quantitative research is inadequate. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability can be established using several different techniques. I outline how I strengthened these aspects of my research.

2.7.1. Credibility

Credibility describes the extent to which the phenomenon is presented accurately. That is, to what extent are the findings depicting reality (Shenton, 2004)? I have previously discussed that narrative researchers do not aim to ever access an objective reality, but instead seek to present a subjective narrative truth (Reissman, 2008). I used several strategies to ensure credibility. First, I chose a research methodology that is well established and successfully used in other qualitative research. Second, as a researcher I attempted to elicit in-depth responses from my participants. I encouraged this by asking participants to be as open about their experience as possible. Third, I engaged in debriefing sessions with my supervisors to discuss my ideas, and to have any of my biases or flaws in my analysis pointed out with alternative approaches to engage with the data. Fourth, as previously discussed, I used a journal to write my reflections throughout the analysis process. This journal provided a written account of my generation of the findings. Fifth, I built in member checks into my research procedures. After I generated themes from the data, I verified the findings with participants before reporting them. I was able to do member checks with three of the parent participants; the fourth parent participant did not respond to my request for a follow up meeting. Sixth, thick description was used to provide extensive detail about the transitions to Kindergarten. Finally, I have provided a review of the literature in this area of study to allow for comparisons with my findings.

2.7.2. Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability of research findings to transfer to other situations or individuals. Although it is impossible for qualitative researchers to generalize findings, it is possible that similarities may exist in other situations and researchers can use these findings to shed light on these cases (Shenton, 2004). I have attempted to establish transferability by providing thick descriptions of the phenomenon under study, namely parents' storied experiences of the transition to Kindergarten for children with ASD, as well as presenting contextual factors for each participant.

2.7.3. Dependability

Dependability describes whether the research that was conducted can be replicated by other researchers (Shenton, 2004). In this chapter, I have provided a detailed overview of my research methods, including how I gathered and analyzed my data. I also provide my reflections on the effectiveness of the research methods, including the strengths and limitations of the project in chapter four. Providing these detailed descriptions of my study would allow for replication of the study if it was desired.

2.7.4. Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings are the result of the experiences of the participants, rather than the subjective beliefs or biases of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). While I have acknowledged that the stories of participants are co-constructed realities, and the analysis inevitably is shaped by my own beliefs and assumptions (Lieblich et al., 1998), I have taking steps to minimize my influence on the findings. First, I have provided my own reflections and story surrounding my experiences with children with ASD and their transition to Kindergarten. Second, I have provided a detailed description of my research procedures so that they can be examined closely. Finally, I provide a discussion of the limitations and shortcomings of my research in the final chapter.

Chapter 3.   Findings

3.1. Participants' Introductions

3.1.1.   Claire

Claire began her narrative reflecting on her son, Evan as a toddler. She described Evan as a happy young child who preferred to be left alone. Although she did not think much of Evan's social disengagement at the time, she looked back on this behaviour as an indication of atypical development. Evan was diagnosed with ASD prior to Kindergarten and received several early intervention services, such as behavioural, speech, occupational, and physiotherapy. Prior to receiving these professional services, Claire felt inadequate in her ability to help Evan engage with those around him. With the help of the intervention from these professionals, Evan began making more eye contact and engaging verbally with his family. Claire spoke extensively about Evan's intelligence, sharp memory, and his gentle and kind disposition. In addition, she explained that parenting a child with ASD is tiring and demanding. Although she accepted his diagnosis, she described ASD as a disability she wished her son did not have; however, she feels she has made the choice to move forward and to provide the support necessary for her son. At the time of the interview, Evan was five years old and had been in Kindergarten for about two weeks.

The family consists of the Mom (Claire), Dad, Evan, and a younger brother who is about two years younger than Evan. Claire works part-time, while her husband works full-time outside of the home. Claire does the majority of the parenting during the day and is generally the parent who communicates with the school and manages the intervention team. Claire lives close to the local elementary school, so there are many opportunities to take Evan to the school playground to be with other children. In addition, many children from the preschool he attended live in the area and currently

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attend the same elementary school. A community centre nearby provided an opportunity for Evan to attend a summer camp before beginning Kindergarten. He was also involved in gymnastics. Claire and her husband had decided to place Evan in a French Immersion Kindergarten at the public school in their catchment area. They had not originally planned on placing Evan in a French classroom, but a mother who knew Evan discussed this possibility with Claire. Evan spoke English and Japanese with both parents in the home. Although his parents did not speak French, they believed that he may enjoy learning an additional language. Claire noted that the content of the curriculum seemed less advanced in the French Immersion classroom compared to the English classroom because children had to learn basics, such as the names of colours, letters, and numbers in French. She believed that Evan may fit in better in a class in which all of the students were beginning with a new language and the concepts being taught were not new to Evan. After visiting a French Immersion Kindergarten classroom the year before, Claire and her husband also discovered that the learning environment of the French classroom incorporated more music and gestures than the English classroom, which they believed would be a helpful approach to teaching their son. Evan's school team consisted of the Kindergarten teacher, Education Assistant (EA), resource teacher, and principal. Claire described the teacher as caring and accepting, but she had very little information about the experience of the teacher. Furthermore, she had only recently met Evan's EA, which was two weeks after Kindergarten started. She had not yet attended a meeting with the school team at the time of the interview, but a meeting had been scheduled and Claire was looking forward to getting to know the teaching staff.

3.1.2. Susan

Susan is the mother of Gavin and Liam, fraternal twins who were both diagnosed with ASD just prior to their third birthday. As the boys were born prematurely, their development was monitored closely. By age two, Gavin had a fairly large vocabulary and spoke one word utterances. Liam had a small vocabulary of a couple of words and rarely spoke. By age two and a half, Susan recalled that Gavin's speech regressed and he rarely spoke anymore. The pediatrician suggested an assessment for both boys, and Susan had them privately assessed soon after. Within two or three months of diagnosis,

a behaviour intervention program was set up and both boys received behaviour intervention three to four hours daily (including weekends). Gavin and Liam also used speech and occupational services. At the time of the interview, Gavin and Liam were five years of age. Gavin was described as an affectionate, gentle, sweet, quirky boy who loves to sing. His speech is currently limited to making basic requests. In addition, at times he makes loud screams. His brother, Liam was described as the more "typical" boy of the two. Susan described Liam as active, feisty, mischievous, and inquisitive. Liam's communicative competence is more advanced than Gavin's, allowing him to make his wants and needs known more appropriately. Throughout our interview, Susan discussed the gains both of the boys made in speech, motor skills, ability to follow directions, and play skills. Because of these gains, Susan developed a great amount of trust in her early intervention team. Susan reflected on some of the challenges associated with ASD, which included the unknowns about what to expect, the fear of the future, and the stress and added responsibility required to manage learning support services for her children. At the time of the interview, Gavin and Liam had been in Kindergarten for around three weeks.

Gavin and Liam have no other siblings and live with their mother (Susan) and father. Both parents work full-time and the boys attend a day care at their school in the afternoons. Susan explained that the family tries to make the most of the time they have together by eating meals together when possible, and going on outings. She noted that finding time to spend as a family is challenging because of the behaviour intervention the boys receive from service providers in the evenings. While Susan and her husband are both actively involved in parenting, Susan's husband manages the majority of the intervention team and is the main line of communication with the school due to his flexible work schedule. Susan's family moved to their current home from a nearby city approximately a year ago. There are many parks in the area and several children nearby due to a day care a couple of houses away. She had also spoken to her neighbours about the public school in their catchment area, and they had spoken highly about the boys' Kindergarten teacher. Susan frequently receives newsletters from the school about parent events, but she has not participated in these activities to date. The school team consists of a full-time education assistant (EA) for each child, resource teacher, district behaviour specialist, speech pathologist, Kindergarten teacher, and the

principal. Susan mentioned that Gavin's EA has worked 10 years in the school system and the principal has experience in special education; however, she was unsure about the experience of other team members. Gavin and Liam attend an average sized public school with approximately 20 students in their class.

3.1.3. Linda

Linda's son, Michael is currently in grade three and is nine years old. He was diagnosed with ASD at the age of two and a half years, and received early intervention services which included behavioural and speech therapy. Prior to attending preschool, Michael's oral competency was limited, which in turn impacted his ability to communicate with other children. Linda attributed Michael's communicative and social gains over the next three years to the early intervention services he received. Preschool was also identified as a source of support that helped Michael to learn to follow classroom directions and work in groups with support. By the end of preschool, he was capable of communicating in short conversations and made his needs known clearly. Linda described Michael as a thoughtful boy who loves to be silly. He also has a passion for food and cooking. Linda described being a parent of a child with ASD as demanding and isolating. She also shared the emotional struggles she has endured as she has made the realization that her parenting experience is not typical and that life is more challenging for Michael because of his diagnosis of ASD.

The family consists of Mom (Linda), Dad, Michael, and a younger brother who is 18 months younger than Michael. Linda works from home, which allows her to do the majority of the parenting during the day while her husband is at work. Linda also carries the majority of the responsibility for the home intervention team and communicating with the school team. The family spends time together eating meals and doing a variety of activities together. Linda described her family as being very active and they enjoy hiking, biking, and skiing as a family. Michael attends an average sized public school; there were approximately 20 children in his Kindergarten class. The family home is within the school catchment area. They live in a neighbourhood that has several parks, a library, and a swimming pool within walking distance. There are also other children living in the neighbourhood. Michael's entry to Kindergarten was delayed one year

because his birthday is later in the year, and Linda and her husband believed that he was not ready to begin school due to challenges with social communication at that time. In the year prior to Michael's Kindergarten year, Linda became involved in a parent advocacy group for children with ASD in the school district. This advocacy group had the opportunity to meet with representatives from the school district to discuss the parents' desire for early intervention service providers to be hired as EAs to support their children in the schools. She explained that the district was receptive, and a trusted member of the behaviour intervention team was hired to work with Michael in the school. Linda believed that this arrangement was of great benefit to Michael. Knowing that the interventionist was someone Michael knew prior to going to school also put her at ease. She thought that Michael would be well-supported in the classroom. In addition to the EA, the school team consisted of the Kindergarten teacher, resource teacher, speech pathologist, and principal. Linda discussed how families were welcomed into the classroom every morning for reading and activities. Linda cherished this part of the day because it not only allowed her to see her child engaging with others in the classroom, but it gave her the opportunity to connect with other parents and get to know the teacher better. This daily 30 minute ritual seemed especially significant to Linda's transition story because she talked about it at length and explained that it helped her to feel less isolated from other parents.

I also had the opportunity to interview Michael's Kindergarten teacher, Michelle, who has 25 years of experience teaching children of elementary school age. She pursued a Master's degree in Education and has also taken courses in teaching children with learning disabilities. In addition, her own son has a diagnosis of ASD. Her story will emerge through discussion of the findings.

At the end of our interview, Linda discussed how receiving the diagnosis of ASD early helped to get all the supports in place that were integral in making Michael's transition to school successful. At that point, I wondered what the experience might be like if a child begins school without a diagnostic label, but still faces challenges associated with ASD. This curiosity led me to meet with my final parent participant, Jen.

3.1.4.   Jen

Jen's son, Nathan appeared to her to be a typical child prior to beginning Kindergarten. Jen explained that he engaged with the family and used speech. She had also noticed that even at the young age of 12 months, Nathan was able to do puzzles, which struck her as quite advanced for a boy of his age. When Nathan began preschool at age three years, his teacher pointed out that his behaviour appeared to be delayed, relative to his classmates. For instance, Jen gave an example that the teacher reported that Nathan climbed into the water table at preschool. Although Jen did not think this behaviour was problematic, she followed the teacher's recommendation and met with a Supported Childhood Development consultant who observed Nathan in the classroom. The consultant told Jen that in her view, Nathan would not benefit from extra support in the classroom. Nathan also met with a speech pathologist and an occupational therapist. Nathan worked with the occupational therapist on some fine motor skills, but the speech pathologist reported that his speech was age-appropriate and he did not require any speech therapy. After seeking the opinions of these professionals, Jen was not concerned about Nathan's development. Jen described Nathan as a sweet, caring boy with a great sense of humour. At the time of the interview, Nathan was in grade three and was eight years old.

The family consists of Mom (Jen), Dad, Nathan, and a younger brother who is 20 months younger than Nathan. Jen's brother and mother also live in the home and provide care for the two children. At the time of Nathan's Kindergarten transition, Jen worked two days a week outside of the home. Her husband worked full time out of the home. Jen is responsible for the majority of the parenting for her children and communicating with the school. The family tries to spend quality time together during meal times and in family activities. Although there is an elementary school nearby, Jen explained that she does not often see many children playing outside. There is one family nearby who has children around the same age as Nathan and his brother. Jen tries to arrange times to spend with this family, but she stated that it is difficult to find time because the children go to a different school and are involved in different extra-curricular activities. In addition, there are not many community centres to connect with other parents and children nearby. Instead, Jen drives to different neighbourhoods to

involve her children in extra-curricular activities. Jen and her husband decided to place Nathan in a Montessori Kindergarten classroom because they thought he would thrive in a blended grade environment that allowed him to work at his own pace. This decision meant that Nathan attended a school outside of his catchment area. He attended an average sized school with approximately 20 students in his Kindergarten class. Because Nathan had no diagnosis at this time, his school team only consisted of the Kindergarten teacher and principal. Jen believed that the teacher did not have many years of experience due to her young age, but was not certain about her level of experience or skill set. As Nathan's behaviour became problematic at the onset of the Kindergarten year, such as when he refused to come in to the school after recess and when he initiated tantrums, a district behaviour specialist and a resource teacher also became involved with the school team. Although Jen took part in the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) and participated in family reading in the classroom, she still felt disconnected from the classroom community. She felt as though all the parents already knew each other.

3.1.5.   The Potential Impact of Family, Neighbourhood, and School Dynamics on Feelings of Belonging

The dynamics within each family may have influenced each participants' transition experience and feelings of belonging within the family, neighbourhood, and school. All of the families interviewed appeared to have strong connections to their immediate family members. These close relationships with family members provide the context in which children's identities were constituted as a member of a united family, and they could feel a sense of belonging within the family system. For instance, Linda explained that she attempts to spend as much time as possible engaging in family activities because she is aware that Michael does not have as many opportunities as typically developing children to engage with friends. Some constraints to family connectedness were also pointed out in the interviews, such as lack of time due to parents working full-time and children's behaviour intervention programs.

Each child's experiences in their neighbourhood also played a role in the Kindergarten transition and provided opportunities for belonging within the community.

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Claire, Susan, and Linda live in neighbourhoods that have parks and community centres available to provide opportunities to connect with members of their communities. These families also chose to place their children at schools in their catchment areas, which gave further opportunities to engage with members of their local communities. Some children had peers in their Kindergarten class who they already knew from preschool. Jen commented that few parks or community centres were nearby for her to connect with members of her neighbourhood. She had to take Nathan to other communities to access extra-curricular activities. Furthermore, Jen placed Nathan in a school outside of their catchment area, which may have contributed to further disconnection from the neighbourhood.

Finally, the school context was an important component of the transition experience and was critical for families to form a sense of belonging to the school. While opportunities for parents to become involved were present at all schools (e.g., PAC, volunteering, and family reading in the classroom), not all parents involved themselves in these activities. Claire did not mention any involvement in the school, but since school had only started two weeks prior to our interview, she may not have had an opportunity to engage with the school. Susan also did not participate in these opportunities with the school due to her full-time work schedule. Linda explained that she often gets involved in volunteer opportunities at Michael's school and that this participation has been beneficial for her feeling connected with the school. Jen also became involved in Nathan's school activities; however, she did not feel the same sense of belonging. It is possible that because Jen resided outside of the catchment area, she felt like an outsider. In fact, she explained that she felt as if all the other parents already knew each other. In addition, the fact that Jen was having a challenging time forming trusting relationships with the school staff could have potentially pushed her away from forming other relationships within the school.

3.2. Themes Generated from Narratives

Thematic and structural analyses of the participants' stories revealed that each parent narrator made sense of her child's Kindergarten transition experience by positioning herself as an agent who was actively seeking out belonging in the school.

The teacher's story added value to this research project by sharing the importance she placed on forming connections with parents, adding insight into parents' narratives about searching for belonging. Three subthemes were identified in the narratives that contributed to how parents sought belonging within the school system: adapting to the culture of the school, building trusting relationships with teachers, and emerging identities and hope. These subthemes have been broken down into categories to help explain contributing elements and organize the data. Quotations in the participants' own words provide evidence for each subtheme.

3.2.1.   Adapting to the Culture of the School

As children and families move from one system (preschool system or early intervention system) to the school system, they are required to engage with the new system and decipher its rules, processes, and expectations. In order to learn these expectations, parents and children must interact with members of the school. Parents discussed the need to prepare their children for the demands of Kindergarten, such as familiarizing them to the new physical environment and ensuring that they had the prerequisite skills needed to be included in the classroom. In addition, parents were required to learn the processes of the school system, particularly in regards to Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). A component of parents' seeking belonging within the new group was the ability to discern the behaviours and attitudes that characterized the group and that conformed to these group expectations. However, parents also voiced difficulties with feelings of isolation, which constrained their ability to adapt to the school culture and find belonging. Understandably, if new members of a system do not engage with the system itself, they may encounter challenges determining the norms within that system. Norms are defined as the "...distinctive patterns of behaviors and attitudes that characterize group members and differentiate them from members of other groups" (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006, p. 579). The first two sections of this subtheme discuss challenges associated with engaging with the new system; namely, the isolation felt by children and parents. The last two sections discuss how parents and schools helped families acquire knowledge about school norms, enabling them to adapt to the school culture.

3.2.1.1. Emerging feelings of isolation: children.

In all of the participants' stories, it was apparent that all children had struggled with peer interaction, friendship formation, and for some children, physical exclusion from peers in the classroom was an issue. As these stories of isolation continued to surface in the interviews, I began to wonder how children could adapt to a new school system without engaging with the people within the system. Learning social norms and behavioural expectations involves a dynamic process of engagement from both the child and the system (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The mothers interviewed identified three constraints to social engagement for their children: difficulties in social communication, lack of time due to home intervention programs, and behavioural challenges.

Parents' desire for their children to engage with peers was evident when they discussed the goals they had for their children's Kindergarten year, specifically in regards to their IEP. Claire planned to make her wish for Evan to interact with his peers a priority in the upcoming IEP meeting:

> Yeah, our goal would be trying to get him engaged with his classmates. Like, so I'd ask them to focus on trying to get Evan to play with his classmates, with his peers any way they can.

