CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN
STATE FUNDED PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS

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By
Sarah L. Jackson

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State funded preschool programs were constantly faced with the need to change in order to address internal and external demands. As programs engaged in efforts towards change, minimal research was available on how to support continuous improvement efforts within the context unique to state funded preschool programs. Guidance available had primarily been borrowed from what was known about change within the kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) sector. Understanding the current context of continuous improvement within state funded preschool programs was identified as the first step in translating the literature base and validating it for the intended audience. The purpose of the study was to explore the approaches to continuous improvement utilized within nine state funded preschool programs in northeast Ohio. A grounded theory research design was used as the framework in which to explore the topic. Content analysis and a multiple sequential interview processes were utilized to gather data and a four step data analysis process was used to review the collected data. The study resulted in the development of a theory that identified context and process elements that were represented within the continuous improvement efforts of programs that achieved successful change. Three context elements, including change as a guiding philosophy, teaching staff, and supportive relationships, defined the conditions, relationships, and beliefs that shaped the
support available for the continuous improvement efforts. Understood purpose, opportunity for input, shared decision making, revisiting change, and communication were the five process elements used to describe the actions taken by the programs that resulted in change.
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CHAPTER I

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose and intent of preschool programming has continually evolved. A growing research base, increased accountability, requirements for quality, and a rise in the number of programs available to young children have presented many competing demands. Preschool programs have been faced with the constant need to change and engage in continuous improvement efforts in order to remain relevant within the needs of the community. The term continuous improvement was used to characterize the actions, interactions, conditions, and supports carried out by programs. Change was defined as the result of the continuous improvement efforts. Little attention had been given to supporting change within the local context of preschool programs. What guidance was available to the local preschool sector had been borrowed from research developed for kindergarten through twelfth grade settings without consideration of the unique characteristics of the preschool system. Missing from the research and literature available was the exploration of current approaches to continuous improvement employed by preschool programs in order to identify what supported change within the local level.

Transformation of Preschool Education

For an increasing number of children, preschool programming had become their first introduction to center based educational experiences and provided a much needed preparation for meeting the demands faced in school settings (Mareroff, 2006; Stipek, 2006; Warner, 2009). Preschool programs were designed to provide care and educational
opportunities to children age three, four, and five. Unlike other industrialized nations, the focus and availability of preschool experiences in the United States had only been a recent venture in order to meet the demands of a transforming culture (Wat, 2010). The movement for childcare emerged in the United States around the 1930’s in response to wartime efforts to open up opportunities for women to join the job force (Pianta & Howes, 2009). Children moved out of home to center based care with the primary goal of health and safety; little attention was initially given to the educational experiences that could have been offered. Transformation efforts of preschool programs had occurred rapidly within a short timeframe with varying success. Change was required with little support in understanding how to approach efforts that ensured success. Five major trends have marked the shifting purpose of preschool programs including (a) increased funding, (b) growing research base, (c) supporting young children with disabilities, (d) demands for quality, and (e) increased accountability. Ways in which the programs have embraced the influences of change, knowledge regarding the potential impact of the trends, and observable outcomes varied across the different types of preschool programs.

**Increased Funding**

Funding at the federal and state level was established to increase preschool experiences for children identified as disadvantaged or at risk for low performance in later schooling opportunities (Barnett & Masse, 2006). State funding to support programs for children at risk emerged in the late 1960’s and became widely available across the nation in the late 1980’s (Mitchell, 2001). Funding availability at the state level was viewed as one of the most influential factors in changing the landscape of
Prior to increased state funding, early care and education programming was primarily a private venture focused on childcare, rather than child outcomes. State preschools were defined as programs in which (a) funding was controlled by the state, (b) primarily served three and four year old children, (c) focus was on early education experiences, and (d) group learning experiences were offered at least two days a week (Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Sansanelli, & Hudtedt, 2009). State preschool programs may have incorporated federally funded programs, such as preschool special education and Head Start, and received a form of fiscal support and program oversight from a state agency. State funded preschool programs increased dramatically in a short timeframe as a result of greater public demand. In 1976, approximately 21% of three year olds and 41% of four year olds participated in a state funded preschool program (Epstein, Pruette, Priestly, & Lieberman, 2009). In 2008, 52% of the three year olds and 82% of four year olds reported participation in preschool programs (Barnett, et al., 2009). During the 2008 to 2009 school year, 1,216,077 children participated in a state funded preschool and 411,912 children in a preschool special education program. States in the same year allocated over five billion dollars for preschool programming. Availability of preschools and funding allocations had followed a pattern of variability through the years as a result of changes in legislation and priorities established at the federal and state level. Discussion about the importance of early childhood, however, remained frequent as the field of early childhood continued to recognize the benefits of early learning experiences.
Early Childhood Research