Similarly, Susan hoped that Liam would be encouraged to increase his communicative competencies in social activities at school:

> And Liam, I just want him to work on building relationships maybe, being more social, more... not anything really academic because they already know so much from the early intervention. It's more social skills and life skills.

Her hope was that Liam would "assimilate with his peers," and this was more important to her than learning specific academic skills. She was aware that in order for Liam to integrate socially in the class, he would need help with social communication to adapt to the social norms of his peer group. As children enter elementary age, their play and social interactions become more sophisticated as they engage in reciprocal play, cooperation, self-regulation, and assertiveness (Fabes, Martin, & Hanish, 2009). A

social learning perspective would indicate that children learn the norms of a group through observation; furthermore, interactions that fit with the group norms are rewarded with peer acceptance, while non-normative behaviour could potentially lead to peer rejection (Rubin et al., 2006). Parents reported that differences in their children's social competencies hindered their engagement with peers. Claire illustrated how Evan struggled to socialize appropriately with peers:

> He's very interested in getting to know other friends, but sometimes well like most of the time he still has trouble. What I think is he just doesn't know how to engage with his friends, so he may go up to his friend just trying to be friendly, but sometimes it's too close. So friend may say, "No, Evan!" So, he doesn't try to hit them, but he might give a little poke to his friend and some children don't like that. So they may say, "Stop Evan" and he gets a little afraid and walks away.

This example provided evidence of non-normative behaviour – invading a peer's personal space and poking him or her. This led the peer to reject Evan by telling him to go away. Claire provided a story of an experience taking Evan to the school playground. Parents would often let their children play on the playground for a few minutes after school before taking them home:

> I still remember the first time we took him to, because we live so close to the school, actually as part of the preparation of him going to school, I started taking him to the elementary school every day after school hours at 3 o'clock when the school children come out and I let him go in that group. And he was very excited, but of course he didn't know what to do. And lots of children were actually not, you know nice to him, I mean they don't mean to, but he was acting a little bit different and [they were] saying, "I don't want to play with you. Go away." And there was one day when he was very upset and he just kept walking away from the schoolyard and walking into the woods and just crying. It was a hard experience. In that moment, I thought oh my god Kindergarten will be such a tough thing for him. I was emotionally very upset, and so was he too I think.

Although it appeared that Claire's expectation may have been high for a child to spontaneously interact with a group of unknown children, it also seemed to fit with her story at this point. Interestingly, this was the first instance in the interview that she mentioned the transition to school; she thought that the transition was going to be challenging due to her son's lack of social competence.

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Another reported contributor to the feelings of isolation experienced by children was the amount of time allocated to early intervention programs. As mentioned in chapter one, children with ASD commonly receive 20-30 hours per week of early intervention, which may include behavioural, speech, and occupational therapy (National Research Council, 2001). The amount of time spent in structured intervention activities left very little opportunity for children to be involved in various social group activities. Linda reported,

> And the same like when all the kids are going to kiddie music class, or kiddie this, or kiddie Gymboree or whatever, and we're at home doing our 30 hours a week of early intervention. And there was no choice about that, we had to do it. And if he's structured for 30 hours per week, I don't want to send him in these extra hours to something else that is structured. It's enough. And the same with his brother. He didn't get a chance to do a lot of that stuff because we're at home. You know, we've got this 3 hour session here, and sure we could have gone out but that would mean the class we wanted to go to would have to fit in those hours. So it limits your contact with the rest of the world.

Although home programs provided convenience and a familiar environment for families, it also contributed to a lack of connections and relationships with the outside world. Linda desired having a connection with other parents who have children with special needs, but because her son's intervention program occurred in the home and consumed large portions of the day, this was also challenging:

> And when you find other families with special needs kids, it's awesome because you know they get it. But, it's really hard to connect with other families because we're doing our program at home. There's nowhere...there's no connection. And that applies even now. It's isolating to a lesser degree because you establish friendships through school and stuff, but yeah it's still you know.

The final reported contributor to some children's feelings of isolation was behavioural challenges that occurred in the classroom. Susan's son, Gavin and Jen's son, Nathan displayed challenging and disruptive behaviours in the classroom. Their resulting removal from the classroom became an utmost concern for both of these parents. Being removed from peers was not conducive to forming a sense of belonging in the classroom. Gavin sometimes screamed in the classroom, which resulted in his EA

bringing him to the resource room. This isolation from his peers was concerning for Susan, who stated,

> But, he didn't want to stay in the classroom, and a lot of the time he'd be in the resource room with the SEA. And he was obsessed with the gym apparently, and every time he'd walk by the gym he would want the gym and he would just scream and flop himself down. I think the third day, I got a call and it was from the receptionist at the school, and she had left me a voice mail saying, "Gavin is having a lot of tantrums, and you guys need to come pick him right away." So, it was just total panic. And we didn't know what to say. I tried to give her some stuff myself to calm him down, but I knew it wasn't really going to work. And then my husband did end up picking him up and bringing him home. He was just not wanting to do anything in the classroom at all. It was rough. It still is. It's still a work in progress everyday with him. He didn't respond well at all.

Jen underwent a very emotional experience with the physical and emotional isolation of Nathan from his Kindergarten classroom. Jen explained that his anxiety and frustration manifested in behavioural problems, such as tantrums or kicking. Her story was characterized by the themes of victimization and rejection. For Jen's son, the time spent in the classroom became increasingly reduced. By Thanksgiving of his Kindergarten year, Nathan was only with his classmates until recess each day (approximately an hour and a half per day). With less time spent with his classmates, Jen believed that Nathan was vanishing from the classroom in more ways than just his physical presence:

> I remember that after a 3 day weekend, she said he could only come until recess, the first recess which was like 10:30. And I remember in the beginning too, the other things was he was missing out on doing stuff. So I asked the teacher, "Can we do some of this stuff at home?" And she would never prepare anything. So all the kids would have art or whatever on the wall, and he wouldn't have it. And it's like, "Well if you're sending us home, could we at least do some of the activities?" And she was never willing to do that for us. So I felt like he was excluded, and kind of like, "We just don't want to deal with him at all. Or help him in any way."

The missing art displayed on the wall symbolized Nathan's absence from his Kindergarten class, for the artwork was a symbol of Kindergarten membership. This event was significant in Jen's story because she believed it reflected the ambivalence of

the school and teaching staff towards her son. They were positioned as villains in her story and were deemed the cause of his "getting kicked out." Thus, Nathan was positioned as a victim of the decisions made at school, while Jen felt helpless in supporting her son in the decision making process.

Susan and Jen wanted their sons to be physically included in the classroom. Susan described her expectation that the teaching staff should work with Gavin on the skills necessary to be able to stay in the classroom with his peers. Although Gavin's communication was limited to simple requests and he had no close peer relationships, Susan valued the opportunity for him to be physically present in the class to gain a sense of belonging with his peers as much as possible. Susan planned on making this priority clear during the upcoming IEP meeting:

> ...[W]e want Gavin to be integrated into the classroom as much as possible without him disrupting the class either, but I know at daycare if they were noisy at circle time, they were just told... like they just left. So we want in the IEP to try to just promote these, like work through it. You want them to be included.

Jen also spoke about her expectation that the teacher would teach the skills or competencies necessary for Nathan to remain included with his peers in the classroom:

> ...[I]f he's in your care during those hours, then he's in your care. So you need to teach I think. What happened was, when there were behaviours, he's just taken out. He's removed. He's removed from the classroom. He's removed from the situation. To me, that's not teaching anything. That's just isolating him. That's just isolating him from all his peers.

In addition, she believed that being removed from the classroom was actually triggering or worsening his behaviour:

> He doesn't feel welcome. He doesn't feel supported. How could he? He's always removed. How would you feel? That's my thought.

This excerpt illustrates how the school was interpreted as a villain in Jen's story. In her eyes, Nathan was victimized and excluded. While there was a meeting held to discuss a plan of action to get Nathan included back in the classroom, which included bringing in a

district behaviour specialist and plans to video tape behaviour problems in order to brainstorm solutions, these plans were never carried out. As Jen explained,

> But by Christmas, just like maybe a week before or two or three days before, the principal pretty much told my husband that she didn't want him to come back. So we weren't even going to try the plan. Not even try it. And then she said maybe he could come back by March break or whatever. But by the time, on the last day there was an assembly or Christmas party or something, my husband went to basically leave, the teacher had packed up all his stuff and had given it to us. As far as we were concerned, she had no intention of him coming back. It was awful. It was the worst thing. It was the worst Christmas.

This case shows an extreme experience of isolation – completely being cut off from the classroom community. In this narrative, not only was Nathan physically and emotionally isolated from the school, but so were his parents.

3.2.1.2. Emerging feelings of isolation: parents.

Children's parents also appeared to have difficulty engaging with the school community. The resulting feelings of isolation posed challenges for parents to adapt to the school culture. Two constraints to inclusion for parents were identified: lack of time to connect with other parents and parents' lack of knowledge about what is happening in the classroom.

One contributor to feelings of isolation that came up several times in the interviews was a lack of time to connect with other parents. Claire explained the effort and attention required when she took her son to the park:

> And also, at the park, if you go to the park with lots of children playing my younger son has no trouble. He will find a friend. He will have a good time playing, and I can sit and relax on the bench and talk with whoever. But, with Evan he doesn't really engage with other children so I have to play with him all the time. And if I am lucky enough, we may have other children try to play with Evan, but I still stay with him. Maybe I may step back, but I always watch how he's doing because you never know, he may get upset, and he may poke other children or may do something inappropriate.

This constant monitoring of her child was tiring for Claire. She illustrated the mental and social tolls monitoring took on her with a metaphor:

> It's just like pedalling a bicycle with Evan. Your mind always keeps going, going, going, not really having any moment to be relaxed. Like, you can't really chat with other moms 'cause if you do, you're going to just focus on him and he could have trouble behaviour.

Linda described a similar experience to Claire, but added that she felt misunderstood by parents of typically developing children due to her time constraints:

> Typical families don't get what it's like to have a special needs kid. They have no understanding, but they think they do. So, they don't get that you're monitoring your kid on the playground way more than other people with kids the same age because you're watching out for inappropriate social engagement. You're watching out for, how's his level of calmness, upset? You know, some days it's like, "Oh, it's time for us to go because I can see you've run out of coping." And so because you're doing that, you can't engage in the same sort of conversation. And so you're not as interesting of a person to be with.

In addition to time constraints, Jen discussed how her son's difficult transition pushed her further away from the school community. From the beginning, she was already feeling like an outsider:

> A lot of parents I think already knew each other. And just everything in the beginning, things happened quickly. Like the negative stuff happened quickly. There wasn't an opportunity. There just wasn't time for me to talk to other parents. From the beginning, things started happening already, and some of the kids were calling him names. And I was feeling upset about the feedback I was getting. The last thing I felt like doing was socializing with other parents or trying to set up play dates or anything like that.

Another component of parents' isolating experiences was their lack of understanding of what was actually happening in the classroom when they sent their children to school. As I listened to participants' stories, I could not help but be struck by their feelings about the closed classroom door and their anxiety associated with that image. Although many parents have concerns about their child beginning school, getting along with peers, being separated from family, and getting along with the new teacher, research also indicates that parents of children with developmental disabilities

have more transition concerns and higher stress levels than parents of typically developing children (McIntyre et al., 2010; Quintero, 2009). Parents in this study expressed anxiety about the uncertainty of what was happening in the classroom. Claire shared her feelings of helplessness as she sent Evan into the classroom:

> I don't know what's going on in the classroom. It's not like preschool, you can't go in and see how he's doing. Once the door is closed, you don't know how he's doing until three o'clock. So actually, the first week was really tough. The first day of school was very, very tough emotionally. I think I was in tears... oh my god, I don't know what he's doing. It was so scary. It was very scary... I was just sitting and looking around and just thinking and thinking. And like I said, lots of tears came out.

Linda storied her experience of Michael starting Kindergarten differently than Claire. The behaviour interventionist from Michael's home team was hired to be his EA at school. This link between home and school provided Linda with information regarding Michael's experiences in the classroom. She stated,

> I don't want to be the parent that's clinging to Michael 'cause part of what he needs to learn is to be independent. Which doesn't mean I was asking (EA) lots of questions – "So, how did it go?" And, you know if there's field trips, I'll volunteer. But I'm not the parent turning up at the door with their lunch just to see what's going on, which I've heard some parents do.

Michelle shared a particularly inspiring story of how she began getting parents involved in the classroom. Linda mentioned how valuable it had been to spend 30 minutes every morning reading and doing activities with the children in the classroom. As this had played an important role in her success story, I was keen to learn more about this classroom ritual from the teacher. Michelle explained,

> Well, why I started, I started at a different school and parents said good-bye at the door. The kids came in, I shut the door and my lesson would start. And so I'd be sitting there, and all of the sudden I'd be teaching and I'd see these women in my window. And they're looking, and I'm going, "Well, what are they looking at?" I feel like a fish in a fish bowl. And so I opened the door and said, "Why don't you just come in?... What are you looking at? What do you want to know?" (laughter) And then I thought, as a parent, well some parents just leave. Well, why are they not wanting to know? Well, they're busy. That's my job. Okay, that's why I closed the door. And then all

of the sudden I went, "Oh this is different. Okay, bring them in." Okay, they came and they just sat there. "What do you want to do?" I said, "Here. Here's some scissors and paper - cut" because they need letters traced or something. And one lady was still sitting there, so I said, "Can you sort these books for me?" So she'd start sorting. "Can you start colouring for me?" So these parents started doing things. And I thought, oh okay. And then more parents would come. Okay, come and meet with the kids. And then, "Well how come my mom's not coming?" It just snowballed from there. It was because one woman looked in my window. And that's how it started.

Inviting parents in to witness and experience the classroom provided each parent with knowledge about their child's classroom experience. Michelle recalled,

> Linda was in here all the time reading with him, playing with him, meeting. His dad and he had a younger son. And that I remember because he was also in my class. And every time Michael came in, his brother was coming in... Once you bring one child in, they bring all the siblings, and parents, and grandparents, and everyone comes in and finds out what children work on in these four walls.

Linda agreed on the value of this morning routine:

> And you get to see your kid engaging or not...doing his thing in the classroom. It's just fabulous... Yeah, or how is he being supported? Or are there issues with peers that he's not getting, you know what I mean? You don't know. So it was a good year.

Being in the classroom also acted as a way for her to connect with other parents:

> Well, you're getting to know the other parents because you're all...well not all, there's probably a group of 10 out of 20 or so because parents work or whatever. Some parents could only come one day a week. You get to know the other parents, which is really nice because, with regards to the isolation problem, it helps.

Although Michelle may have started this classroom tradition spontaneously one day because of a parent looking in her window, it appeared as though she stumbled on a powerful method to help parents feel included in the school system by facilitating connections with other parents and providing information about the child's experiences in the classroom.

3.2.1.3. Parents supporting children's transition to new rules, routines, and expectations.

In addition to engaging with members of the school system, children are required to learn about the structural expectations of the school environment. As children and families move from early intervention and preschool systems into the public education system they experience a shift in attitudes and expectations (Fox et al., 2002). Children must learn the new routines, rules, and expectations of the classroom in order to adapt to the school culture. Parents reported preparing their children for Kindergarten by working on social skills and familiarizing them with the physical environment of the school.

Social skills were frequently worked on by parents at home before Kindergarten entry. Claire put great effort into setting up frequent play dates for her son so that he might have the competencies necessary to engage with other children at school. Often, these play dates were facilitated by a behaviour interventionist:

> We did lots of play dates. Like, doesn't matter if he played with... they actually did have a session. It's called play date sessions. So we have different kids come to our house and they play, try to get him engaged with other kids. And we also did lots of play dates on our own, just to keep having the children coming and coming. People were probably thinking we have a day care here (laughter). So lots of play dates.

All but one parent arranged school tours for their children before beginning school. However, it was not clear whether these tours were enough for children to feel comfortable in the new physical environment. For instance, Susan expressed a desire for more preparation, but she was not sure what else she could have done to prepare her children:

> Well, we did a couple of tours of the school. We did do that. We went to an orientation, and we made a social story. Other than that, we didn't do a lot... I think in hindsight, I think that we should have done a lot more prep. Although, I don't even really know how much more with the school we could have done. I mean we could have had ten tours, but I don't know if that would have really made a difference or had... especially with Gavin, I don't know if anything would have really made him prepared. Yeah, I don't know. It's hard to say, but I regret... I just wish that we could have somehow gotten them better prepared.

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Linda also recalled taking steps to familiarize Michael with the physical environment of his new school:

> I know we took some photos of places of the school. I think we took some photos of his classroom... We may have had a visit. It's so long ago. And just walked around the hallways and stuff.

3.2.1.4. Schools supporting children and families' transition to new rules, routines, and expectations.

Parents also identified ways that preschools and elementary schools prepared their children for the rules, routines, and expectations of Kindergarten. Differences arose between parents about how adequately they believed their children were prepared for their Kindergarten transition. Elementary schools were also important contributors to parents' understanding of processes and policies within the school.

Linda pointed out that the two years of preschool helped prepare Michael for Kindergarten. She expanded on this support, saying,

> But I thought that preschool had prepared him for Kindergarten... he was in the routine of going to preschool too, so I think it was just a continuation of that, "Now you're going to be in the big school." And I thought that he was emotionally ready for it 'cause like at home, we constantly have positive messaging about school. My husband and I think it's important and education is great, so yeah I thought he was ready.

Although preschool was a source of support for Michael's transition, Jen expressed disappointment in herself and Nathan's preschool for not preparing him sufficiently:

> I think just because preschool to me is just what it sounds like, what you do before school. So it should prepare you for going to school. And to me, it was just... aside from the longer days, it would be a lot of the same. The preschool that he went to was play based, but they definitely did learn stuff. It was actually bilingual... I didn't really think about a lot of the self-care that they required. I was thinking more that it's just the next step after preschool. He did well with preschool. I think I was thinking more about the education part of it and not the self-care and all the things he would need that way, the tools, self-regulation. I didn't think about that and I think I didn't prepare him that way. And so that was something that I wish I had known or thought about and could have done because I think that if he was able

to do a lot of the stuff on his own, then a lot of frustration that came out wouldn't have probably happened. I think I was just used to the way our family is and having all these grown-ups. We took care of everything and helped our kids take care of things. Preschool there was always two teachers to 20 kids. So the ratio was a lot smaller, so didn't really think about how one teacher is going to be able to help like 22 kids or whatever with all the care activities. You know, like putting on their shoes or whatever. I didn't think about all that stuff. And explaining concepts to him like recess and going through all that stuff. I really didn't prepare for that stuff and I should have. It didn't occur to me at all.

In this example, Jen also illustrated how differences in expectations from different systems posed adjustment problems for her child, impeding his ability to feel a sense of belonging at school.

Parents also believed that the elementary school should prepare students for Kindergarten. Jen provided an example of how an activity such as recess can be challenging for a child who has not been taught the rules and routines of the school:

They have a Welcome to Kindergarten activity like afternoon or evening. And really all it was, was they went into one room and they played with alphabet letters. And they went to another area and they played with Play Doh. If it were me and I was creating a system to help transition, I think that I would focus a lot more on the logistical parts of school and with things that they need that way. Like recess was something totally new for my son. In preschool, when you're there for two and a half hours, you don't have recess. So now, all of the sudden, you're in school all day. The year he started was the year they made it full day. And suddenly he has to get himself ready, take a snack with him, go outside to the playground, eat his snack on his own and play, and understand that the bell means you have to do stuff and it means transition. And they don't have a bell in preschool. All these logistical things that I didn't think I had to teach him ahead of time. And nobody taught him really. The expectation was there that the kids should all know this stuff. Or at least they weren't assisted in a way that I think Kindergarten should be. I think that in the beginning of Kindergarten, if it's sort of play based, you should spend time just explaining how school works I think. I don't know.

While Jen thought that these preparatory activities in the classroom were lacking, Linda shared that her child's Kindergarten teacher did teach the children in the class the independence skills that were necessary to function in the classroom. She stated,

I don't remember whether we had the parent reading on those days or not. Actually, no we didn't because [the teacher] didn't start the parent reading until October because I think she wanted to get everyone into the routine of being independent and putting up their own jacket, and putting their own lunch up. Then we she had them trained (laughter), the parents could then come in in the mornings cause she didn't want parents doing everything for their kids, you know.

Michelle described the process she uses of teaching children the rules, routines, and expectations needed to "fit in" as a Kindergarten student:

We try to socialize, or schoolize, institutionalize... I don't know what the word... children very quickly so that they are in the school system because there are only 200 days in the school year. That's not a lot of time... Kindergarten is like herding cats. They don't know how to line up. That's schoolizing. It's sitting in a desk. It's sitting in circle criss-cross. It's watching who's talking. It's really giving them a different experience they would have never done at home. It all depends on what the parent has done in their own life. If they've gone to, let's say church, and had to sit quietly, they would have that sort of skill. If they're had to go to a museum, or the planetarium, or the aquarium, they have a huge amount of background knowledge that they can bring into the classroom. If the child's been staying home playing video games all day, what are they going to do? That's with any child, let alone an autistic child.

Parents also sought information about the expectations and processes within the school. Michelle explained how overwhelmed parents must feel at the Kindergarten orientation the spring prior to school entry:

We try to make it as welcoming as possible. "Welcome to the institution of public education." What can you expect as a Kindergarten parent? What are your expectations? All the little rules. And they're bombarded with medical, with the nurse that comes in and says, "You need all your immunizations." The principal is there. The parent is overwhelmed. I'm sure they are. It is a lot of information. But, we've all been in school. Every single one of us, and we all think we know what we're doing because we've been there already. We've been there. "I've gone through school. Must be easy" (laughter).

Michelle's sarcasm here is pointing to the fact that school may be more complicated than many parents might assume. Interestingly, Michelle indicated that parents are given a

large amount of information at the beginning of school. However, parents in this study stated that they did not have enough information. For example, Linda explained,

> Going into the school system, there's a huge amount of unknowns. There's very little communication with parents who may have additional concerns beyond your typical kid. So you just sort of toss your kid in there, fingers crossed.

She also explained how the first IEP meeting was a learning process for her to figure out how the school formulates goals, allowing Linda to adapt her goals to fit the structure of the school:

> [The goals required] a little negotiation in a fine way because at the beginning, I didn't understand how they needed to operate. So, they have a system and the goals need to be in a certain way. And they're not that experienced with data. In the early intervention program, it's all about data. It's all about this is what good data looks like. This is was bad data looks like. The people in the school system aren't really trained in that area. They have expectations about what they need to do with the IEP goals, and they do the best within their skill sets. So there's a bit of adjustment with the wording. I think we all agreed on the intent of things, but we learned to fit into their way of doing things, which is perfectly reasonable. So a little bit of learning in that respect.

There appeared to be variation in the amount and type of transition practices used by parents, preschool teachers, and Kindergarten teachers. What can be drawn from this data is that the participants all commented on the importance of getting children prepared to be members of the school. While these norms are required for all Kindergarten students, I believe learning these skills may present additional challenges for children with ASD because of their differences in social and communicative competencies, as well as their inflexible adherence to previously learned rules and routines (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

3.2.2.   Building Trusting Relationships with Teachers

Participants emphasized the importance of forming relationships with teaching staff in order to build trust for the school system. These trusting relationships were necessary for parents to feel a sense of belonging within the school community.

Because three of the parents had already formed trusting relationships with their early intervention teams, there was reluctance to trust the different teaching ideologies of the school. Additionally, ASD parent groups reinforced the belief that the school system would not adequately meet the needs of their children. For parents who appeared to identify as members of these groups and accepted the associated group beliefs, it was challenging to form membership with a school system that was seen as unhelpful and untrustworthy. Finding belonging in the school system would, therefore, necessitate the rejection of many of these ideas, and perhaps withdrawing this previous group membership altogether. Baumeister and Leary's (1995) *Need to Belong Theory* argues that individuals who have formed relationships and feel a sense of belonging will resist the separation from such relationships. Indeed, parents began the school year with many concerns and anxieties, including giving up control, ensuring the safety and well-being of their children, and seeking information about the skills and experience of teachers. Therefore, reducing anxieties in parents became an important task for schools. Other elements of trust formation were identified, including creating opportunities to build relationships, bridging trusting relationships, and communicating and collaborating among school team members. Once parents began forming relationships with teachers, they appeared to feel less anxiety and trusted that their children were being well-supported at school. These relationships with teachers were imperative for trust formation and the ability for families to feel a sense of belonging in the school.

3.2.2.1. Understanding the mediating effects of early intervention and ASD parent groups.

Parents placed trust in the pre-existing early intervention programs, which created reluctance in forming trusting relationships with staff in the schools because of early intervention-school differences in teaching ideologies. Membership in online parent groups of children with ASD seemed to compound parents' difficulties forming trusting relationships with members of the school because of the stories and conversations frequently shared that conveyed the belief that the school system was not trustworthy. While parents reported that early intervention and ASD parent groups were sources of support, these groups also constrained parents' ability to achieve belonging in the school community.

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The families whose children had a diagnosis prior to Kindergarten had established early intervention programs in the home. Parents discussed how their children improved in terms of academics, communicative competence, eye contact and engagement with family members, which fostered trust with these professionals. They also attributed the formation of trust with early intervention service providers to the expertise they displayed. Linda stated,

> The people we had in our early intervention program were awesome. They were all so fantastic, and made a huge difference for Michael. All the individual BIs were awesome, and so that was great. Once we got our program up and rolling, sort of that early stressful time, it was... I had a lot of trust in our program, and in the people that were doing it. We worked with two really great consultants who brought different strengths at different times. Again, we couldn't have gotten where we are without them, too 'cause they were sort of leading the program of what to work on next... So, the people who worked on the home program, the speech path were fantastic, and very there with excellent skills. So, that was really great.

Because the early intervention teaching methods were effective with their children, parents were apprehensive about the alternative teaching ideologies of the school system. Susan described a hesitancy in trusting the school's teaching ideologies; instead, she was desperate to have the school conform to the teaching ideologies of early intervention services:

> I think the big challenge, too, is kind of getting the school to work with us and the team that we have, to kind of keep the... we don't want to scare them off or like make it totally like, "You must do it this way" but we want them to kind of just be consistent with what we're doing at home. And we've been trying to really diplomatically do that. And they've actually been really good at agreeing to things and asking us, and even our lead [interventionist], they'll ask her for tips and stuff. So, it's been pretty good, but it's been another big concern I've had. I worry about them regressing a lot. I don't know if that would ever happen, but you never know.

Susan attempted to remain connected with the early intervention program because she had already established relationships and trust with individuals attached to the program. She may be feeling a sense of belonging with staff in this program and resists a movement away from it. This resistance is somewhat problematic because when children reach the age of six years, funding to early intervention programs is cut

drastically. Funds are transferred to the school system to provide extra support for the child in the classroom. It seemed that in these stories, parents perceived that services were being cut and they would be left on their own. This stands in stark contrast to the view that the transition process represents the formation of a new and equally competent support team. Claire expressed her sense of loss in support that accompanied her son's transition to the school system, stating,

> And also funding is now cutting down to half of what we used to have, so we are not going to be able to have a behaviour consultant. Like, we're not going to be able to have any support what we had in the past three years. But I think we are... always in charge of making decisions for what we do, but we feel we are kind of now on our own. We have to be our own. We have to be. I guess we just have to see whatever we learned in the past few years... We kind of feel this is the beginning of new challenges we have to deal with on our own from now on as parents. And also ...I don't know, I think we are good. We are prepared, you know for the new challenges to come. And we just have to deal with it. We'll see how it goes. So it's going to be definitely different because we are not going to... like whenever he has behaviour trouble, we always had someone to go, "Evan is doing this, can you give me suggestions?" But, now the funding is cut down so and we are not really prepared to find new support workers.

Another layer of complexity emerged regarding the groups with which parents felt membership prior to their children beginning Kindergarten. All three parents who had a child diagnosed with ASD prior to starting Kindergarten mentioned the prominent ideas and beliefs surrounding the school system in ASD parent groups. While these groups were seen as sources of support for parents, they also induced anxiety because there were frequently stories being shared by other parents that communicated the belief that the school system does not meet the needs of children. Before even beginning the school year, Susan was already feeling defensive about the educational goals she had for her children:

> I think they'll probably do the right thing with the boys, but I've heard so many negative stories and negative things that have happened to other parents, and that kind of sticks in my head. So, I try not to think about those too much, but it does come up... The bulk of the things I've heard are from a few groups I'm on Facebook. That's a huge thing for me is I... there's like a (city) Mom's Group and there's like... so I'm always going back and forth with them about things. And a lot of them are going through the same kind of stuff as we are. Like, difficulties with the SEAs. Well, actually we've been lucky. We haven't

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had any real issues with SEAs. But just all sorts of things. And I've heard so many things, and so many people jaded about IEPs, and, "You go in there, and you know you have to stick up for your kids." So, it's almost like I'm on the defensive right away. I want to go in with an open mind, but it's almost like I've heard too many negative things.

Claire also experienced anxiety after reading similar stories:

Yeah, so at the end of the week, he was in school full time. And I was very, very nervous about it. I still get nervous sometimes. I may expect a phone call from school saying, "Your child is doing this and this, you have to pick him up." Because I hear lots of stories from other parents that when children with autism go into school, it's actually typical that the school may call to pick she or him up. Yeah, lots of information. I joined this parents of children with autism network, like they have a Facebook page. So I joined, and I remember asking lots of questions to other moms. And I also see lots of stories, which was very scary, really scary. It makes you nervous a lot. Actually beginning of summer was the toughest time for me because I started knowing what we were going to be going through and I just don't know what to do. It's very, very scary. Every child is different. So even in the back of your mind, you think this is happening to another child, but it doesn't mean it's going to happen to Evan, but yeah, lots of thinking, lots of bad ideas going through day and night. And sometimes you just can't sleep because you keep thinking and thinking. It's pretty bad.

Interestingly, it appeared that the children of these two parents were adjusting smoothly in the classroom (with the exception of Gavin, who had taken a couple of weeks to settle into the classroom full-time). However, parents were still very anxious about something going wrong. These communicated beliefs influenced how parents positioned the school system in their narratives. For instance, Susan placed the school system in opposition to her learning priorities for her children, potentially creating an antagonistic dynamic before even having the opportunity to discuss learning goals with the school. Therefore, the conflicting ideas, philosophies and scripts that characterize these groups may have restricted access of parents to the new system.

3.2.2.2. Reducing anxieties.

In participants' stories, a number of concerns arose about the perceived lack of support within the school system, including parents' hesitation to give control to a school

administration that may have different priorities, the ability of the school to maintain the safety and physical well-being of their children, and the level of skill and experience of teaching staff. All of these factors mediated trust formation in the narratives. As discussed above, these concerns were often reinforced by online parent groups. Thus, schools were required to address these concerns to help reduce parents' anxieties and begin forming trusting relationships.

Parents voiced concerns about the priorities of the school system in regards to their children's education. Parents realized that the school has many children to consider and could therefore not prioritize the needs of their particular child. As Linda stated,

> It's difficult. I was a parent who was very involved in the early intervention program. Perhaps more than others, I don't know since I don't know anyone else. So, it's a big leap to pass that trust on because you know they have different priorities than you. You know they are juggling the needs of hundreds of kids, not just one.

Parents who had established early intervention programs invested large amounts of effort and responsibility into their children's learning. And as Linda explained, it consumed much of her life. Suddenly, she had to let go of a lot of control:

> And the other thing I wanted to say too was putting a child in school is passing over a lot of control to the school system. And that is challenging because we've had to be in control for the past two, three, four years. When you get a diagnosis of autism you're just tossed in the deep end. And you either be in denial and do nothing, or you step up and you put whatever process in place, whatever early intervention, and you do it, and you do it, and you keep doing it. And it consumes a lot of your life, and you are responsible for it. And so, yes handing that responsibility over to a system that you don't know much about, that it's hard to get information about, and you know doesn't necessarily put the needs of your child first is difficult.

Similarly, Susan stated,

> I don't know, it's so different. It's so different for us because we've had all the control, and it was scary at first to have all that control. Yeah, and you get used to that. And then it's like, now we have to give some back to somebody. I want to put my trust in them, but it's tough.

Interestingly, at the end of Linda's story, this process of handing over control was reframed. After a successful Kindergarten year, she felt that handing over responsibility was freeing:

> It was great because the Kindergarten thing had gone smoothly 'cause it was a big leap. So it was like, yay that's good! It was sort of freeing. And like, you didn't have this constant schedule for home. Who's doing what? This person's leaving on you, you have to hire someone new. How are our goals going? Do we need to get the consultant in again to observe and move things along? When's the team meeting? Gotta have some munchies for team meeting. You know, just that sort of constant process... I've said to (husband), sometimes I feel completely responsible. Like whether Michael becomes an independent adult or not depends on me. And that's like, ugh. That's a huge, huge feeling. So it's like, and it doesn't. Intellectually, no it doesn't. But as the primary decision maker about what we're doing, it's sort of like... So, handing off a bit of that responsibility, even though you're still keeping an eye on it 'cause I recognize there may be a time where school is not the best choice. So, you're sort of watching. Not in an "I'm watching what you're doing" kind of way, but just an awareness. Like with any kid, you're sort of taking the pulse of how life is working out for them and whether or not things need to change.

It is not surprising that parents found it challenging to hand over some responsibility to the school system at the beginning of the year when they had very little knowledge about the system, nor had they had an opportunity to establish relationships with members of the school. Linda constructed a hopeful narrative that conveyed a sense of freedom that comes when relationships, trust, and ultimately a sense of membership or belonging are established within the school system.

Parents also discussed concerns about the physical well-being of their children. While all the children were toilet trained, two parents had anxiety about their children having an accident in the classroom. For Claire, an accident at school might have been embarrassing for her son and may have made him reluctant to want to go to school, which was one of Claire's biggest fears. She explained,

> But as the time [in the classroom] is getting longer now, my fear is about Evan may have an accident in his classroom, so I was pretty much stalking the teacher saying "I'm so afraid he may have an accident. Please, please watch him." I don't want him to lose

confidence. Having an accident may affect him being comfortable in the classroom.

Susan also felt apprehensive about toileting; however, her main concern for her boys was safety. Both of her children were flight risks, which meant that they needed to be monitored carefully to prevent them from running out of the classroom or playground. In fact, both boys had run from their EAs, even after Susan made it clear that they must be watched carefully:

> One thing that really kind of was concerning for us was the first thing we told them was that Gavin was a flight risk, and that he would bolt like that if you leave him for a second. And our school is on a busy street, so we told them from the get-go that he needs support... you cannot let him out of your sight 'cause he will go on to the street. He's tried it, even with us. And then last week, his SEA told us very honestly and just right off the bat, "He got away from me today on the playground." And she said, "I turned my head for a second, and he slipped by me and ran to the fence and was off down the road." So, she had to run and catch up to him and she was totally upset by the whole thing. And then, the next day apparently Liam, in the classroom, somehow avoided three people and managed to get upstairs into some random classroom (laughter). So in the span of two weeks, both boys got away... Yes, so that concerned me a lot, especially Gavin with the outside thing. We tried to be so clear about that.

When children begin Kindergarten, they are put in the school's care for six hours each day. The safety and physical well-being of the child while at school were necessary for the establishment of trust.

Parents also had concerns regarding the amount of experience teachers had working with students who have a diagnosis of ASD or other specialized learning needs. Susan was particularly concerned about the experience of her boys' Kindergarten teacher:

> She put our minds at ease a little bit too that it felt as if, they didn't come out and say it, but they might have dealt with kids similar to the boys before because that was a huge thing for at least me. I just thought, "Oh, I hope that they've had experience dealing with kids like our sons." And it sounded like they had, but I still don't know if... I think they might be the most severe that they've had.

In cases where parents were informed of a staff member's experience with students who have special needs, this knowledge provided a powerful means of facilitating trust formation. For example, Linda credits the Kindergarten teacher's first-hand experience with ASD as a major contributor to her son's successful school transition:

> I think one of the most important pieces was that the teacher had experience with dealing with kids with autism 'cause she really got it. And she really knew how to engage with Michael. And she knew... she just knew. Whereas other teachers don't have that same experience. Equally well-intentioned, equally skilled, but they're starting from a different place. So, I think that was a really awesome part of that first piece.

Similarly, Jen felt instantly understood when she spoke with the director at the alternative school where she placed Nathan after their challenging experience with his first school. She explained,

> So, I called or emailed them or something and the executive director phoned me immediately. She was like, "Do you want to meet?" I said, "My son has all this anxiety." And she had a grandson that had huge anxiety. She was right away just so... she understood. She understood right off the bat. I met with her. I told my husband this school is awesome, so he went and he checked it out and everything.