A growing research base focused on the importance of early learning experiences prompted an increase in the number of families looking to access preschool opportunities for their children (Pianta & Howes, 2009). The years between birth to age five represent a rapid pace of growth and development. The learning and development that takes place during this time was identified to be dependent on the experiences and opportunities provided to the child (Phillips, Crouse, & Ralph, 1998; Reynolds & Temple, 1998). Tremendous growth has been identified in the cognitive, social, and emotional areas for children within the preschool years. Social emotional development represents skills focused on the establishment of self regulation of emotions and behaviors, the ability to understand the emotional response of others, and establish cooperative and sustained relationship with others; all skills that have been linked to school readiness indicators (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005; Pianta, Cox, & Snow, 2007). Oral language and phonemic awareness skills established during the preschool years had been directly linked to success of later reading skills and identified as a predictor of future reading abilities (National Reading Council, 1998). Emerging research identified that preschool children were able demonstrate a stronger understanding of problem solving, quantitative understanding, and number sense than first believed possible at the ages of three, four, and five (National Research Council, 2009). Research continued to show that children that accessed preschool experiences demonstrated higher academic achievements compared to children that did not (Gromley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2005; Kiernan et al., 2008; Magnuson, 2007; Scott-Little et al., 2006).
Young Children with Disabilities

Another area of transformation for preschool programming was impacted by the educational opportunities provided to young children with disabilities. The Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, PL 94-142, marked the first federally funded initiative that provided incentives to states for the establishment of programming to serve young children with disabilities between the ages of three to five years. The Education of Handicapped Act Amendments established in 1986 (PL 99-457) moved the optional incentive program of PL 94-142 to a mandated service. PL 99-457 established requirements focusing on free and appropriate public education and least restrictive environments provisions that guided the decision making process as children were identified for special education services. Research regarding the positive outcomes of inclusive educational opportunities for young children with disabilities (e.g., Buyssee & Bailey, 1993; Cole, Mills, Dale, Jenkins, 1991; Guralnick, Connor, Hammond, Gottman, & Kinnish, 1996; Hanson, et al., 2001; Holahan & Costenbader, 2000; Odom & Diamond, 1998) and legislation impacting childcare programs within the Americas with Disabilities Act of 1990 (PL 101-336) increased the educational opportunities for young children with disabilities. The inclusion moment, in particular, promoted a significant restructuring of programs that resulted in efforts to change program operations to support a more diverse population. A changing focus in professional development, educational practices, and shifting belief systems of early education professionals were steps taken by the field to support the inclusion process (Bricker, 1995; Bricker, 2000; Bruder, 1993; Cross, Traub, Hutter-Pishgahi, & Shelton, 2004; Guralnick, 2000; Lierber et al., 2000;
Odom, 2004; Willis, 2003). Increased accountability mandates through the Office of Special Education Programming brought attention to outcomes achieved by children receiving preschool special education services. The national focus established expectations that required a change within the delivery of services (Harbin, Rous, & Mclean, 2004; Early Childhood Outcome Center, 2010).

**Demand for Quality**

Preschool programs had been required to change purpose, services, and offerings to meet the demands of the communities in which they served. Adjustments had occurred without oversight, support, or understanding of how to engage in continuous improvement that matched the context in which the change was to be carried through. As a result, preschool programs operated with varying levels of quality (Mareroff, 2006). The quality of the preschool settings was directly linked with the outcomes that children were able to achieve during the years that marked a foundation within a child’s educational career (Cunningham, 2010). Continuous improvement efforts presented the potential to support programs’ desire for offering quality opportunities to young children if an understanding of how to support successful change was available.

The preschool years marked a time of important developmental milestones. When considering the primary skill areas that emerged and the impact of a child’s surroundings:

The ability of the environment to substantially alter developmental outcomes in the early years suggests the potential for preschool programs to have a powerful impact on child development… Development is not simply an unfolding of
innate capacity, but varies with context. It is a dance in which nature, what the child brings into the world, and nurture, the relationship and other aspects of the child’s context, are partnered. (National Research Council, 2001, p. 58)

The accomplishments of development and learning were highly dependent on the quality of the early childhood settings (Boyd, Barnett, Bodrova, Leong, & Gomby, 2005; Cunningham, 2010; Early, Maxwell, Ying, 2010).