The first-hand experience of teaching staff with ASD and learning differences facilitated instant connection and shared understanding. Parents felt relieved and their guards appeared to let down to allow trust to begin to grow. In the narratives, these experienced teachers were positioned as allies to children and parents. Michelle agreed that knowledge about ASD is an important asset for any teacher. Unfortunately, she expressed concern over the lack of training teachers are provided to work with this group of children:

> You as a teacher are not trained enough. If I didn't have an autistic son, I wouldn't have any clue what to do. If no one teaches me what to expect or how do I deal with it, it's based on your own experiences. I wish all teachers had Masters in Education because that would increase the level of knowledge base for each teacher so that they would benefit... I took a learning disabilities class, but it's all in theory. Nothing is in practice. Or they teach you what you should do, or do tonnes of reading. But you never know until you're practising.

3.2.2.3. Creating opportunities to build relationships.

Parents indicated that trust began to form as they got to know the teaching staff. Formal meetings, such as IEP and introductory meetings at the beginning of the school year, provided opportunities for parents to share information about their children and get to know teaching staff. Although teachers' primary concern is the education of the child, relationships must be formed with both the child and the parent(s).

All parents and children had an opportunity to meet with the Kindergarten teacher at the beginning of the school year in a scheduled meeting. Participants spoke of this meeting positively, indicating that it provided comfort as their children started Kindergarten. Claire stated,

> No, they still had a parent-teacher and child meeting, so they will call in every single parent and have a child there with you and she will talk to us about... so that actually helped. That's great to come, okay she's great, she's very supportive... It was a big comfort.

Michelle shared that this introductory meeting was an important opportunity as a teacher to begin connecting with Michael and his family:

> Meeting Michael... I remember meeting his brother in their house. I got to see him at home. And Linda brought these books out when they were adopted. Aww, how welcoming. And then Michael... I think it was one of them, "Would you like something to drink?" when I was there. So it was really neat.

Here, Michelle offers a teacher's perspective of feeling welcomed into a new system – the family system. Although she was clearly not striving to become a family member, Michelle is presented with their family stories as an invitation for her to get to know them. Michael's family had opened themselves up to Michelle in the hope of building a relationship and forming trust.

These first meetings were meaningful to participants, but Susan pointed out that there was not enough time. It was important for her to have adequate time to discuss her concerns and provide information about Gavin and Liam:

So we did the teacher meeting... it was a very quick 15 minute meeting with the teacher, and the resource teacher, and the SEAs. So we all kind of sat around. The teacher is great. I really like her, but we didn't have a lot of time initially to discuss the boys. But we tried in the 15 minutes that we had for each boy. So that was maybe about a week or so before they started I think. And with the strike and whatnot, I think they were just completely overwhelmed and they didn't have a lot of time to allocate for us... I should say, too that we had a meeting in June about the boys, but the teacher wasn't there because at the time, they didn't know who they were going to have and whatnot. Again, they only gave us, we had maybe half an hour this time for each boy. And then the strike... we had to cut things off because of that. So, I was kind of mad or not happy because of the strike issues and whatnot. But we tried to think it's such a rare thing, maybe let's try to pick our battles and try to get in as much info as we can. But it was hard to get all of the info out... oh my gosh. We didn't even get half the stuff out that we wanted to tell them. So that was a bit disappointing, but we tried.

IEP meetings were also frequently mentioned as opportunities to get to know the teaching staff and for parents to share information about their children. Susan anticipated that the IEP meetings for her children would be a valuable time to connect with the teaching staff:

Yeah, I think that will be a huge help for us. I'm looking forward to that a lot to get that in place. I think that will help, and we'll finally have the time to sit down and talk to them because we've been so limited the last few meetings that maybe this will be a better opportunity. So, yeah. I guess we'll see.

Linda agreed that her son's IEP meetings had been valuable in getting to know the teaching staff and reassure her that they were working together to support Michael as best they could. She shared,

All the IEP meetings that we had that year were great. It was good to sort of get to know everybody that's involved because you can see that they're operating within what resources they have, but they are so willing to... you know what I mean? They have the best intentions, and they are just trying to do their best.

Although the IEP experience was discussed in a positive light by all participants, Susan also felt overwhelmed with the amount of new people involved with her children at

school and felt nervous about the upcoming IEP meetings for her children because this process was new to her:

> I've gotta say, I thought that the school piece of the school thing would be less tiring, but it's been way more I think than even daycare or anything like that. Just like so much responsibility, and people... I can't even remember half the people's names that are involved now. It's a lot of stuff. And that's a good... I'm so grateful on the one hand to have that many people available to help, and they're really invested. But then it's like overwhelming at times... This is our first IEP meeting ever, and it's going to be nerve racking, but I'm looking forward to it at the same time.

Meetings that occurred in the beginning of the school year were imperative to building trust because they were the first introductions to the teaching staff and parents began forming patterns of interaction between school team members that may carry on the rest of the school year and onward. In many ways, teachers are not only representing themselves, but the system as a whole. These first impressions can be powerful in generating or changing beliefs about the school system. Building these trusting relationships was imperative for the establishment of belonging in the school.

3.2.2.4. Bridging trusting relationships.

As discussed above, the established trusting relationships with early intervention teams contributed to hesitancy transitioning to a new system of education. However, these relationships also had the potential of supporting families as they transitioned to the school system. For some families, these trusting relationships from the early intervention teams provided a bridge from one system to the next, and encouraged the formation of trusting relationships within the school system.

Linda had a unique story in that her son's behaviour interventionist from her early intervention team was hired by the school district to work with Michael in his Kindergarten classroom. To Linda, this pre-existing relationship provided her with confidence that her son would be supported well in the classroom, alleviating stress associated with the Kindergarten transition. When asked what impact having an EA working with Michael from the early intervention program made for his transition to Kindergarten, Linda stated,

> Oh huge. Huge, huge, huge. I knew there was someone in the class that Michael knew, same thing with the preschool, that knew what to do with him, that knew how to make the most of the learning environment 'cause Michael's really great learning one-on-one, but he can't learn in a group. That's really difficult. I knew that aide would provide the best learning environment. A learning environment I could be relaxed about because I knew nothing about the teacher at the stage or that kind of thing... And also he has awesome skills... Because we had an aide that I knew, I was pretty comfortable about it. It was a big step, but I thought we are ready for it.

Michael's teacher also valued having an EA in the classroom who already had a relationship with the student, and as a result brought with him knowledge about the child that the teacher could not have possibly known at the beginning of the year:

> And another story is when Michael came in, he was brought in with an EA. And having that connection, and his expertise because he worked with Michael was an awesome transition for me because he knew him already. So that help of transition, pushing by Michael's parents to make sure that the EA was in here, was a great idea. It helped I think a team, and we all took it as a team approach to help Michael.

Susan was disappointed to learn that her school district did not employ EAs from children's early intervention teams:

> And of course, we didn't really do our homework with the districts, unfortunately. And, our city is not known for their flexibility with ABA and getting your own support in. So, they just flat out refused to even discuss that. We were not able to do that. So, that was kind of... we regret in a way moving here because of that (laughter), but it just kind of happened that way. So, we're just kind of trying to work together with them and keep it going.

While Susan was not able to have member of the home team working in the classroom daily with her children, the school did reach out to their behaviour interventionist for recommendations when Gavin displayed behavioural difficulties in the classroom:

> Well they phoned her, and they asked her actually if... well they asked us if we would send her to school the next day with the boys, but that they would not be paying. It would be coming out of our pocket for her to do that. So, we agreed to it. So, she went in for a full day with the boys, and kind of, just sort of I don't want to say she shadowed the SEAs, it was almost like they were shadowing her in some ways I'm sure. And she took really detailed notes and told us all about what

had happened, and what she showed them how to do. I think it sounded like it was a positive experience - that the SEAs got a lot out of it.

Behaviour consultants were also common sources of support while families transitioned to the school system. Linda's consultant was particularly supportive:

Our consultant had worked as a teacher, so it was really invaluable having her perspective on things, and still is, because she gets what it's like on the other side of the fence in the school system. So she could educate us on expectations, and you know. And just the team working on the skills to get Michael ready for school.

Support from the home intervention teams was also helpful in IEP meetings. Susan stated,

And we're going... we're actually asking our consultant to be there for the IEPs because my husband and I have no idea what we are doing or where we're even going to... so luckily she... we definitely need that support.

Bridging relationships from early intervention teams to the school system made Kindergarten transitions smoother for parents. Not only did they feel supported in setting up goals and providing important information to the schools, but they also had a sense of connection before new relationships were formed with the teaching staff. These early intervention relationships facilitated new relationships to be formed with members of the school, encouraging parents to establish a sense of belonging with the school community.

3.2.2.5. Communicating and collaborating.

The final component of building trusting relationships identified by participants was communicating and collaborating as members of the school team. Communication styles were discussed as influencing the formation of relationships with teachers. Furthermore, parents struggled with advocating for the needs of their children while also communicating in a way that was conducive to building trusting relationships. In addition, including parents in generating goals and troubleshooting problems that arose was a mechanism that helped parents feel a sense of belonging. For parents who had

concerns about handing over responsibility to the school system, being involved in decision making processes helped alleviate their sense of powerlessness. Parents felt valued when their contributions to the school team were acknowledged and used to help support their children in the classroom. Hence, school teams offered opportunities for parents to belong.

Susan described the communication difficulties she encountered with teaching staff. Specifically, she discussed the confusion and frustration she felt when she attempted to gain information about a district behaviour specialist who had observed Gavin in the classroom:

> But, she has of yet to call us, and I've asked about it. But, for some reason she hasn't contacted us, so I don't know what she's doing there. But, they seem confident in what she's telling them, though. I've noticed as soon as she got there and started saying things to them, they've said, "Okay, he can go now to the full day." So, yeah... It was a bit of phone tag at first, but she didn't give me her number and I still don't have it. Nobody has given it to me, and she still hasn't called me (laughter). So, we're totally in the dark. So, yeah that's unfortunate. But, he seems to be doing better, so I'm happy about that at least.

Communication was also discussed in a strategic manner. Parents were aware of the importance of relationships within the school and did not want to damage these relationships. However, they also wanted to advocate for their children to make sure their needs were being met. Balancing the needs of their children with the need to gain and maintain relationships was challenging for two of the parents. Susan described the difficulty she had advocating for her children without harming the relationships with the teaching staff:

> My husband and I want to just pick our battles. We don't want to constantly fight the school on every single thing... I'm going to have to go in with an open mind and hear them out. See what they have to do. But yeah, I don't want to be too argumentative with them or else they won't be on our side anymore, or who knows... But always trying to keep them in mind, and not put them on the defensive. And it's entirely new for us. It's so overwhelming.

I noted that the language Susan used to describe communication with teaching staff was quite aggressive, such as the use of the words "fight" and "battle". Interestingly, this same usage of language was apparent when describing the beliefs of the parent groups she was involved in. Possibly, her language usage here illustrates the impact these parent groups had on her belief system about the school and her perceived role as a parent of children with a diagnosis of ASD as they begin Kindergarten. Linda described a similar struggle communicating in a way that built relationships with teaching staff, yet also allowed her to advocate for her child:

> I want Michael to be in that school system from Kindergarten through to grade seven. Well high school, too. And so, I knew that the people that I needed to work with, I needed to keep them on side. I needed them to be well-disposed toward Michael for eight years. And so, that was my attitude that I need to keep good relationships with these people regardless because going off the deep end or whatever isn't going to serve anyone's purpose. And that's worked well because the people are very reasonable and operating to the best that they can with their constraints... Yeah, and be someone that they're happy to see. And not go, "Oh god, she wants a meeting. What's it going to be about?" And just be pleasant to deal with, and you know, that was our goal. So far, so good.

Michelle agreed that approaching the team in a confrontational manner would have been detrimental to the relationships within the team and to the child's transition success:

> It's supportive because [the EA] is supportive. The people I work with on a team have to be a part of that team. If all of the sudden you became confrontational, it would have been a totally different experience. But I think when you have the objective of the child in our midst, if that's what we're thinking about, I think it benefits.

Interestingly, while Susan and Linda discussed "picking their battles" and facilitating positive interactions with the teaching staff, Jen had the opposite challenge. In her narrative, Nathan's teacher and principal bombarded her with negative feedback about her son's behaviour. The amount of negative feedback she received, in addition to a lack of collaborative problem solving, had a disastrous impact on the formation of trusting relationships:

> And the other things that had happened with the difficulty with the current school, I decided to check out the catchment school which is

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right behind our house because I was feeling basically almost hatred for the principal, and the teacher, and the school at this point.   And that's kind of strong, but who wants to keep going somewhere where every day you feel like, oh now what? What are they going to tell me? You feel like you're bringing in somebody that they don't want.   It's the worst feeling.

Effective school teams involved parents in creating goals and solving problems together.   Jen did not feel included in the process of finding solutions when Nathan displayed challenging behaviour in the classroom. In her narrative, the perceived lack of collaborative problem solving was depicted as a contributing factor to Nathan's continued behavioural challenges and Jen's feeling of exclusion. Jen explained,

> I mean, I can do stuff outside of the classroom, but it needs to be communicated to me.   Like, you know, "He's having some difficulty with this, maybe can we work on this together?" or whatever.   There wasn't that.   One of my issues was being told he had behaviours or whatever, and I'd say, "Well what did you do about it?"   And nothing's being done except telling me about it.   But, I'm not there when it happens. I can't necessarily talk to him about it. I don't know his side of the story.   I'd rather someone say to me, "This is what happened. This is what we tried to do. I don't know if that's what you do at home."   You know, working together or try to at least deal with the problem, not just telling me there's a problem.   That's challenging.

Troubleshooting problems that arose was not the only instance in which parents involved themselves with the school team.   Michelle pointed out that Linda often worked with the teaching staff to provide extra support and facilitate Michael's success in classroom. She shared,

> I remember him doing show-and-tell, and I'd always have to get him to practice... But I remember him making books, and he made these books... And he did his trip to the recycling centre, so Linda for his show-and-tell tried to see what was expected 'cause his EA would say, "This is what has to be done." So they went to the composting centre doing these things. And I kept them. This was a great thing that he could tell and turn a picture, and it connected to his learning. So the family really got involved in the school to see how successful Michael could be because you need way more preparation with autistic children. You need to know, okay what are they expecting, what do I have to... you have to do A,B,C,D,E to help the child. You can't go from A to F.

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This example illustrates a successful team approach in which all team members worked together to encourage the success of the child. In the same way, all members of this particular team gave input into goals and generating solutions to problems. As Michelle explained,

> [The IEP meetings] I remember because they were very dynamic. First, the resource teacher would set up a basic, "What do you think from his previous files?" So he would set up one, consult with me. "What do you think this IEP should be? What do you think." So, then I would put some input. He'd go to the EA. "What do you think?" Go to individual people, pull up an IEP plan, and then come to a team as we're all sitting there with the parents and say, "Okay, what do you think?"
> "Well, no let's tweak this, let's change this, let's add this." Wow! And once you come out of that meeting, you had an awesome document because everyone had their opinion. Everyone saw it. Everyone put their two cents in. And that was very productive. But if people don't know what to say or what to do, or what are the goals because they haven't had that experience, you sit there and go, "I don't know." So, it's learning. Some people learn, some people are giving. And having that team approach, that's what the best teachers do. They come with a team. They don't do it by themselves.

Michelle also explained that teams need to work together to strengthen all of its members, providing a "net" for the child:

> ...[T]here has to be a hammock or a net to help that, facilitate that, because if you don't, they're going to fall through the cracks... You're only as good as your weakest link in your team approach. So you have to make everybody in the team strong. Give them support. If they've had consultants before school starts, then they're the legal person who needs to know and facilitate that family and help there. If there is no consultation, or lack of education, that's where that team needs to help and push forward. If they don't... or it could be the other way around. You could have a weak school team, never had autism. What do we do? What if you have a beginning teacher that has never had that or ever been to a team [meeting]? But hopefully they don't put children with special needs with beginning teachers. But there's beginning teachers out there anyway. Everyone is beginning. Even a parent is beginning. So, if we're all beginning, let's just work together... I don't do this all by myself. It's everybody that has to come together to help the children. That's our goal is the children. If we keep focusing on that, we'll be successful.

Members of effective school teams felt valued and respected. In order for parents to feel actively involved and have a meaningful role in the school team, they sought interactions in which they felt like they were providing useful knowledge or suggestions. These types of interactions strengthened relationships in teams. For example, before the IEP meeting occurred, Susan was already feeling useful in her ability to help the teachers cope with Gavin's behavioural challenges:

> And that's what we've told... we've communicated that to the school, too that we're just, "This is Gavin, don't panic. This is what he does sometimes, and we just work through it." And I think that seemed to help them once we sort of worded it that way, like he's not in pain. You don't have to worry so much, it's just more redirecting him I guess. Maybe once they knew that, maybe they calmed down a bit themselves.

Linda spoke about her first experience at an IEP meeting. She reported feeling heard and valued. She was building trusting relationships that were leading to a sense of belonging. Linda stated,

> Back to that control freak aspect of me (laughter). I knew with our consultant, we worked together on what we wanted the goals to be. And the school was quite receptive... the resource teacher was quite receptive to hearing it 'cause I mean, they've got this new kid they've seen for a couple of weeks. When we said, "We think these are the goals we should work on" there was a little bit of an adjustment and so on, but that was great. So, we were there at the meeting. It was good... And they were very willing to listen to what we thought was needed. So, we felt very much like a part of the team that's adding value. Like, adding to the general knowledge of what's needed, and then they make the decisions within the resources they had.

Unfortunately, Jen did not feel valued; instead, she thought that the teaching staff did not believe the information that she shared with them about her son's compliant behaviour in other environments. In Jen's case, trust was not established with the teaching staff, creating an unfavourable dynamic for forming beneficial relationships. The quality of these relationships was one obstacle in Jen's story of seeking belonging within the school. She explained,

> Well, the principal in the beginning seemed to feel like, well it's just the long day is too much for him. It was overwhelming. He's just kind of catered to so much by all these grown-ups. We were made to feel

like we babied him too much. And when he had behaviours that came up at school that he had never had before anywhere, they didn't believe us time and time again. So they made us feel like liars all the time 'cause they'd say, "Oh, he kicked" or "he dumped" or something. And I'd say, "Oh, he hasn't done that before," which was very true. The behaviours that came out were always a shock to me because never, never, never [did I see them]. And they'd kind of look at me like, really? They might have even said, "really?" 'cause it seems to kind of be a recurring thing at school. But, to me the difference was the school. And I was like, "But, I'm there with him at Strong Start and he doesn't have any of these behaviours. And the Strong Start teacher can tell you all that." But anyway, in the end I felt like the principal was not supportive of the families at all. In the end, she kicked us out. She was there to support the teacher and not the students.

In Linda's narrative, her respect and value of Michael's Kindergarten teacher grew as she spent more time with her and built a meaningful relationship. She provided a reminder that strong school teams are characterized by mutual respect and appreciation for the value each member contributes to the team:

> So, like I saw a lot of Michael's teacher 'cause we were in there every day doing reading, so that was... she was great. And you know, you could learn from her, too. The way she got the kids to engage with each other was like, that's what I wish I did at home, but instead you're like, "Stop that!" (laughter). She did that perfect parenting... it wasn't parenting in this case, but she was a just a master at it. And so it was just inspiring being in there with her. So, she was great.

Michelle expressed how valuable Linda was in making Michael's Kindergarten year successful:

> And so that was great success for Michael. And that's how we scaffolded. You always had to communicate what was expected, and then how can we facilitate that? But his parents were awesome because they were so involved... They're very exceptional, so that's why you have exceptional children that are coming and they're benefiting because of that wonderful parenting. It's nothing that the school is doing. It's what the parent does to make the child. But that's with every parent I guess. If they come in here openly, and not judge me 'cause it's like me in a fishbowl. They're really looking at their children. So I try to create an environment for parents to feel like, "Oh, I'm watching my child engage with another child. What can I do to help?" And that's what I'm trying to engage, how the parent can help their own child.

Working collaboratively in a team context created unity between teaching staff and parents. In effective teams, such as Michael's school team, there was mutual respect and value for each member. As Michelle explained, working toward a mutual goal of the child's success in the classroom was imperative when the team came together to collaboratively problem solve and work on learning goals. Linda developed a great amount of trust in the school system in her son's Kindergarten year. This trust was an integral component in her narrative of establishing a sense of belonging within the school system.

3.2.3.   Emerging Identities and Hope

Throughout the interviews, parents struggled to construct narratives in which their children belonged with school peers and the community. In addition, parents feared that their children encountered similar difficulties forming identities that included a sense of belonging. There was also a sense of hope that shone through these stories as parents discussed their children's potential for learning and becoming valued members of their school communities. Identity construction is pertinent to the theme of belonging because identity is something that is constructed socially, through relationships (Gergen, 2011). Although no data was obtained from children about their emerging identities, parents' narratives provided insight into the social influences that inevitably played a role in co-constructing these identities. It was clear that participants were attempting to discern how their children "fit in" with the other children at school. In fact, teaching staff also became active participants in this co-construction. Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains the changes in roles that occur when children transition to school. These types of role changes were discussed in the first subtheme about adapting to the culture of the school. Interestingly, one can learn how to behave like a Kindergarten student, yet not necessarily feel a sense of belonging within that group. Belonging necessitates an attachment to a group. That attachment becomes integrated into identity. As Joerdens (2014) explains, identity changes as a child begins to feel a sense of belonging in the classroom. They are no longer the child that they were, but he or she is now a Kindergarten student at a specific school in a specific classroom. The shifting of identity to include one's relationship with the school is the final piece necessary for the achievement of belonging in the school community. Three elements of

this subtheme were identified: integrating ASD into narrative constructions of the child, searching for future scripts, and schools encouraging the development of identities that belong.

3.2.3.1. Integrating ASD into narrative constructions of the child.

One component of the narratives I listened for was how participants discussed each child in the context of the past, present, and future. When discussing past and present characteristics, hopes, and concerns for their children, I noticed that participants were attempting to integrate the ASD diagnosis into their understanding of their children. For instance, parents made distinctions between traits that are not commonly associated with ASD versus traits that are linked to the disorder. I believe that in most of these cases, parents struggled to find meaning in the diagnosis – what does it mean to be a child with a diagnosis of ASD? This is relevant to the discussion of Kindergarten transition because parents were now faced with a second meaningful task related to understanding their children: What does it mean to be a Kindergarten student with ASD? All parent participants were asked to describe how their children identify with their worlds. While parents shared the differences in their children's behavioural, social, and communicative competencies, a greater amount of time was spent sharing characteristics that are not often associated with ASD. In fact, parents made a point of stating that these characteristics are not associated with ASD. Linda stated,

> He's very thoughtful. He's a very kind person. He's always, he's thinking of other people. Recently our neighbour died and they were good friends of ours. He was very elderly and the boys knew it was coming. He wrote cards for (neighbour) before he passed away... And then he wrote cards for (neighbour's wife) after he had passed away. And just, you know, "Dad can I take this over the road to deliver?" So he's thinking of other people. He's very thoughtful... And Michael writes letters to his Nanna, so he thinks about other people which is nice. And it's not what people expect for kids with autism.

In a similar way, Susan shared a characteristic of her son, Gavin and pointed out that it was unexpected because of his diagnosis of ASD:

> Well, Gavin is pretty affectionate actually. He... once you kind of get to know him a little bit and sort of are around him enough, he is quite affectionate with Dad and I. With my family, it sometimes take a

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while. Like my mom, she just moved over and she's trying to come over more and be around him. And we're noticing that he's responding to her and playing with her a little more. He's like... it's funny, he's got a bond with my other sister randomly and he just sort of forms bonds with people that you don't expect, but he is super affectionate with us, like a lot more than Liam is actually... He's very like cuddly and almost to the point where with me it's almost like he's got this thing lately where he's got to be touching my skin, luckily with just me. But yeah, he's just super affectionate that way with the cuddles and being held and stuff. So that's how he shows it... And I enjoy that Gavin is affectionate. I'm so glad he is because I would often hear with autism that they aren't often affectionate and this and that. He is, so that makes me happy.

Interestingly, Susan mentioned a behaviour that may possibly be linked to ASD (touching her skin), yet attributes this behaviour to his affectionate nature rather than a symptom of ASD. Later in the interview, she made a similar attribution with Gavin's love of music:

He's got a unique way of... I don't want to say stimming because I don't know if it's stimming, but he has a lot of vocalizations, and singing. He loves singing! He loves singing songs from shows and whatnot, and he's actually really into... he's got quite a choir boy voice almost, and he's pretty good! He sings a lot, and he's very sweet. He's very gentle. He's not aggressive. Liam will get aggressive with him and Gavin will never fight back. He'll always take it, which is kind of sad sometimes. But, yeah he's just a very sweet, loving little boy – very quirky, always moving around.

There is no way of knowing as a researcher if these characteristics are in fact manifestations of Gavin's diagnosis; however, I wonder if Susan's reluctance to attribute Gavin's vocalizations or skin touching to self-stimulatory behaviour often seen with ASD was a means of compartmentalizing the ASD diagnosis from the child.

Claire also mentioned how Evan behaves and thinks differently depending on his mood, which also led me to wonder if his diagnosis of ASD was compartmentalized from her understanding of him as a whole. For instance, was the ASD only coming out when he was upset? Was ASD only associated with challenging episodes of behaviour or ability to understand? Claire stated,

But with my second son, you can take it easy from [monitoring] because even though he goes into behaviour trouble, it's so much

easier to fix. You can talk to him. And you can get him to understand, "Okay, listen" and he listens, and he understands exactly what you are trying to teach him. But with Evan, it's hard. When he is emotionally upset, he can't listen. Like if he's very calm, happy mood he does listen.

All participants were asked what ASD means to them personally. Although Claire said that her beliefs about ASD had not changed since her son was diagnosed, I noticed that she spoke about her son's diagnosis in different ways:

If somebody asked me what autism is, I don't know. I might say it's just part of his character. Yeah, just part of who he is and also it is a disability. I would say it's a disability.

Later she said,

Well, I don't know... well, I don't want to think in a negative way, but of course we wish he did not have autism. Of course I wish if he could think normally, you know he could play with other children and he could learn stuff as normal children do. But, wishing doesn't do anything. You just have to deal with it. You just have to deal with who he is. But it is a fact that he does have autism, and always... I know I probably shouldn't think that way... But we always think if he didn't have... yeah we just wish he didn't have it. So, I don't think it's a positive thing. I don't say, "Oh, I'm glad he has autism. That's great. That's how he is." Any disability, you wish you didn't have it, but you know, he has it and we can't change it... you just keep going and focus on what you can do to improve his condition. I wouldn't write to myself, "It's great he has autism!" No I don't say that. Autism is something, yeah we wish we didn't have to deal with, but we do.

This excerpt made it clear to me that ASD was seen more as something disposable; that is, an aspect of her son that she would remove if possible. Therefore, I found it striking that she had said that ASD was actually part of his character. Perhaps this ambivalence was an indication of Claire's struggle to integrate her son's diagnosis into her existing constructed understanding of her son. Susan also described ASD as a disability that she wished she could take away from her sons:

I almost, I hate to say it, but I almost don't associate anything positive with it. I don't see a lot of positives with it, unfortunately. I mean, they have their quirks but I would take the autism away in a heartbeat if we could.

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If parents view ASD as a disability that takes away from, rather than adds to, a child's sense of identity or belonging, it is clear why parents would describe their children in a compartmentalized manner as described above.

Linda and Jen's discussions of ASD contrasted Claire and Susan's perspectives. Linda shared her ongoing struggle adjusting to Michael's diagnosis of ASD:

> I read somewhere when Michael first got diagnosed that it takes you four years to adjust to the diagnosis. At the time I thought, oh that's ridiculous I'm just very quickly... you know, Michael has autism. I'm not in denial about this. I'll deal with it. And now I look back six years, I'd say, "Oh, it's probably a decade because I'm not there yet." Even as accepting and, you know I wouldn't want Michael to be different. But you just keep budding up against, no we don't do X because that doesn't work for our family. Things like that. So, it's not that you want things to be... you wouldn't want Michael to be different than he is, but I would like life to be easier for him. So that's sort of part of that cycle of adjustment. Life isn't totally easy for him, and there's nothing you can do about it. And that's just how it is. Sort of that cycle of readjustment. And it's incremental, and it's not done yet.

For Linda, the personal meaning of ASD was qualitatively different than the first two participants. Linda indicated that, although she is still going through an adjustment process associated with the diagnosis of ASD, she was integrating the diagnosis into her constructed understanding of her son. Linda did not wish away the diagnosis, but wanted Michael's life made easier. Jen's thoughts on what ASD means to her personally revealed that she did not believe ASD was a disability, but rather a personality type:

> It means a child that processes things differently. I think one of the best ones that I saw somewhere was just comparing Apples to IBMs or whatever. To me, it's just they process things differently. Well it's such a spectrum. Nathan is high-functioning, so I can only speak to where he's at. I think that the social/emotional/behavioural part of it is just something that I've learned is maybe not so innate. Sometimes it's something that kind of needs to be taught or needs to be helped. And they just have their things that they like. I don't know. To me it's just, I don't look at it as a disability. To me it's almost like a category of what a person is. Like, you know for people they have Type A personalities or Type B. There's also people who are on the [autism] spectrum. It's just a different type of personality.

Again, there was no indication that the diagnosis of ASD was something that Jen wanted removed from her son, as Claire and Susan expressed in their narratives. Although Jen described being in denial about her son potentially having characteristics of ASD during preschool and Kindergarten, she presently appeared to be integrating his diagnosis of ASD into her constructed understanding of Nathan.

It is possible that the length of time that had passed since diagnosis may have played a role in the integration of the diagnosis into parents' narrative constructions of their children. Severity of ASD-related challenges or contextual factors, such as available support systems, may have also impacted how participants came to understand the ASD diagnosis. These factors were not investigated in this study, but they do pose questions for further research.

Frequently in the narratives, parents attempted to understand their children's differences by considering how their children fit in within the context of the classroom or social groups. Participants also spoke about how they try to avoid making such comparisons:

> Instead of comparing - okay other children are doing this way, we should do that way. We just focus on, okay he is at this level and he's doing fine.

Similarly, Linda stated,

> And, you know, every so often you have to remind yourself that Michael's peers are here, and Michael is here, and there's no point looking at that. You need to look at this next step, and get to there. And then this next step, and get to there. And that it's just incremental. We're on a different schedule, and this is just how it is.

Claire and Linda spoke about a unique developmental path; however, both parents made comparisons with other children throughout the interviews. As an example, when asked about how her hopes for Michael came to fruition in his Kindergarten year, Linda stated,

> He did well academically. You know, he's not at the top of the class. If we ever get in range with typical kids, I'm happy. We've just got to

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get in the group.   So, some skills are better than others, but no concerns.

Furthermore, Linda spoke about the grief she experiences adjusting to the reality that her parenting experience is not what she had imagined it would be. In fact, she pointed out that the "typical experience" is a constructed idea that does not actually exist. Nevertheless, this culturally constructed ideal had a powerful impact on how she came to understand her child and herself as a parent:

> In the sense that you still go through the cycles of wishing for a more typical experience, and then going, "Well you know, few people get the typical experience." Like, everyone has their issues. You know, even the ones with typical kids have some issue in a family. Nobody has the ideal life, even though it's out there in the media. You know what I mean? We have this preconceived conception of the ideal family life. And so, everyone's probably going through this little cycle of, it would be so much easier if. It would be nice if every time we wanted Michael to do a sporting activity, we didn't have to pay three times the price because we need to send support. It would be nice if. But it's not like that is a constant. It's just a little sort of recalibration every so often. So that hasn't changed.

3.2.3.2. Searching for future scripts.

A second component of emerging identities and hope was the absence of future scripts to refer to when parents created narratives about their children. The result of this scriptlessness was a noticeable absence or resistance to a future orientation. Parents' stories were characterized by many unknowns and they verbalized that ASD is associated with anxieties about their children's futures. Indeed, parents discussed how life events that are typically taken for granted as part of our cultural life scripts are not necessarily milestones that their children will reach. Claire stated,

> It's still hard on us sometimes, actually lots of times, you know if I think about how his future is going to be. And the other day, I was actually thinking when he grows up, will he be able to have a driver's license? Would he be able to have a normal job? Or will he be able to marry and have children? But after all, he's only five years old. We don't know how is future is going to be.

Susan had similar concerns for her two sons:

[Autism] kind of means a lot of unknown. That's what I think of, definitely. A lot of stress, a lot of, I don't know. It's (pause) it's gotten so much better over the years. I'm not as stressed as I was, but there's totally the unknown. There's the stress of managing it all and it's almost like a fear of the future and if they'll fit in, and are they going to have jobs, or get married, or have kids of their own? Things like that. It's fear, stress, and then that unknown. That's just the hugest thing, I think. Yeah, you just don't know how things are going to turn out, so that's a huge thing.

In these fears, it was apparent that Claire and Susan were troubled by the possibility that their children would not fulfil the milestones and roles in their life narratives that are culturally expected. How will their children fit into society if they are not able to achieve these expectations? These types of concerns pose challenges to the formation of the child's identity as a member of a classroom, school, and society as a whole; ultimately, the sense of belonging felt within these systems will be affected by how each child identifies himself.

Parents also pointed out unknowns associated with their children beginning Kindergarten. Some of these unknowns related to the child's ability to cope with the expectations of school. Claire's greatest concern was that her son would not enjoy school and she felt unprepared to handle this possibility:

Of course, Evan coming out being happy from the classroom helped a lot. Like if it was him crying saying, "Oh I don't want to go to school" like even the next day him saying, "No, I'm not going" then I don't know what I was going to do. I may have actually taken him out of the school and started doing home schooling, I don't know. I'm not strong enough to push the kids. Yeah, I don't know how other parents do it. I guess if that's what you have to do, you have to do it. But, I don't know if the kids are not wanting to go, I may not take them. I don't know. I have no idea what I was going to do.

This example certainly illustrates the challenge of looking to possible futures and problem solving without a known script of what she "ought" to do; however, Claire also shared her personal struggle to build confidence in her ability to parent her child with a diagnosis of ASD. Fortunately for Claire, Evan was adjusting well to school at the time of the interview. Susan's son, Gavin had a challenging time making this transition.

Susan reflected on this experience and revealed that these challenges are part of having a child with a diagnosis of ASD:

> We didn't predict that any of that would happen, but I can't say that I'm 100% shocked either. It's just sort of, well we just have to deal with it kind of thing... That's like just autism in general, I think. Just take whatever it gives you, and just kind of make the best of it. That's what it's like.

Like Claire, Susan questioned her decision-making as a parent. She was unsure if Gavin would be successful in a regular classroom with typically developing peers:

> I think I'm constantly thinking of Gavin, and whether he will do well being mainstreamed. I don't really have any other friends who have any kids that are even remotely like the boys, or that have ASD. So, I don't really know what to compare it to sometimes. I don't know, I just have my fears that he may not do well in the public school system, but again totally unknown. So I think, yeah the unknown is the biggest thing. But, I'm happy in some ways that at least we got it under our belts, too, and that we've gotten the first few weeks over with. And hopefully that was the roughest part of it all. So, I don't know... 'Cause we want them to be happy, too with like... I don't want to force anything, but we also have to try. Back to the unknown again. You never know unless you try stuff I guess. It's all new. Entirely new experience, and it's scary. But, we're doing it... It's like anything with the whole ASD journey, knowing where to go with therapy and everything. It's just so unknown, and you're left to just decide.

Susan spoke about the absence of a comparison or script to follow in order to make an informed decision. Without a comparison, Susan had difficulty imagining various outcomes in the future, thus making decision-making difficult.

All of these unknowns left parents feeling anxious and stressed. Claire experienced high levels of anxiety when Evan began Kindergarten. She shared how difficult it was for her to hold her emotion inside because she was afraid her son might begin to feel similar anxiety if she exposed her true feelings in his presence:

> Yeah, so your mind goes positive some days, but some days super negative. But I guess every parent, everyone has a life. That's what life is, but it's rough... it is a roller coaster... It was very, very hard. Even though you don't think how hard. It was very tough. I just try not to show him and it just accumulates inside of your body and you

can't let it go. Actually, my husband was away on work most of the time he was actually out of town. So, in the night, it's just like my emotions come out and I call him on the phone just to say, "I need somebody. I have to you know..." Yeah, and also he's very stressed out with his work, so he doesn't want to listen to much of me complaining and upsetting about what's going on. So, there was one day we actually do have support from a respite service. The babysitter, the lady comes in to look after Evan and his brother and I get to go out once in a while. And I was at my girlfriend's place and I don't know, it just poured out. I was crying and complaining and those sort of things. Poor girlfriend of mine. But, she just listened to what I said and she also said, "It's really hard to have so much worry, but if you worry too much, Evan might start getting worried too, so you should try to be strong, to be positive, not try to make things... everything is okay. Everything is going to be okay."

Susan also experienced high levels of stress as her children began Kindergarten:

I still feel stressed and that unknowness even more presently. That's worse... Worse, definitely.