The transformation of early childhood programs across the nation had resulted in the emergence of many new programs with little oversight, guidance or support to ensure quality was inherent and available for all young children that participated (Cost, Quality, and Child Outcome Study, 1999). Across the nation, state funded preschool programs varied significantly in their operations such as (a) how programs were funded, (b) state agencies responsible for overseeing preschool programming, (c) eligibility for program enrollment, (d) requirements and operation of programming schedules (e) standards for programming and early learning outcomes (f) types of services offered to children and families, (g) teacher qualification, (h) professional development standards, and (i) per child spending (Pianta & Howes, 2009). Differences in operations, paired with an evolving purpose, had resulted in varying levels of quality. The majority of young children attending a preschool program participated in settings that were considered “poor to mediocre in quality that compromise children’s long term development” (Kagan, 2001, p. 3).
Increased Accountability

Programs in recent years have faced more accountability to demonstrate increased quality and improved child outcomes as a result of a child’s participation in a preschool program. Good Start, Grow Smart and the Head Start National Reporting System were two examples of initiatives that changed how the field of early childhood responded and considered the outcomes achieved in preschool programs (Brown, 2007; Kagan & Kauerz, 2007; Pianta, 2007; Office of the White House, 2002). The 1990’s marked the start of the standards based reform efforts in early childhood programs with the emergence of the National Education Goals. The federal initiative established standards aimed at ensuring all children were ready to learn as they entered kindergarten (Falk, 2000; National Education Goals Panel, 1992). As a result of the national focus of accountability in preschool programs, more states began to put in place procedures for monitoring programs funded for preschool aged children (Lund, Rous, Moffett, Wood & O’Keefe, 2002). Accountability systems established by state agencies remained primarily focused on health and safety standards, with minimal reporting of child outcome data (Barnett, Robin, Hustedt & Schulman, 2004). The majority of state systems failed to monitor many elements of programming and instructional practices that directly impacted program quality and supported increased child outcomes. Federal government initiatives such as No Child Left Behind and federal monitoring of state performance indicators for special education programs emphasized a focus of accountability on the outcomes children were achieving, rather than all aspects contributing to program quality (Rous, Lobianco, & Moffett, 2005).
Research available continued to emphasize that child outcomes achieved in preschool settings were directly related to the quality of the programming (Duncan, 2003; National Research Council, 2001; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Ensuring quality was dependent on local understanding and capacity to monitor aspects of the program and establish support for continuous improvement. With rapid changes to the purpose and structure, the field of early childhood had not yet explored how programs responded to the need for change and ways in which continuous improvement was approached. Without an understanding of the current context of continuous improvement and efforts in place to achieve change, a mismatch between internal and external demands for improvement remained and quality was impacted.

**Change Across the Educational System**

Throughout the literature, many terms were used to define the efforts to achieve change including organizational development, systems change, school reform and continuous improvement. The terms were used interchangeably to describe the process and considerations that educational programs attended to in order to promote change. Commonalities across the many ways in which the efforts were described were characterized by the desire to alter current program operations that were presumed to better serve children, families, communities, and staff. It was through continuous improvement efforts that change was made possible to achieve the targeted goal.

**Preschool Context**

In addition to the many demands for change preschool programs faced, the efforts of continuous improvement were complicated by the many interacting levels of the
system and types of preschool programs in operation. Preschool was often described as a system of systems (Hayden, Smith, Rapport, & Frederick, 1999). From the communities in which it operated, to the many agencies providing oversight, preschool programs had a vast number of stakeholders and external influences impacting operations (Pianta & Howes, 2009). Across the United States, no single description of the preschool system was available to clearly articulate the vast amount of opportunities provided to young children prior to entry into kindergarten (National Research Council, 2001). The center based programs available within the preschool system were commonly defined within three categories, including community based, state funded, and Head Start. Descriptions of the programs that fell within the three categories were described differently across states. Community based programs generally encompassed both profit and nonprofit programs, were operated by a private business, public agency, or family homecare provider. Primary purpose of community based programs was focused on care outside of the home; variations across the programs existed in how educational outcomes were addressed. Subsidized funding was available directly to families who qualified in order to support access to community based early care opportunities for their children (Office of Child Care, 2011). State funded preschool programs received oversight from a state agency and direct financial support to fund portions of program operations, teacher and administrative salaries, and cost per child. Program requirements for state funded preschools were focused more on the educational aspects of the center based opportunity compared to community based programs (Maeroff, 2006). Amount of funding allocated and program requirements differed from one state to the next (Barnett, Epstein, Carolan,
Fitzgerald, Ackerman, & Friedman, 2010). Head Start programs received federal funds, and in some cases state funding, routed through local public and private agencies to increase access to center based opportunities for economically disadvantaged children with the goal of school readiness (Office of Head Start, 2011).