Claire's and Susan's emotional experiences were also characterized by hypervigilance, as if waiting for adverse events to occur. For example, even though Susan stated that Liam's transition had gone very well, she seemed to have a hard time committing to this successful ending to his transition story:

So far, yeah. That's not to say in a few months, it could you never know. But I am really, really happy and impressed with him about how smoothly it did go. It was one day of crying and not wanting to go in, and then otherwise he just goes. So that's been a relief, a huge relief. Gavin, not entirely surprising, but disappointing. But, with a little bit of time he seems to be doing better. And we're just hopeful that it's just going to keep going up and up. But, then we also know how he can be and we know that he's very loud at times. That's who he is at the moment, so we're working through it.

In this excerpt, Susan shifted quickly to a hopeful narrative; however, she followed up with more hesitation, as if stopping herself from relaxing because of unforeseen future challenges. Without a script to refer to, Susan had no reference to what the future may hold for her children. Instead, she was left waiting for problems to arise or avoiding thoughts about the future altogether:

I think maybe once they get a few years into school that might calm them. But I also don't want to just assume anything like that because anything could happen. Like, we don't even know if they'll be in that school next year for all we know. I mean, I don't like to think too far ahead with stuff.

Claire expressed similar hesitation to commit to an ending of her narrative about Evan's Kindergarten transition:

[The anxiety] is not as bad. It was way, way worse than right now. But you never know, it may go sour again.

Even though Claire believed that Evan's transition was unfolding successfully, she was already thinking about the challenges that await in the future, despite mentioning earlier that her and her husband "don't really think what it'll look like when he goes to grade one, grade two":

Right, it was a successful transition but it's also a beginning of a new challenge – him being in school. We have to prepare when he goes into like grade one, grade two. There are going to be more challenges.

Susan made similar statements about "not thinking too far ahead," yet spoke about the uncertainties of the future. It is possible that statements involving the avoidance of future orienting may be a strategy to avoid the anxiety associated with the unknowns. However, it was evident that abstaining from speaking about the future was difficult for some parents.

3.2.3.3. Schools encouraging the development of identities that belong.

All participants spoke about the schools' role in helping children construct identities that included a sense of school membership. Three aspects of school influence on identity were discussed: children enjoying the student role, difficulties fulfilling the student role, and teachers' beliefs and acceptance of ASD.

The most frequently discussed school influence on the child's formation of identity was the child's enjoyment of school. Jen shared her hopes for her son as he began Kindergarten:

> Just really that he would enjoy school. That he would learn. That he would make friends. That he would be happy. And really, because Kindergarten is the beginning of so many years of schooling, I really wanted him to have a good experience because it's the foundation for the rest of his school life. So I wanted it to be really positive.

Jen indicated that school was going to be a significant component of Nathan's life; therefore, it was important to her that he find enjoyment in this aspect of his life. Linda also spoke about the significance of starting school and messaged school positively to Michael leading up to Kindergarten entry:

> We had messaged it positively in the months leading up to it about how exciting it is to be old enough to be going to the big school... But yeah, he was in the routine of going to preschool too, so I think it was just a continuation of that, "Now you're going to be in the big school!"

The positive messages about Kindergarten communicated to Michael indicated that this transition was a rite of passage that he had achieved. Michael was now a big kid who got to go to the big school with the other kids. I got the sense that Linda not only tried to make the transition exciting, but also encouraged Michael to feel proud of himself for finishing preschool, growing up, and reaching a new milestone. The participants appeared to realize the significance of school in their children's lives. They did not want this large portion of her children's lives to be something they disliked. Connecting back to the theme of seeking belonging, it is unlikely that children would find a sense of belonging within a system that they disliked.

Some parents worried about their children's identities being negatively affected (e.g., lowered self-esteem) if they had difficulty fulfilling the student role. For Gavin and Nathan, adapting to the expectations of being a student was difficult. The beginning of their Kindergarten experience included behavioural challenges in the classroom. Susan understood the teacher's difficulty attempting to manage Gavin's screaming; she also did not want him removed from the classroom if there were alternative methods to calm him. Unfortunately, Gavin was creating disruption for other students when he remained in the classroom:

> Their number one thing with Gavin was his screaming because they were saying it was actually disturbing not only the Kindergarten

classroom he was in, but the classrooms across the hall, and that the other kids were starting to look over and hear, and it was just disrupting everything.

Susan had an understandable concern that Gavin would be identified as a "disruption," rather than a valued member of the classroom and school community. Not only does being labelled a disruptive student contribute to negative identity construction, it also highlights difference in Gavin from his peers. This difference could make it difficult for him, and his parents, to feel like he belongs with the rest of the school community. Similarly, Jen described how emotionally difficult it was for her to witness Evan being construed as a "bad kid" at his school:

> [Limiting his time at school] is making him out to be a bad kid. So his esteem, all that stuff... to me that's not teaching, that's just not wanting to deal with it.

Jen points out that this problem-focused identity that she believed was being formed was also affecting Nathan's self-esteem; that is, the perceived beliefs of the school about him were being internalized by Nathan, even though his family did not agree with the school's evaluation of him. This narrative illustrates the potentially powerful impact the school system can have on the child's development of identity. The emotional toll on Jen culminated with Nathan being "kicked out" of school:

> It was awful. It was the worst thing. It was the worst Christmas. My son who has just turned five, he's made out to be this evil kid and he's being kicked out of Kindergarten. Like, how bad is that? Yeah, it was awful. To us, he was so fun and we love him. How could they not even get to know him? How could they not even want to try to help him? To us, it was blatantly like, "We don't want him. We don't want to deal with him."

Jen was clearly hurt and confused about how the school could view her son so differently than his family viewed him. Her interpretation of this experience was physically and emotionally rejecting for Jen and Nathan. Jen believed this experience negatively impacted her son's self-esteem. The impression of Nathan as the "bad, evil kid" isolated him from the school community by pointing out a difference that made him

an outsider. In Jen's view, the problem-focused understanding of Nathan held by the school did not support his need for belonging.

The teachers' beliefs about ASD also had a potential impact on how children formed identities as students. All of the parents discussed the importance of having the teacher get to know their children. Michelle discussed her own views and ongoing learning about ASD. She also shared how her teaching has been impacted as she continues to learn:

> Well I'm still learning. I don't understand it. Autism is Rain Man. Remember that show? That was my... Oh! They must be good at numbers. And yeah, a lot of autistic kids are great with math. Why? Because it's sequential. It's systematic. You have to go A, B, C, D. You can't skip. Maybe that's why. When we introduce social skills, well you can't go through that pattern. It's so difficult and it's so complex... And how do we teach that? And so you just keep reflecting on your teaching. Did I miss it? Did I hit that? And it's the repetition. It's a lot of modelling. A lot of what your expectations are. Yeah, my views have changed. It will always change. Even [until] I die because I'll learn more hopefully.

In Michelle's narrative, Michael was not just a student, but also a teacher. This role reversal illustrates how she understood Michael as a highly valued member of the classroom. In fact, Michael impacted her narrative by providing insight into her understanding of disability:

> Michael taught me probably more than I taught him in that year. Student-teacher interchanged in that, well in any year I have children. Everyone says, "You're the teacher." Well, sometimes I'm the student and they're the teacher. And that's what is so fascinating about this classroom... What did he teach me? How you can adapt and how you can learn with a disability. Children teach me everything.

Michelle's shift in understanding about ASD was exemplified when she stated,

> Michael specifically, he would always, "Hi (teacher's name)." He was just always greeting. And he had a good memory. I think I remember him having a good memory. He was very sorry if he did something wrong - "I'm really sorry." He showed empathy, even though they say autistic children don't show empathy. They can if you teach it to them. They can do everything if you teach it to them. But they can't do it if you don't teach. And autistic children who learn have had

excellent teachers. That's what I think. They don't just go through the school system. You need superior teachers for kids like that.

Michelle communicated her belief that Michael (and any child with ASD) has the potential to learn as any other child if the teacher is knowledgeable and skilled. Acknowledging a child's potential was important for the parents in the study. Susan provided an explanation as to why it was imperative that Gavin's teacher see his potential:

> The school had asked our lead [behaviour interventionist] to provide a list of mastered items for Gavin. And she did, and it was mind boggling looking back at all of the things he's learned. It was just information on every single skill, whether it's academic or a life skill that he's learned, and she just drew up this huge list and we sent it to the school today. And it was really eye-opening to see how far he's come. I think that in some ways, they're almost in a better position than other kids. I mean, Gavin doesn't show it, but he does know so much. I think they just need to see that and kind of realize the potential he has. But I don't know if they realize that yet. I think it is because, I don't know, with a kid like Gavin it's unfair because he's not verbal essentially. I worry that he doesn't get as fair of a shot at things as other kids maybe, or he's misunderstood. Maybe people don't think he's capable of things, or maybe he isn't even as intelligent as some of the other kids. And it's too bad because I think he's every bit as intelligent. It's just, he's not expressing it... Yeah, so seeing that list, I was so proud to send it off 'cause I thought, "See! You can see, this is what he does." So that was cool. I was happy to send that to them. So hopefully that will maybe open their eyes a little bit, too.

Michelle agreed that focusing on a child's gifts and potential are essential to building up the child's self-esteem, and ultimately encouraging the construction of self that focuses on strengths and success:

> But that's with every child. It doesn't matter if they have autism or if they're typical. They each have their gifts. And every child in this world has a gift. And if we work on their gift and we work on their strength, that will make them a better person. If we forget about their strength or their gift, and we only work on the things that they need to, their self-esteem is just going to drop. And that to me is the saddest part. So give the children the compliment in their gift... My hope is just for them to, wherever they came to this classroom, to build on the skills, to progress. I just want to see that their growth continues skyward. As we say, our learning skyrockets in this class. That's just my hope. Learning comes, there are waves. But I just wanted wherever we started, whatever we could get accomplished. I

remember Michael reading at the end. I remember him printing. He would interact. He would have to come and have a conversation. That was a lot to work with. Michael had... putting away toys. He had to do those expectations. He had to sit quietly at a story corner, and it was hard... You shoot for the moon. But wherever they go, you land, that's what you're going to accept. But if you don't give him the skills, or you don't give him the time, you just see where children can go.

In other words, Michael's diagnosis of ASD was not limiting his potential or capabilities in Michelle's narrative. Michael was expected to fulfil his unique potential for that year, whatever that may have been. And at the end of the year, both Michelle and Linda reported an incredible amount of learning. Michael felt good about himself and was a valued member of his classroom community.

Despite Jen and Nathan's challenging experience at the beginning of the Kindergarten year, Jen's story concluded with redemption. He was moved to a private alternative school, where Nathan's self-esteem improved and the family found a sense of belonging. Jen attributes this success to the beliefs and teaching philosophy at the new school:

I think because they genuinely, genuinely care about each child as a person. And I think they respect them all and embrace their strengths. And they don't make them feel like whatever weaknesses they have are a negative thing. But they try to give them tools, or try to teach them or help them. I think always encouraging strengths is going to give a child confidence and greater self-esteem and all that. And all the other stuff is going to come with that I feel. And just making them feel special. Every single child there is made to feel like they are the king of the world. Like, seriously it's just amazing... I think that school, the people that work there, education is not just academic. I always tell people about that school. When I describe it, it's full service. They service every part of the child. It's not just the academics.

Jen's description of the teaching philosophy at Nathan's new school was very similar to the strengths-based approach described by Michelle. Jen and Michelle are not only discussing teaching in the academic sense; rather, they are speaking about the role that schools play in the child's development of identity as a Kindergarten student. They are arguing that building up the child's self-esteem by focusing on strengths and capabilities will set the child up for success within the school. If children internalize this belief of

being a capable Kindergarten student into their self-concept, they will be more likely to find similarities with their peers. Finding similarities with their peers allows children to self-categorize themselves as part of a group, and increases group cohesiveness. This group membership "...both describes and prescribes one's attributes as a group member and becomes part of an individual's social identity, which is a component of self-concept" (Hogg, 1993, p. 92). Therefore, once children incorporate their identity as a student into their self-concept, a sense of belonging can be achieved within a group.

Chapter 4.   Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to inform the questions: "How do parents of children with ASD make meaning of their children's transition to Kindergarten?" and "How do the stories of the teachers help inform the transition experiences?" I employed a narrative analysis, which included structural and thematic analytic methods, to explore the transition stories of four parents and one Kindergarten teacher. Findings indicated that each parent narrator made sense of her child's Kindergarten transition experience by positioning herself as an agent who was actively seeking out belonging in the school community. Parents sought belonging by adapting to the culture of the school, building trusting relationships with teachers, and through emerging identities and hope. The teacher participant added insight into all three of these subthemes; however, her reflections on the relational aspects of the Kindergarten transition process were invaluable in gaining an understanding of the complexity of this process. The present chapter provides linkages from the current study to the literature, pointing out similarities and contributions to the literature on Kindergarten transition for children with ASD and their parents. I then discuss the findings within the *Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition* (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) to provide a theoretical conceptualization of the findings. Finally, I discuss the implications for counsellors and educators, limitations of the study, directions for future research, and concluding remarks.

4.1. Linking Findings to the Kindergarten Transition Literature

As I reflected on the interviews, analysis, and findings of this study, I came to a deeper understanding of the complexity of Kindergarten transition for children with a diagnosis of ASD and their parents. The literature presented information regarding parental concerns about the transition process, various transition practices that are commonly (or uncommonly) used, and patterns of interaction and involvement between

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parents and schools; however, I sought to understand why these were important components of the transition experience. By using a qualitative methodology, I was able to collect rich, contextualized data, allowing for a deeper understanding of these transition elements. I now provide a discussion of the subthemes that contributed to parents' narratives of seeking belonging and connect these findings to the existing literature.

4.1.1.   Adapting to the Culture of the School

Within all of the parents' narratives were common struggles with isolation. Children were often isolated due to differences in social and communicative competencies, which at times manifested in behavioural challenges in the classroom. For these children, physical removal from the classroom exacerbated the feelings of isolation from peers. Indeed, behavioural concerns have also been cited in the literature as being more commonly discussed by parents of children with developmental disabilities (Quintero, 2009; McIntyre et al., 2010). In Jewett and colleagues' (1998) narrative analysis of teachers' journals, teachers identified that parents of children with special needs often had concerns about their children obtaining acceptance and friendship, which is corroborated with the findings from the current study. For parents in the current study, the majority of their concerns communicated a desire for their children to overcome isolation and gain acceptance and connections with their peers.

Parents had their own constraints to social engagement, including lack of time and insufficient knowledge about classroom activities. The existing literature shows that parents often lack information about school processes and are unaware of how to help their children make successful transitions to Kindergarten (McIntyre et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 1986; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011; Villeneuve et al., 2013). However, the literature to date does not offer insight into the emotional or isolating experiences of parents during the transition process, other than reporting higher stress levels in parents of children with special needs (Starr et al., 2014; Janus et al., 2007). Additionally, Quintero (2009) reported that parents of children with a diagnosis of ASD had higher stress levels before transition than parents of children with other developmental disabilities. The current study makes a contribution to the literature by presenting a rich

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description of the emotional experiences of four parents as their children with a diagnosis of ASD transitioned to Kindergarten.

With lengthy and careful thought, I decided to discuss these feelings of isolation within the subtheme of adapting to the culture of the school because it provided the emotional context in which participants were situated at the time of transition. The storied experiences of isolation added to the understanding of how adapting to this new system was often challenging and provided potential explanations for why parents held specific concerns (e.g., inclusion and friendship) for their children when they began Kindergarten. Importantly, in order to learn the norms, expectations, beliefs, and rules of a group, an individual must actually engage with group members (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Therefore, isolated individuals would be expected to have difficulties adjusting to new system norms and expectations. This reality speaks to the importance of comprehensive transition plans that include families.

Keeping in mind the reality that parents and children in this study were struggling with feelings of isolation, they were required to develop an understanding of the rules, routines, and expectations of the classroom and school. For children, this was largely encouraged through the use of transition practices. Dockett and Perry (2001) differentiate between orientation to school and transition to school. The former describes practices that familiarize children and parents to the school setting, while the latter is longer-term and individualized to each student's needs. Many of the commonly used transition practices discussed in the literature are orientation activities; that is, they are generic, low-intensity activities, such as open houses and school tours, which occur for all children transitioning to Kindergarten (Pianta et al., 1999; La Paro et al., 2000; Shulting et al., 2005). In the current study, activities such as orientations and school tours were carried out to help familiarize parents and children to the school environment and provide general information. In addition, some parents prepared their children for the social demands of school by scheduling play dates and involving children in extracurricular activities such as summer camps and gymnastics. Preschool was also identified as contributing to children's learning of the rules and expectations of being members of a classroom. Indeed, lack of formal preschool experience has been correlated with poor transition outcomes (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). Finally, parents

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held an expectation that Kindergarten teachers would teach the rules and expectations, such as putting away belongings and following bell schedules, necessary to successfully adjust to the classroom. While Michelle discussed the process she goes through "schoolizing" her new Kindergarten students, Jen described her disappointment in the lack of instruction about rules and expectations from her son's teacher.

4.1.2. Building Trusting Relationships with Teachers

Parents discussed their desire to build trust with teaching staff, but were apprehensive to hand over control to people they did not know and to a system that had been portrayed negatively by other parents. It was also clear that parents had established trust in their current service providers and were reluctant to shift a large portion of their child's educational services to a school system that had different teaching ideologies than the early intervention services. Additionally, parent support groups communicated negative beliefs about the school system, which instilled fear in parents and contributed to hesitancy trusting the school staff. Although service providers and community services have been identified in the literature as sources of support in successful transitions (Starr et al., 2014; Villeneuve et al., 2013), the current study provides evidence that these established relationships also have the potential to create resistance and fear in parents during their children's Kindergarten transition. Another constraint to building trust was concerns related to the level of skill and training of the teachers and the physical well-being of children. Starr and colleagues (2014) reported that teachers acknowledged their lack of training in teaching children with ASD. Furthermore, parents, early intervention service providers, and early childhood resource teachers reported lowered expectations at school due to teachers' lack of knowledge in working with children with ASD, leading to fear about regression of skills and increases in problematic behaviour. Parents in the current study echoed these concerns.

One of the ways parents began building trust was by creating opportunities to form relationships with teachers. As Starr and colleagues (2014) reported, and parents in the current study corroborated, parents valued teachers who showed an interest in getting to know their children on a personal level. They viewed meetings as opportunities to share information about their children and get to know the teachers. In

this way, meetings with the teachers at the beginning of the year were significant transition activities for parents, though Susan expressed having insufficient time at these meetings. Susan's comment on lack of time with the teacher exemplifies how interactions between parents and teachers in Kindergarten are less frequent and more formalized compared to preschool or early intervention environments (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 1999).

Two parents in the current study discussed early intervention service providers' involvement in the Kindergarten transition. For Linda, her son's behaviour interventionist was hired by the school district to work with Michael in his Kindergarten classroom. Involving behaviour consultants and interventionists allowed parents to feel supported in new processes, such as formulating IEP goals. These professionals also acted as a bridge or link between early intervention services and the school system. Starr et al. (2014) also reported that early intervention service providers were used as a link between home and school, but found that parents were often over-reliant on these professionals rather than forming relationships with teachers. While Susan showed signs of resistance to trusting the teaching methods of the school and communicated her desire for the teacher to follow the early intervention teaching approaches, Linda discussed a smooth transition that included the formation of strong relationships with teaching staff. Several contextual factors could account for this discrepancy. For example, the early intervention teams could have been communicating different messages about beliefs and roles of parents, teachers, and other professionals. Furthermore, three years had passed since Linda's transition experience. It is possible that her narrative had been restructured over those years to illustrate a smooth plot structure; that is, the emotional ups and downs of that time period may have been forgotten or reassembled to create a plot that exemplifies a "successful transition" story.

All of the parents interviewed indicated a lack of communication between home and school, which at times impeded their ability to build trusting relationships with teachers. Lack of communication between schools and parents has been reported elsewhere in the literature (Janus et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 1986; McIntyre et al., 2007; Villeneuve et al., 2013). Starr and colleagues (2014) reported that parents of children with a diagnosis of ASD struggled with balancing the maintenance of

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relationships with advocating for their children. Parents often described these conversations as "battles" with the school system and teachers. I noted similar usage of language with participants in the current study. Communication appeared to be a challenging component of maintaining relationships with teachers. For instance, even though Linda described strong relationships with the teaching staff, she still discussed the effort involved in advocating for her child in a way that would not be perceived by teachers as threatening or adversarial. Michelle noted in her interview that confrontational communication styles would be detrimental to the relationships within the school team, indicating the implications of ineffective communication styles.

Collaboration was essential for parents to build trust with the school staff. The literature is clear that involving parents is key to promoting successful Kindergarten transitions for children (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011; Pianta et al., 2001; Fowler et al., 1991; Janus et al., 2007; Villeneuve et al., 2013). Furthermore, the relationships created between parents and teachers can significantly impact a child's sense of belonging in the classroom (Dockett & Perry, 2001). While involving parents in the transition process was important in the current study, it was also imperative that parents felt valued as members of the school team. Jen's narrative provides a poignant example of the difficulty parents may face forming trusting relationships when they do not feel valued and included as a member of the school team. Despite the fact that Jen may have been able to provide helpful information or suggestions regarding her son's behaviour, she did not feel heard or valued by the teaching staff. Her narrative was constructed in a way that positioned the teaching staff as uncooperative and antagonistic, which led to feelings of "hatred" towards them. Therefore, being included and valued as part of the school team was one way that parents found a sense of belonging within the school community.

4.1.3. Emerging Identities and Hope

The start of formal education marks a developmental period that requires changes in roles, which affects how individuals within the transition process think, feel, and behave (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As previously discussed, children in the current study were required to adapt to the rules, routines, and expectations of the school. A

child's ability to meet these expectations and shifts in roles influences the child's identity formation as a student and their sense of belonging (Joerdens, 2014). Furthermore, Entwisle and colleagues (1987) discussed how changes to social groups and expectations lead to the development of self-worth. Children become increasingly aware of how they compare and "fit in" with their peers, which shapes identity construction. These authors cautioned that children with learning differences may be more likely to experience decreases in self-worth if they perceive themselves as not fitting in with their peers. In the current study, children's perspectives were not obtained; however, the parents and teacher interviewed provided insight into their understanding of their children and students. These constructed understandings from parents and teachers inevitably influence how children view themselves and form identities. Parents in the current study frequently discussed making comparisons between their children and peers. They attempted to decipher how their children fit in with their peers. These comparisons were one way in which parents constructed an understanding of their children as Kindergarten students. The current study offers a contextualized picture of the challenges parents faced as new Kindergarten roles and identities were formed by their children. Parents of children who were diagnosed with ASD prior to Kindergarten entry all appeared to be struggling to integrate the children's diagnoses into their understanding of their children. This struggle was often seen when parents compartmentalized characteristics that they believed were important aspects of their children versus those that were associated with ASD. For Claire and Susan, ASD was something disposable and unwanted, indicating that the diagnosis had not been integrated into their constructed understanding of their children. These struggles were relevant to the Kindergarten transition process because it added complexity to the task of deciphering what it meant for their children to now be Kindergarten students. Parents frequently faced the reality that their children were different from their peers. Furthermore, they were aware that this could pose challenges for their children identifying similarities with peers, and thus find a sense of belonging within the classroom.

Not being able to refer to a cultural life script to hypothesize about potential or expected futures for their children was emotionally taxing for parents. It also led to difficulties making educational decisions for their children. Parents were uncertain if

their children would be able to fulfil the culturally expected roles of a Kindergarten student, which led to difficulties forming constructed understandings of their children and determining how their children would fit in with their peers and find a sense of belonging.

Finally, the current study offers insights into how the school system plays a role in children's formation of identity. One of the main hopes parents had when their children began school was for their children to enjoy their new student role. Teachers made this possible by forming relationships with children and making them feel welcome in the classroom. Dockett and Perry (2004) also identified that disposition toward school was an important aspect of children's transition experiences. Teachers' beliefs about ASD were also identified as impactful for parents in the current study because these beliefs were linked to the teachers' ability to see the potential in their children. Furthermore, Susan and Jen illustrated how teachers can influence children's construction of negative identities (e.g., low self-esteem), especially when children have difficulties fulfilling new roles and expectations at school. Pointing out differences, such as being "disruptive" or "bad," isolated Gavin and Nathan from their peers; thus, it was difficult for them to feel like they belonged in the classroom.

The current study makes a contribution to the existing literature by presenting parents' struggles constructing an understanding of their children with a diagnosis of ASD during the transition to Kindergarten. The Kindergarten transition literature to date offers little insight into the identity construction that occurs during this transitional process, and the role of parents and teachers in children's construction of these identities is neglected.

4.2. Conceptualizing Findings Using an Ecological Framework

As discussed in chapter two, ecological frameworks are frequently used in the literature to conceptualize the Kindergarten transition (e.g., Pianta et al., 2001; Arndt et al., 2013; Rous et al., 2007; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Starr et al., 2014). Ecological frameworks are well suited to study Kindergarten transition because it is viewed as a developmental process rather than a series of distinct events. Furthermore,

these frameworks highlight contextual factors across systems that can directly or indirectly affect the child's transition experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). As Starr and colleagues (2014) point out, ecological frameworks can be especially useful in conceptualizing Kindergarten transition for children with a diagnosis of ASD because of the complexity of their ecological environment; indeed, children with ASD often have relationships with several professionals prior to and at the time of school entry.

Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) *Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition* postulates that "the transition to school takes place in an environment defined by the many changing interactions among child, school, classroom, family, and community factors" (p. 499). Therefore, the transition to Kindergarten can be described as a relational process, which was exemplified in this study's findings. These authors explain that in addition to child characteristics, direct, indirect, and dynamic effects of the ecological environment influence a child's transition to Kindergarten. Direct effects are contextual factors with which the child directly interacts, such as the group of peers in the class and characteristics of the family. Indirect effects describe the links between different contexts and would include contextual elements that the child does not directly interact with, but nonetheless impact the child's success at school. For instance, parental involvement with the school and family connectedness with neighbours are examples of indirect effects. Finally, dynamic effects describe the transactional nature of interactions between contexts and account for the patterns of relationships that change over time. Examples of dynamic effects are parent-teacher and peer group interactions. These interactions form patterns over time and impact a child's experience at school.

I now provide an overview of some of the contextual elements that influenced the participants' experiences of their children's Kindergarten transition. Child characteristics are discussed first, followed by direct, indirect, and dynamic effects of the ecology of the transition on school outcomes. Although the model described above uses the term "effects," I have chosen to use the term "influences" to describe the relationship between contextual characteristics and the child's transition. Effects are quantitative in nature and the usage of this term asserts a causal link between variables. As a qualitative researcher, I cannot make such claims.

4.2.1. Child Characteristics

Each child in the study began Kindergarten with a unique set of competencies. For parents in this study, children's academic competencies were not a main concern; rather, parents worried about differences in their children's social and communicative competencies. If children were not able to communicate effectively and engage socially with peers, parents feared that their children would not fit in and feel a sense of belonging in the school. Gavin and Nathan provided examples of how ineffectively communicating needs or feelings can lead to behavioural challenges in the classroom. Furthermore, these behavioural challenges led to further isolation, as these children were physically removed from their peers in the classroom. In this study, it appeared that the children who had more difficulties with communication and social interactions experienced more challenges adjusting to the school environment.

In addition, children were required to learn the rules, routines, and expectations of the classroom. All of the children participated in several forms of preparation to facilitate their adjustment to school. Claire explained that physiotherapy, gymnastics classes, and summer camp helped prepare Evan for the expectations of Kindergarten by teaching him the rules and routines needed to function as part of a group, such as following group directions, lining up, and sitting in a circle with the group. Conversely, Jen expressed her frustration in her belief that Nathan's preschool had not taught him the necessary expectations to adapt to the classroom. She explained that Nathan lacked many of the independence skills required at school and she believed this contributed to his feelings of frustration and confusion. Nathan's case exemplifies how changes in expectations when moving from one system to another can pose challenges for a child's transition.

4.2.2. Direct Influences

Children's transition experiences occurred at the school, family, and neighbourhood levels. While all of the children were placed in classrooms with approximately 20 students, Michelle pointed out that classes of this size make it challenging for teachers to address the unique needs of each child. Parents all discussed concerns about Kindergarten teachers' level of skill and training teaching

children with specialized learning needs. Michelle agreed that many teachers lack the necessary knowledge to effectively teach children with a diagnosis of ASD. In addition, teachers' ability to provide a welcoming environment for children was noted by parents as being an important component of smooth transitions for their children. Four of the children received full-time support from an EA while in the classroom. Michael had a pre-existing relationship with his EA and Linda explained that this relationship helped Michael adjust quickly to school. Unfortunately, Nathan did not receive additional support in the classroom because he had not yet received a diagnosis. Nathan clearly struggled without this additional support. The peers in children's classrooms also influenced the transition experiences. For instance, Gavin and Evan had peers in their Kindergarten classes that were familiar to them from preschool and the neighbourhood. Gavin and Liam attended an after-school child care program at their school, which provided additional opportunities to connect with peers in the school community. In contrast, Nathan attended a school outside of his catchment area and did not know any other children in his classroom when he began Kindergarten. It is possible that the unfamiliar physical and social surroundings created additional inconsistencies between preschool and Kindergarten, leading to difficulties adjusting to school. For the other four children, there was continuity in their physical and social surroundings as they transitioned, which meant that there were fewer changes and adjustments that had to take place.

Family factors also influenced children's transitions to Kindergarten. All parents expressed their expectations, hopes, and beliefs about the potential of their children. These ideas played a role in how children were expected to fulfil the student role. These beliefs influenced how parents constructed their children in the narratives. Furthermore, parents were responsible for educational decisions regarding Kindergarten placement. For instance, Linda decided to delay Michael's Kindergarten entry one year to allow him more time to gain the necessary competencies expected in school. Claire placed Evan in a French immersion classroom because she believed Evan would be more likely to fit in with his peers if they were all learning French for the first time. Similarly, Jen decided that a Montessori classroom would be beneficial for Nathan because she believed he would thrive in a self-directed learning environment. The implication of this decision was that Nathan attended a school outside of his catchment area away from familiar

surroundings and peers. Finally, Linda and Claire specifically spoke about how they used positive messaging about school to help prepare their children for school and encourage excitement and pride about being "big" enough to go to school.

Finally, neighbourhood factors also played a role in children's transition experiences. All of the parents except for Jen described neighbourhoods that had nearby parks, community centres, and other children. These community resources gave children opportunities to engage with other children within the neighbourhood. Jen involved Nathan in extracurricular activities, but these occurred outside of their neighbourhood. All of the parents interviewed were middle class and their children did not struggle with issues of poverty or violence within their neighbourhoods.

4.2.3.   Indirect Influences

Although interactions between contexts occur in all aspects of each child's transition ecology, three of these interactions were extensively discussed in parents' narratives: parent-teacher, early intervention-teacher, and parent-online community interactions.

Parents attempted to build trusting relationships with teachers. Each narrative clearly communicated the desire for parents to connect with teachers and get involved in their children's transitions. Linda's case illustrated the influence of a strong, mutually respectful relationship with the teacher on successful transitions. Collaborative interactions that occur within team approaches indirectly affect children by allowing teams to generate agreed upon goals that offer consistency between home and school settings. Furthermore, when problems arise, parents can offer suggestions to teachers to help children's adjustment to the classroom. Jen's narrative indicated that a collaborative relationship was not formed with the teacher, and Nathan's adjustment to the classroom was negatively impacted because the school appeared to be unsure how to help him. Even day-to-day expectations of children can be influenced by parent-teacher interactions. Michelle explained how she worked with Linda to scaffold Michael's learning. At the beginning of the Kindergarten year, Michael was unable to independently present for show-and-tell. Michelle discussed the expectations with

Linda, who then created a flip book with pictures for Michael to use during his show-and-tell presentation. This visual support acted as a prompt for Michael to know what to discuss with his peers, allowing him to independently meet the classroom expectation.

Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) *Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition* discusses the child's movement from preschool to Kindergarten; however, for parents in this study the movement from early intervention services to Kindergarten was more relevant. As presented in chapter three, parents had developed a great amount of trust in their early intervention teams and their associated teaching approaches. I believe these relationships with service providers added complexity to the transition experience because most families will continue to work with these service providers throughout the elementary school years. However, children will now receive most of their education at school. For children solely transitioning from preschool to Kindergarten, there is a clear handing over of educational services, a distinct ending, and new beginning of educational services. Because both the school and community-based service providers are working with their children, parents indicated that it was important that collaborative relationships were formed between teachers and early intervention teams. I discussed these relationships in chapter three as acting like bridges or linkages between systems. Children were not simply moving from one system to the next; rather, they were moving back and forth between the two systems on a regular basis. Parents wanted consistency between children's learning environments to ensure their success in both environments. Susan and Linda's narratives provided examples of how these linkages can help encourage consistency between home and school programs, thus creating smoother transitions for children.

One of the findings that was unique to this study was the influence of online support groups on the participants' storied transition experiences. These online communities were discussed as sources of support for two of the participants, yet were also responsible for triggering fear and wariness in trusting school staff. The discourses that parents engaged with in these online communities cultivated a divide between families and schools. The discourses of parent support groups have not been discussed previously in the Kindergarten transition literature. Online communities offered opportunities for parents to connect with other parents who have children with ASD and

overcome the isolation they were experiencing; however, it was also clear that these groups made the Kindergarten transition especially stressful for parents. As Claire mentioned, she was concerned that Evan would see her worrying and begin feeling anxious about school, which illustrates the indirect influences these negative group discourses can have on the child. Furthermore, when parents were exposed to beliefs that indicated that schools were not trustworthy, they spoke about interactions that occurred with teaching staff in a similarly confrontational manner. For instance, I noticed Susan's use of aggressive language, using words such as "fight" and "battle" when discussing the need to advocate for her children at school. Parents in this study feared that the goals of the school did not align with the goals they had for their children, which was a belief that was reinforced in online communities. As Michelle and Linda pointed out, actual or perceived misaligned goals are not conducive to building collaborative teams. Without these collaborative teams, children become affected due to decreased support and consistency across systems. In addition, it is possible that adversarial relationships between parents and teachers could impact a teacher's relationship with the child. Linda was aware of this connection when she stated that she worked on maintaining pleasant relationships with teachers so that they would be well-disposed toward Michael. Similarly, Susan understood that the quality of her relationships with teaching staff could impact her sons' education. For her, finding a balance between advocating for her children's needs and building harmonious relationships with teaching staff was difficult.

4.2.4. Dynamic Influences

The dynamic influences of contexts on a child's transition to Kindergarten describe the patterns of interaction that form in relationships between contexts over time (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Two of the participants had children who had only started Kindergarten approximately three weeks prior to the interviews; therefore, it was not possible to investigate the evolving nature of these relational dynamics. What can be pointed out in these cases is that the types of interactions that parents were having at the beginning of the year will influence the patterns that are formed in these relationships over time according to the *Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition* (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

Linda and Jen's cases offer some insight into these dynamic influences due to the fact that their children were currently in grade three at the time of the interviews. Linda discussed how the relationships built with teaching staff in her son's Kindergarten year were pivotal in establishing trust for the system as a whole. That year, she learned how to communicate her son's needs effectively and work as part of a school team, despite the acknowledged system constraints and differences from her son's early intervention team. As Michael moved on from Kindergarten, teachers and principals changed. However, Linda still reported maintaining similar favourable relationships with the teaching staff, reflecting a pattern in the types of interactions and relationships that were formed in the Kindergarten year. Conversely, Jen's case revealed a pattern of interaction with teaching staff that was detrimental to both Jen and Nathan's ability to form trusting relationships with teaching staff and achieve a sense of belonging at school. Jen's interactions with the teacher and principal led her to feel undervalued and unheard. When the school contacted her to discuss Nathan, she expected similar types of interactions, indicating a pattern that was forming. Nathan was also experiencing undesirable interactions with his classroom peers. Children in his class were beginning to tease him, adding additional constraints to achieving a sense of belonging in the classroom. Potentially, Nathan's peers may have recognized that he was different from them; indeed, he was having behavioural challenges in the classroom and being removed for large portions of the day. Using Nathan as an example, the complexity of the interactions between contexts becomes clear. In this case, child characteristics (e.g., difficulties communicating needs and emotions, which led to behavioural challenges) created direct influences on child-teacher interactions (e.g., the child was seen as disruptive and removed from the classroom). In turn, the child-teacher interactions were witnessed by peers, leading to the formation of similar isolating interaction styles between peers and the child.