Each of the different categories of the preschool system included variation on the operational expectations and funding availability. Programs, therefore, often operated in isolation leading site administration to implement a program from a single agenda and vision without consideration for other impeding factors (Schultz, Lopez, & Hochberg, 1996). Making change a sustainable reality was described as being dependent on the flexibility and support of the systems interacting with the area of targeted improvement (Blasé, 2009). Disconnection from the systems impacting early childhood programs was one of the reasons cited by the Good Start, Grow Smart initiative as to why programs remained low performing (Harbin, Rous, Mclean, 2004). The federal initiative found two factors that negatively impacted efforts of continuous improvement including lack of alignment between early childhood programs and missing program evaluation data.

Gallagher and Tramill (2002) identified that the coordination and belief systems guiding the decision making process among all agencies across the early childhood system must align in order for any effort to move forward at the local level. The context of preschool programs presented a complex structure in which continuous improvement needed to occur. The resources and information available to support preschool programs in achieving change, however, was taken primarily from what was known from the kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) educational system. Research failed to focus
on developing an understanding of how change had been supported in preschool when considering the unique characteristics in comparison to K-12.

**Translation from K-12**

The topic of continuous improvement was not absent from the early childhood literature; however, what was available had not been prevalent at the local level where the focus of change needed to occur. The past 20 years in education had demonstrated a cycle of reform that directly impacted K-12 programs and prompted various continuous improvement efforts (McLaughlin, Henderson, & Rhim, 2008). Vast amount of information was available to guide K-12 programs’ understanding of what was needed to ensure change was achievable. Literature available for preschool programs, however, was limited even though change was demanded of the programs. In a validation study exploring accountability structures for early childhood programs, respondents indicated that accountability and efforts to support quality needed to recognize the differences between K-12 structures and early childhood programs (Rous, Lobianco, Moffett, & Lund, 2005).

Terminology used to translate continuous improvement efforts from K-12 to preschool generally had different meanings across programs and presented confusion within the implementation (Harbin, Rous, & Mclean, 2004). Many of the considerations used to guide continuous improvement in preschool programs had been taken directly from the literature available for K-12 programs and was not researched within the local preschool sector (e.g., Hayden, Smith, Rapport, Frederick, 1999; Hayden, Frederick, Smith, and Broudy, 2001). Reform that mirrored what occurred in K-12 did not take into
consideration the differences between the child, student, and family structure that defined the early childhood system (Sadowksi, 2006; Stipeck; 2006). Differences between the K-12 system and the preschool sector were observable in the lack of requirement for compulsory participation, funding differences, policy expectations, teacher credentials, and agency oversight. As the standards based reform, for example, took hold within preschool programs, many were concerned that the application of educational practices that emerged in K-12 would eliminate developmentally appropriate practices in the early years and view readiness for learning through an inappropriate association with skill development in children (Kagan et al, 1995; Meisels, 1999; Scott-Little et al., 2006; Shore, 1998). Through interviews with 28 early childhood professionals and observations of an assessment task force aligning preschool practices with K-12, results of the study identified that preschool professionals had to change their views of readiness and redefine the purpose of preschool to align with the mission of the K-12 sector (Brown, 2010). Direct translation of approaches defined for K-12 comprised the beliefs and practices inherit in the preschool sector. Within continuous improvement efforts, early childhood professionals needed access to further research that explored the continuous improvement process to determine relevance of the information presented from the K-12 system. In a review of the K-12 literature on continuous improvement, a common set of factors were identified that supported change efforts.

Change Reform in K-12 Education

Considerations to support change first entered the field of education in the mid 1960’s. Miles (1963) was credited with first presenting educators with the idea that a
school should be viewed as a system and this perspective was intended to guide how educational entities entered the process of continuous improvement. Large scale curricular reform was funded at the federal level and influenced programs to engage in continuous improvement. Evaluation of the early effort reform found that the majority of programs involved failed to meet expected outcomes (Fullan, 1991). It was not until the early 1970’s that the field of education was presented with guidance on how to develop continuous improvement through an organizational development model focused on educational settings. The Handbook of Organization Development in Schools (Schmuck, Runkel, Saturen, Martell, & Derr, 1972) was contributed with the early movements in education that supported continuous improvement from an organizational perspective. The 1980’s once again sparked large scale reform as the report, A Nation at Risk, identified the declining quality of education and the poor outcomes achieved by students (Owens & Valesky, 2007). With the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001, educational accountability focused on increasing the achievement of all children within K-12 influenced a greater need for the application of continuous improvement.

**Factors of Change**

Across the research focused on change, a common set of factors that impacted success within the efforts of continuous improvement emerged. Michael Fullan’s research on successful change had been identified as one of the most significant contributions to transforming how educational programs entered into the process of continuous improvement (Curtis et al., 2008). First identified by Fullan (1993), eight
 factors of change that directly impacted continuous improvement efforts had been emphasized throughout the research. Continuous improvement efforts initiated without consideration of the eight factors risked effectiveness and sustainability. Throughout the research on continuous improvement, the eight factors were discussed.