4.3. Implications for Counsellors and Educators

My predominant hope in conducting this research is that counselling practitioners may gain an understanding of the storied experiences of parents as their children with ASD transition to Kindergarten. Unfortunately, counselling psychology graduate

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programs largely neglect to discuss potential clients who may have children with learning differences or developmental disabilities. Thus, many counsellors may feel unequipped to enter the experiences of their clients and provide the types of supports needed by parents. While I am unable to generalize the findings from this study to other parents of children with a diagnosis of ASD, I do believe that the participants provided a great amount of insight that can be used to help inform counselling practice. Claire openly expressed her distress during this transitional period; her worry about her son built up inside of her, often bringing her to tears. Similarly, Susan revealed that her children's Kindergarten transition had been much more difficult than she had expected. Even for Linda, who had self-reported a successful transition, the pressure of responsibility for her child's education and future independence at the time of his Kindergarten entry weighed on her psychologically. Finally, Jen's narrative illuminated the emotional pain that can accompany a rejecting experience from a school community. I suggest that each of these parents may have benefited from therapeutic relationships, allowing them to feel heard and supported. Counselling practitioners should be aware of potential feelings of isolation for families and children and encourage parents to engage with school communities whenever possible. For instance, parents may get involved by volunteering for hot lunch days or supervising field trips, joining Parent Advisory Councils, or finding other opportunities to interact with other parents and teachers before or after school hours.

Through the use of narrative interviews, I was privileged to witness participants' meaning-making processes as they constructed their stories. The depth of emotional experience and meaning each participant shared with me was more than I had anticipated at the outset of this research project. It was clear that Kindergarten transition was not simply about an adjustment to school for their children; indeed, issues of identity, relationships and, ultimately, belonging emerged in all of the narratives. I suggest that narrative approaches to therapy could be beneficial for clients to help them explore their stories, considering alternative plot lines and meanings within the dominant narrative. As Reissman (2008) asserts, "Telling stories about difficult times in our lives creates order and contains emotions, allowing a search for meaning and connection with others" (p. 10). In particular, parents struggled to understand their children as individuals and as members of their classroom communities and society as a whole.

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This impacted how each parent identified herself as a parent of a child with a diagnosis of ASD. Storytelling is a means of constructing identity, and some narrative researchers would argue that these narratives are our identities (Reissman, 2008). Thus, narrative therapeutic methods are well-suited for explorations of identity. The findings from the participants in this study suggest that the struggles of constructing an understanding of their children through narrative created a great amount of anxiety for parents. They feared that their children would face challenges identifying themselves as belonging. Explorations of what ASD means to clients personally, and how those meanings influence their children's construction of identity could be helpful for many parents. As well, conversations may arise about how these identities are restructured as their children enter school and what role schools play in this restructuring. Parents should be encouraged to explore alternative plot lines in cases where narratives are problem-saturated. Specific attention should also be placed on establishing future plot lines, as these were difficult for parents to construct in this study.

Counsellors may also support parents of children with a diagnosis of ASD transitioning to Kindergarten by offering facilitated support groups and psychoeducational groups. All the parents in the study discussed their feelings of isolation from other parents. Counsellors can encourage clients to engage with other parents of children with a diagnosis of ASD in a support group setting. This study also adds a point of caution for counsellors facilitating support groups. There is the potential for negative messaging about school systems to become normative within the group, as was illustrated in parents' narratives about online communities. While parents should be welcomed to share their thoughts and feelings openly with the group, I suggest that the facilitator's role may include opening up discussions about such discourses and their impact on transition experiences. In this way, parents may become more aware of these socially constructed discourses and make thoughtful decisions about how to engage with them. Furthermore, psychoeducational groups could be used to provide information and teach skills relating to effective communication and advocacy. Parents in the current study discussed their struggles balancing their desire to build strong relationships with teachers while also advocating for the needs of their children. As I have outlined, I believe that a counsellor's role in supporting families during Kindergarten transitions can

be invaluable for parents struggling to find belonging for themselves and their children in the school community.

The implications for educators must also be addressed, as they are the front-line workers in the Kindergarten transition process. First, I hope that these research findings can increase awareness of Kindergarten transition for families of children with a diagnosis of ASD for Kindergarten teachers, resource teachers, EAs, principals, and early intervention service providers. Like Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) and others, I encourage educators to view transitions through an ecological lens, focusing on the formation of strong relationships with children, families, and other service providers. As Michelle so wisely shared, "It was phenomenal to see [Michael] grow because adults cared about him. And that's why he grew." However, it was not simply the direct effects of the relationships Michael had with adults that made his transition successful. I believe that Michelle was illustrating that when the adults involved in the child's transition can connect and collaborate based on the shared goal of supporting the child, successful transitions occur. With this understanding in mind, I provide several recommendations for educators. First, opportunities to begin building relationships between families and teachers should be used as early on and as frequently in the transition process as possible. These opportunities may include transition practices such as meetings, phone calls, and home visits. Second, teachers may consider involving parents in classroom activities, such as reading or craft activities. Parents would have a chance to gain knowledge about what happens in their children's classrooms and how their children engage with peers. As well, parents would have additional opportunities to interact with Kindergarten teachers and other parents, allowing parents to overcome feelings of isolation, build trust with teachers, and begin establishing a sense of belonging within the school community. Third, efforts should be made to collaborate with other service providers who work with the transitioning child whenever possible. Two of the parents in this study discussed the importance of having service providers involved in their children's transitions. These existing relationships helped connect parents to the new system and aided parents to begin forming trusting relationships with teachers. Fourth, I recommend that children be included in the classroom as much as possible to foster their sense of belonging. For children experiencing problematic or disruptive behaviour in the classroom, specialized support should be introduced to collaborate with parents

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and teaching staff. Additionally, transition plans should be introduced before the school year begins, especially for children who may be more likely to exhibit behavioural problems in the classroom. For instance, children who have difficulty appropriately communicating their needs or emotions may require extensive preparatory transition plans to attempt to prevent the types of behaviour that could lead to their removal from peers in the classroom. Finally, teachers should always keep in mind that their beliefs about ASD and the child's learning potential and the ways in which teachers interact and form relationships with children have an impact on how a child's identity is constructed. Therefore, I suggest that teachers participate in opportunities to advance their knowledge about ASD through seminars or workshops. Providing support and learning opportunities to ensure that each child fulfils the student role to the best of his or her ability and creating welcoming, inclusive classroom environments would also facilitate the construction of favourable identities in children.

Early intervention service providers also play a significant role in Kindergarten transitions for children. Because of the relationships they have already built with families, service providers are in a position to facilitate connection to the school system. When possible, service providers should share information about transition processes with parents. Information should also be shared about the child with the school through meetings and written reports. Communicating through these means can also provide opportunities for service providers to advocate for children and families in ways that respect the skills and teaching ideologies of the school. While service providers play a supportive role to parents, they should also encourage parents to begin forming new connections with the school team to prevent becoming dependent on service providers, as recommended by Starr and colleagues (2014). Finally, service providers should be cognizant of the types of messages they send to parents about the school system. Parents need to know that there are limitations and restraints within the school system; however, they also desire the establishment of a sense of belonging within this new community. Parents need to know that the teaching staff have the shared goal of helping their child meet his or her full potential in order to establish trust in the school system. Early intervention service providers have an opportunity to help families move smoothly into a new system by messaging about the school system in a positive,

constructive manner and by modelling effective communication that can also be used to advocate for the child.

4.4. Limitations of the Study

There were some limitations to this study that should be noted. As previously discussed, I had originally hoped to interview the Kindergarten teachers for each case that was presented. However, two of the teachers declined participation and one parent chose not to include her son's teacher. Unfortunately, only one teacher participated in this study, which limits the perspective to mainly parents' experiences of children with a diagnosis of ASD transitioning to Kindergarten. In addition, data triangulation with the use of multiple participant perspectives was limited. Had more teacher participants been included in the study, a richer contextualized picture of each transition could have been presented. However, I believe that the parent participants shared a wealth of information about their storied transition experiences and this openness led to a rich data set that created a strong, valuable piece of research.

An additional limitation to this research was that children's perspectives were not included. While I aimed to include children's perspectives in this research, I knew from the outset that this may not have been possible due to children's communicative limitations. Indeed, each parent participant indicated that her child would likely not be capable of participating in an art activity that included telling a verbal story about Kindergarten. Not surprisingly, the experiences of children with developmental disabilities beginning Kindergarten is absent in the literature.

Finally, this research reports findings based on interviews that were carried out at one point in time. Only a snapshot was captured of what was actually a dynamic, evolving narrative. The portion of Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) *Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition* that could not be fully addressed was the changes in relational interactions that occur over time. In order to gain a better understanding of these evolving relationships, I would have needed to implement a longitudinal approach, conducting interviews throughout the Kindergarten year. This approach was outside the scope of this project.

4.5. Recommendations for Future Research

This research adds knowledge to the existing literature on Kindergarten transition for children with a diagnosis of ASD. Specifically, I investigated parents' storied experiences of the school transition process and the findings indicated that each parent narrator made sense of her child's Kindergarten transition experience by positioning herself as an agent who was actively seeking out belonging in the school community. Based on the findings of this research, I offer several recommendations for future research. First, future researchers may address how patterns of interactions form between parents and teachers over time with the use of longitudinal research designs. Researchers could investigate the role that patterns of interaction with preschool and early intervention educators play in the types of interactions that occur later with Kindergarten teachers. Links found between these ecological contexts could inform how early childhood educators can encourage strong relationships between parents and Kindergarten teachers by fostering trusting, collaborative relationships between parents and early childhood educators before school entry. Furthermore, by studying interactions between parents and educators over time, an understanding can be gained about how interactional patterns form and how these patterns affect transition outcomes for the child.

Second, I believe that studying the perspectives of children with a diagnosis of ASD as they begin school would make a large contribution to the literature. As already stated, there is no current research reporting the experiences of children with special needs as they transition to school. Joerdens (2014) reported that typically developing children discussed roles, routines, rituals, relationships within the classroom, and special moments such as birthday parties or losing a tooth as contributing to their sense of belonging as a member of the class. Future research could explore how children with a diagnosis of ASD establish a sense of belonging, especially given the social challenges associated with the disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Are there unique aspects of their Kindergarten transition experiences that have been neglected in the research? What roles do they take as students, and how are their identities constructed as they begin a new stage in their lives? Ethnographic research could be particularly useful in understanding how the classroom environment helps or hinders children's

ability to achieve belonging. For instance, researchers could examine cultural aspects of classrooms. How do classrooms convey a culture of acceptance and inclusion? What roles do students with a diagnosis of ASD play in the classroom? What are the language and norms surrounding difference in the classroom? Answering these questions could help parents, educators, and policy-makers become more aware of children's perspectives on seeking belonging and how to create learning environments that best serve the developing identity of the child.

Finally, the current study pointed out that the parent participants were exposed to pessimistic and fear-inducing discourses about the school system through online parent support groups. Future research could analyze these discourses and determine how these communicated beliefs are perpetuated and what types of effects they have on parents and children as they begin school. The findings of the current study suggest that these communicated beliefs about the school system created fear in parents and resistance to building trusting relationships with teachers. However, more in-depth research is required to gain a better understanding of what effects these online community discourses have on Kindergarten transition experiences.

4.6. Conclusion

This research project has given me the opportunity to gain insight into the storied Kindergarten transition experiences of parents who have children with a diagnosis of ASD, thus strengthening my ability to enter the experiences of clients as both a behaviour interventionist and a future counsellor. In addition, I hope that this research can reach a wide audience of families, educators, counsellors, policy-makers, and other researchers. My own work with families and children with a diagnosis of ASD has already been impacted by this research project. Indeed, the Kindergarten transition for one of the children with whom I work coincided with the timing of this research project. While this family was not included in this research, I heard similar struggles of building trust and seeking belonging in this mother's conversations with me. These moments continued to remind me that research on the topic of school transition for children with a diagnosis of ASD is an important and worthwhile endeavour. In a practical sense, I think more carefully now about how I communicate with parents and teachers. I realize that

the beliefs I convey to parents can potentially affect their anxiety about school or the types of interactions they have with teachers. Furthermore, while I always aimed to work collaboratively with school teams and other service providers in my work, I am more vigilant about communicating respect for each team member's role and focusing on shared goals. I have a much firmer understanding that starting school does not simply signify the need for a child to have a specific set of skills; rather, it is a time of both continuity and change that can be emotionally tolling on families and involves networks of interactions among contexts in the ecology of the school transition. Within the complexities of these interactions among contexts, parents ultimately strive to find a sense of belonging for themselves and their children.

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Appendix A.

Recruitment Advertisement

Are you a parent of a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)? Has your child made the transition to a public or private Kindergarten classroom, either recently or in the last few years?

If so, you may be eligible to participate in my research study on the experiences of Kindergarten transition for children with ASD and their families.

==

Let me introduce myself. My name is Lisa Ludvigsen, and I am a graduate student at Simon Fraser University. I am currently completing a Master's degree in counselling psychology. I have worked with children with ASD and their families for the past 7 years. My experiences in this line of work have led to my interest in the topic of school transition.

My research study includes two parts: a 60-90 minute interview with parent(s), and a 20-30 minute art activity with your child. During the interviews, participants will be able to share their story about their transition experience. Children who choose to participate will be asked to make a picture of themselves at Kindergarten and tell a story about it. After interviews are completed, I would also like an opportunity to follow up with you on the themes I have identified. These follow up meetings would take about 60 minutes.

If you are interested in learning more about the research study, or if you would like to participate, please contact Lisa Ludvigsen (…).

Student Investigator	Thesis Supervisor
Lisa Ludvigsen, B.A	Dr. Maureen Hoskyn, PhD
Faculty of Education (M.A. Student)	Faculty of Education
Counselling Psychology Program	Educational Psychology Program
Simon Fraser University	Simon Fraser University
(…)	(…)

Appendix B.

Parent Interview Protocol

I have asked you to participate in this interview to develop a greater understanding of how children with ASD and their families experience the transition to Kindergarten, and what meanings they make out of these experiences. I am also interested in how the stories of Kindergarten teachers help inform this experience.

·I am interested in the stories that surround this transition. I will be creating a description of the interwoven stories of parents and teachers relating to this transition process.

·Although we are discussing _____'s transition, this interview is as much your story as it is _____'s. As much as possible, I am interested in hearing descriptive detail relating to your own thoughts and feelings relating to _____'s transition to Kindergarten.

I anticipate this interview lasting 60 to 90 minutes to allow you to tell your story in as much detail as possible.

Time Prior to Kindergarten Entry

> *These questions will help you tell me the story of how you chose a Kindergarten for your child and how you prepared for _____'s transition to Kindergarten.*

Tell me about your family, and how _____ engages with your family.

Tell me more about _____. What qualities make _____ a unique person in this world?

How would you describe ASD? What does it mean to you personally?

Tell me about what it meant to you at this time to be a parent of a child with ASD.

How did you come to choose Kindergarten at _____ school for _____.

Did _____, or anyone in your family receive community support from professionals to support _____'s transition to Kindergarten? (if yes,) Tell me how these professionals from the community supported _____ or you in this transition process.

Tell me the story of your initial contact with _____'s teacher. What was this experience like for you?

Tell me how you prepared _____ for Kindergarten.

Overall, what are your thoughts and feelings about preparing for _____'s transition to Kindergarten?

Beginning Kindergarten

These questions will help you tell me your personal story about your hopes and fears for _____ when he/she started Kindergarten and how the transition to Kindergarten proceeded for you as well as for _____.

Tell me about your experience preparing _____ for his/her first day of Kindergarten.

What were your hopes for _____ as he/she began the school year? How were these hopes realized?

What challenges do you feel you faced as _____'s parent at the beginning of the Kindergarten year? How were these challenges resolved?

Does _____ have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)?

(if yes), How were the learning and social goals for _____ decided? How are you involved in planning and implementing _____ school program?

Describe your relationship with _____'s teacher and other professionals at this time.

Does _____, _____'s family, or you receive any professional help either at school or from the community to support _____'s school program?

(if yes), Tell me how you feel about this professional help.

Overall, describe your feelings about how _____'s transition to Kindergarten unfolded

Present Time

These questions will help you tell me how your ideas and perspectives about parenting a child with ASD may have shifted throughout the transition process, and help you construct an ending to your story.

Earlier in this interview, you spoke about what ASD means to you, and what it meant to be a parent of a child with ASD prior to Kindergarten entry. At the present time, what does it mean to be _____'s mother/father?

Tell me the ending of the "Transition to Kindergarten for _____" story. Please include your feelings or experiences in this story – although this story relates to the child, this version is yours.

Is there anything else you would like to add, or anything you think I may have missed that is important to your story?

Appendix C.

Teacher Interview Protocol

I have asked you to participate in this interview to develop a greater understanding of how children with ASD and their families experience the transition to kindergarten, and what meanings they make out of these experiences. I am also interested in how the stories of Kindergarten teachers help inform this experience.

I am interested in the stories that surround this transition. I will be creating a description of the interwoven stories of parents and teachers relating to this transition process.

Although we are discussing _____'s transition, this interview is as much your story as it is _____'s. As much as possible, I am interested in hearing descriptive detail relating to your own thoughts and feelings relating to _____'s transition to Kindergarten.

I anticipate this interview lasting about 60 minutes to allow you to tell your story with enough detail as possible.

Time Prior to Kindergarten Entry

These questions will help you tell me the story of how you came to know _____ and his/her family, how you prepared _____ and his/her family for Kindergarten, and your thoughts and feelings about this process.

Tell how you came to know _____ and his/her family. What was this experience like for you?

How would you describe ASD? What does it mean to you personally?

Tell me about what it meant to you at this time to be a teacher of a child with ASD.

Tell me how you prepared _____ and his/her family for Kindergarten.

Overall, what are your thoughts and feelings about preparing for _____'s transition to Kindergarten?

Beginning Kindergarten

These questions will help you tell me your personal story about your hopes and fears for _____ when he/she started Kindergarten and how the transition to Kindergarten proceeded for you as well as for _____.

Tell me about your experience with _____ on his/her first day of Kindergarten.

What were your hopes for _____ in your Kindergarten class as he/she began the school year? How were these hopes realized?

What challenges do you feel you faced as _____'s teacher at the beginning of the Kindergarten year? How were these challenges resolved?

Does _____ have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)?

(if yes), How were the learning and social goals for _____ decided?

Describe your relationship with _____ and with _____'s family at this time.

Does _____, _____'s family, or you receive any professional help either at school or from the community to support _____'s school program?

(if yes), Tell me how you feel about this professional help.

Overall, describe your feelings about how _____'s transition to Kindergarten unfolded.

Present Time

These questions will help you tell me how your ideas and perspectives about teaching a child with ASD may have shifted throughout the transition process, and help you construct an ending to your story.

Earlier in this interview, you spoke about what ASD means to you, and what it meant to be a teacher of a child with ASD prior to Kindergarten entry. At the present time, what does it mean to have been _____'s teacher?

Tell me the ending of the "Transition to Kindergarten for _____" story? Please include your feelings or experiences in this story – although this story relates to the child, this version is yours.

Is there anything else you would like to add, or anything you think I may have missed that is important to your story?