**Engaging moral purpose.** The first factor, termed as engaging moral purpose, focused on gaining a collective interest for undertaking continuous improvement. The other seven factors identified were described as being driven by the moral purpose established within the continuous improvement efforts (Fullan, 2009). Achieving investment in change from the community and educators within a school setting was seen as an important consideration within continuous improvement (Adelman & Taylor, 2007; Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis, 2002; Fisher, Frey, & Williams, 2003; Frey & Pumpian, 2006; Leonard, 2011; Hopkins & Higham, 2007; MCREL, 2000). The educational system that defined a school was described within the community in which it resided. The educational system was impacted by the many surrounding influences and changes in the school sector; influenced by both the individuals internally and externally associated with the school. Comparisons of the educational system could be made to the considerations described within a discussion of child development. As described by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979),

Human development is the process through which the growing person acquires a more extended, differentiated and valid conception of the ecological environment, and becomes motivated and able to engage in activities that reveal the properties
of, sustain, or restructure that environment at levels of similar or greater complexity in form and content. (p. 27)

Continuous improvement efforts needed to take into consideration support for both internal and external stakeholders impacted by the change, such as students, staff, and the community. Without support from all levels of influence within the system continuous improvement was described as unsuccessful (Glasgow, 2002). Schools were encouraged to operate with an understanding that consumer support was influential within continuous improvement efforts (Grimes & Tilly, 1996). Parent support of the goals for change was identified as a factor that impacted student achievement (Gunh, 2009). Gunh stated, “parents and communities not only directly influence children’s development, but also indirectly, through their interaction with schools. That is, community, family, school partnerships, school climate, and district collaboration all can contribute to the effectiveness of schools” (p. 340). In a study completed by Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollows, and Easton (1998), 33% of the elementary schools included in the study all demonstrated change over time as a result of having a priority focused on establishing relationships and communication with parents of children in the school. The other elementary schools featured in the study never achieved a level of change that was sustained over time. When schools were viewed as systems, it was understood that actions by each individual impacted the entire system; therefore, reaching a goal was reliant on the collective groups’ investment and support of the targeted change.

When change was first proposed, the individuals impacted by change were observed approaching the process with reservation. Change, at times, was first viewed as
unfeasible, not necessary, elicited feelings of fear, and challenged an individual’s belief system (Ervin, Schaugency, Goodman, McGlinchey, & Matthews, 2006; Connor, 1995; Hall & Hord, 2006; Hynds, 2010). For a program to achieve successful implementation, 80% of the staff needed to support the proposed change or the innovation was not recommended for implementation (Sugai & Horner, 2006). Readiness for change was defined as collaboration and local ownership in which stakeholders had opportunities to contribute to the direction of continuous improvement efforts (Illback & Zins, 1995). Moral purpose required all stakeholders to internalize and believe in the mission of the continuous improvement and to work together to support implementation by starting the process ready for change.

**Building capacity.** The second change factor was often a missing element in plans for continuous improvement (Fullan, 2009). Building capacity was defined as how the policies, strategies, and actions within the continuous improvement efforts built knowledge, provided needed resources, and established a shared identity among individuals carrying the change process forward. Establishing local capacity to support change was essential to sustaining long term effects (Adelman & Taylor, 2007; Fuchs, Fuchs, Harris, & Robers, 1996; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Noell, Duhon, Gatti, & Connell, 2002; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Southworth, 2002). Shapiro (2006) stated that in order to “sustain change long into the future, one must find ways to continue the implementation of the model without the influences of the external resources that are usually brought into support the initiation of the change process” (p. 262). Many continuous improvement models in educational settings were first influenced by external
factors that provided support in the way of funding, guidance, required regulations, and training. The approach taken to continuous improvement was, therefore, reactionary and driven by the goals of the external influence (Noell & Gansle, 2009). Johnson, Hays, Center, and Daley (2004) identified six elements of capacity building the supported sustained change, which included (a) strengthened links between internal and external supports systems (b) identified leadership roles and actions that were needed to support change (c) secured support of the individuals that have power within the program to influence others’ commitment to change, (d) identified the needed resources to support improvement and development of a plan for the acquisition of the resources, (e) defined operation policies and procedures for the program that aligned with the targeted change, and (f) supported staff in acquiring needed expertise to fulfill their role in the change process. Building capacity within continuous improvement put the needed supports in place to move the efforts forward (Wohlstetter et al, 1997).

Knowledge of the process of change. One of the key areas that supported capacity building was identified as having knowledge of change. The third factor focused on building the knowledge of stakeholders regarding what was needed to ensure change was achievable. Sarason (1990) identified that many school reform efforts were doomed to fail from the start of implementation as a result of not taking the time to inform staff and other stakeholders of change principles. Discussion prior to implementation needed to focus on developing an understanding of the time required before change was evident. Overtime stakeholders lost interest or became inconsistent in the implementation of the improvement process as a result of much upfront effort, with little outcome (Fullan,
Abandonment of the process was a reality faced by programs when the needed length of implementation was not carried through due to lacking change knowledge (Fixen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). Two areas were identified that needed to be discussed with stakeholders to ensure support for change efforts (Grimes & Tilly, 1996). First, stakeholders needed to be informed of the model of continuous improvement that the program was operating. Second, leadership had to educate others on how the continuous improvement model aligned with other areas of the educational system. Stakeholders needed a realistic understanding of what sustainable change entailed and what their involvement would look like in order to obtain meaning in the process (Curtis et al., 2008). As Fullan, Curress, & Kilcher (2005) stated:

A missing ingredient in most failed cases is appreciation and use of what we call change knowledge: understanding and insight about the process of change and the key drivers that make for successful change in practice. The presence of change knowledge does not guarantee success, but its absence ensures failure. (p. 54).

It was the responsibility of the individuals supporting continuous improvement efforts to transfer the knowledge they had about change and empower others to develop the same understanding in order for success to be possible.

**Culture of learning.** Fourth factor brought into account the culture and context in which change was being carried out. A culture of learning that influenced change established a vision focused on developing knowledge among the members of the school community (Duffy, Rogerson, Blick, 2000). Kotter (1996) stated that implementation of continuous improvement cannot be viewed as a linear process that was planned out in its
entirety as every challenge or direction could not be predicted. Much of what stakeholders needed to know to support continuous improvement was uncovered as change was experienced (Fullan, 2009). Donald Schon (1987) stated,

> We must become adept at learning. We must become able not only to transform our institutions, in response to changing situations and requirements: we must invest and develop institutions which are “learning systems”, that is to say, systems capable of bringing about their own continuing transformations. (p.16)

Fullan (2005) identified that in order to change the educational system, you must first change the culture of the school. Impacting the culture of educators within a program was a result of communities that collaborated and committed to learning from each other. Through learning communities, stakeholders recognized the interest of others to commit to change and found value in the work being done. A sense of community emerged and a shared vision for change was established (Harris, 2009; Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007). In a study examining the effectiveness of professional learning communities, Richmond & Manokore, (2010) observed two elementary grade learning communities. The professional learning communities that resulted in change through inquiry fostered (a) a sense of community, (b) confidence in their knowledge of curricular content, (c) understanding of the impact of accountability on student outcomes, (d) teacher learning, and (e) what sustainability of reform entailed. Lack of training and ongoing mentorship among staff was found to contribute to the failure of change (Sarason, 1996).
In many successful continuous improvement models, procedures were put into place to support the establishment of professional communities of learning (Doolittle, Sudeck, & Rattigan, 2008). Professional learning communities addressed the capacity needed to support change by allowing the individuals impacted to learn from each others’ experience and knowledge (Durfour & Eaker; 1998; Harris & Chrispeels, 2008; Darling Hammond, 1996; Mullen & Schunk, 2010; Resnick, 2010). Rosenholtz (1989) was first credited with presenting the foundational considerations that helped to define the understanding of the importance of professional conversations to influence the practices of teachers. Establishing procedures to support conversation among staff was stated as an essential step for achieving the level of learning and reflection needed to support change. As Harris and Jones (2010) stated, “teachers collaborating is not enough. There are numerous examples around the world of well-funded teacher networks that fail to produce the gains expected, simply because they are shallow or empty networks devoid of any real focus on learner outcomes” (p. 174). Providing time was not enough for professional conversations to result in change, success required (a) focus and alignment with the goals for continuous improvement, (b) shared values embraced, (c) a focus on child outcomes, and (d) inquiry based discussions (Hord, 1997; Mason, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Ongoing conversations and learning through the process of change was critical to ensuring continuous improvement remained a priority and that the plan implemented was a match with the context emerging.

**Culture of evaluation.** Developing cultures of evaluation was the fifth change factor described. Fullan (2009) identified that successful change stemmed from programs
that accessed and gathered data on the targeted area of improvement, analyzed the
information for a detailed understanding of what had occurred, revised plans of
improvement based on the data, and shared progress with internal and external
stakeholders. Use of data to understand where a program has been and the direction it
needed to go had been stated as a measure of the effectiveness of continuous
improvement (Cromney, 2000; Earl & Katz, 2006; Gorlewski, 2011; Prew & Quaigrain,
2010; Protheroe, 2010). Often when change was targeted, individuals within the
educational system worked from the assumption that the current system had little value or
place in the new vision (Abrahamson, 2004). Steps to analyze what was known about the
current system prior to making any changes were rarely taken, resulting in minimal
consideration to the external and internal factors that impacted the process. Even when
measures were taken to understand the data, programs lacked capacity for following the
important aspect of any systems level change effort….is the use of outcome data to
inform decision making” (p. 253). Data collected during the implementation of
continuous improvement process needed to focus on the outcome of change,
implementation process, and the operation of the organizational system (Noell & Gansle,
2006). Duffy, Rogerson and Blick (2000) stated “data is needed to build understanding
and information to develop a meaning and value and therefore supporting knowledge
about a situation” (p. 27). Without a process of evaluation, programs were unable to
maintain an accurate understanding of the current context of the program and the impact
of change in order to make informed decisions about how to guide the future of the continuous improvement effort.

**Leadership.** The sixth factor focused on leadership for change which has been argued throughout research as one of the most influential components of any successful continuous improvement effort. Sammons (1999) indicated “almost every single study of school effectiveness has shown both primary and secondary leadership to be the key factor in the success achieved” (p.195). Leaders set the tone for the culture and context within the programs (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Anderson & Simone, 2011; Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; May & Supovitz, 2011; McLaughlin & Hyle; 2001; Singh & Al-Fadhil, 2011; Supovitz & Buckley, 2008; Waters, Marzano, and McNulty, 2003). Means, Padilla, Debarger, and Bakia (2009) identified that leadership needed to ensure (a) a trusting environment, (b) training for staff, (c) opportunities for collaboration, and (d) data were used as the elements that supported a culture where change could be possible. Without a clear direction and someone guiding the way, staff were not committed to change, even when it was clear that change needed to occur (Finnigan, 2010; Huggins, Scheurich, & Morgan, 2011; Moolenarr, Daly, & Sleegers, 2010). Leadership and individuals that hold the power to make decisions regarding continuous improvement efforts needed to be identified from the start of the process as they held the key to impacting the final outcome (Fullan, 2009). Leadership within educational settings was usually limited to the district superintendent or building principals. Continuous improvement models that embraced a view of leadership only within those that held traditional leadership roles often fell short in efforts to sustain
change (Camburn, Rowan, & Taylor, 2003; Coddard & Miller, 2010; Gronn, 2000). In a study of leadership structures in six high school programs, Hargreaves, Moore, Fink, Brayman, and White (2003) found that even with strong leadership, change failed to sustain as individuals in leadership positions changed. A leadership structure must be established for a minimum of five years in order for change to be possible (Schaughency & Ervin, 2006).

Effective leadership within the context of continuous improvement efforts was dependent on a distributed model in which other staff members, outside of administrative positions, were fostered into a leadership role (Clemons-Ingram & Fessler, 1997; Frost & Durrant, 2003; Park & Datnow, 2009; Spillane, 2006; Timperley, 2005). Successful leaders within continuous improvement relied on (a) setting the direction for change, (b) developing people into leadership roles, and (c) redesigning the organization for capacity for change (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Distributed leadership models built a culture where communication, trust, respect, and coordinated leadership guided collaboration and investment for change (Curtis et al., 2008).

Lew Smith’s (2008) portrait analysis of eight schools from 48 programs that received the National School Change Award in 2007 demonstrated the impact of leadership on the efforts of continuous improvement. The award was sponsored by the National American Association of School Administration and the National Principals Leadership Institute to honor building level systems that achieved continuous improvement on four different dimensions. A total of 127 schools applied for the award; eight were selected to receive the honor. In his review of the eight schools, Smith...
examined six elements of program operations to create detailed portraits of the continuous improvement efforts that resulted in positive outcomes for the schools. The six elements included (a) context, (b) capacity, (c) conversations, (d) internal dissonance, (e) external dissonance, and (f) leadership to describe school change.

Results of the portrait analysis revealed the common factors influenced positive change within the programs. Three elementary schools were included in the study and demonstrated how continuous improvement impacted the educational structure for children between kindergarten and eighth grade. In all three programs, it was the principal that was associated with the factor that directly contributed to the success achieved. Government Hill Elementary in Anchorage Alaska served 459 kindergarteners through eighth grade students and employed 31 staff members. Prior to the improvement efforts, the community viewed the school as an ineffective learning center evident by the declining enrollment. Teachers reported that the school was an undesirable place to work and program operations were conducted with no vision or sense of purpose. Curriculum implementation was left to the discretion of individual teachers and in 1996 the school was ranked 60 out of 61 within the state’s elementary schools. Under the leadership of the principal, Stephanie Stephens, a continuous improvement effort was put in place that operated under the guidelines of putting children’s interest first, requiring teachers to demonstrate accountability for the implementation of the proposed plan, fostering alliances internal and externally, recognizing the achievements of the program, ensuring support to teachers in the way of resources and professional development, defining a new culture and climate in which to operate, and engaging parents in the school community.
As a result of the continuous improvement process, reading and writing scores doubled in five years and teachers began to describe the school as having a shared vision, collaborative setting, stable, and welcoming environment.

Facing a similar set of characteristics, Skycrest Elementary in San Juan, California identified that 90% of the 723 kindergarten through sixth grade students demonstrated reading abilities at one or more levels below the reported grade. Teachers described the school as out of control, no established vision, violent, an isolated working environment, and unable to meet the needs of students due to outdated curriculum resources. The building principal, Chris Zarzana, started her first year in the building by working on changing the school culture through grade level meetings focused on data and partnering with teachers that valued the process of change. The staff contributed successful change to (a) a strong vision articulated by the building principal, (b) constant assessment of students, (c) changing the culture of the school to focus on positive attitudes, rituals, and routines, (d) consistency and celebration of work, and (e) strong leadership structure.

Continuous improvement efforts at South Heights Elementary in Kentucky focused on the establishment of curriculum reform, common assessments, and ongoing evaluation of student outcomes. The school operated with a strong leader in place and a staff committed to change, but lacked the understanding of what information needed to be collected to guide decisions that lead to change. A new vision for the program that articulated high expectations for students, persistent effort on the part of the staff, and a strong evaluation process resulted in the programs academic ranking advancing form 41.2
to 65.7 among elementary schools in Kentucky. Staff described the program after the implementation of the reform as embracing a new vision, strengthening professional development, supporting team work, increasing parental engagement, and defining specific goals for learning.

**Fostering coherence making.** Fostering coherence making was the seventh factor identified in Fullan’s work. Within one program or school building, implementation of elements of the educational program looked different from one classroom to the next where coherence was lacking. Successful change was fostered when all key stakeholders had consistency in their operations. All plans, policies, procedures, and training put in place to support continuous improvement efforts needed to align with the goals for change (Davies, Popescu, & Gunter, 2011; Garmston & Wellman, 1999; Hansen, 1994). Lack of alignment within the plan for improvement resulted in inconsistency within implementation (Ellsworth, 2000; Sarason, 1990). Individuals within the educational system needed to be identified to monitor implementation of continuous improvement efforts and to refocus stakeholders when actions were not aligned with the targeted goal. Horner (2008) found a similar link between the success of implementing change in a program wide positive behavioral support model and the investment of all stakeholders impacting the change initiative. The success of the program wide model relied on the extent to which the continuous improvement efforts supported stakeholders’ alignment with the common goal. As Sugai and Horner, (2006) stated, “an organization is defined by the extent to which the collective behaviors of an organization’s membership move the organization towards the
achievement of a common goal...the organization need(s) appropriate level system supports to prompt desired goal related behaviors” (p. 248).

**Tri level development.** Cultivating tri level development was a recent addition to the list of factors as a result of research on the external impact of continuous improvement efforts (Fullan, 2009; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). The idea of tri level development guided programs to consider what impact the school, district, and state level had on the process of continuous improvement and what actions each sector contributed to support change. A system that fostered change was a system that was described as open and adaptive. Programs that operated without consideration of how other levels of the educational system interfaced missed important information that impacted the direction of the work (Curtis et al., 2008). Building level operations needed to take into consideration the regulations and requirements of both the district and state. State level systems were guided to consider establishing policies and practices that recognized the unique characteristics of the local level. A reciprocal relationship was needed among the different levels of the system to ensure adaptability of each individual level. As an external factor influenced the operation of one part of the system, adjustments were made to ensure the path of continuous improvement was not compromised and the interaction of the state, district, and building levels were maintained.

One example of tri level development was observed in the statewide systems change efforts funded by the Office of Special Education Programming, between 1987 and 1995. The project aimed to increase the inclusive opportunities for children with
severe disabilities. Sixteen states were awarded the statewide system change grants and contributed to a momentum that impacted state and local reform efforts (Karasoff & Halvorsen, 1992). Tri level considerations were represented in the planning and implementation stages of the project. As described by Preston and Kleinert (1992), the state department of education helped to establish a cohesive change process by developing a series of manuals and position papers to guide the districts implementation of change at the local level. Universities of higher education coordinated personnel preparation programming to focus on the same information targeted within the change process. A system of technical assistance was designed to provide needed training and resources to local education agencies to ensure capacity for supporting the desired change through a coordinated system of professional development. Procedures for the evaluation and monitoring of the project were developed at the state level that coordinated an advisory council and means of communication between the levels of the system. Data and information from the local sector and across key stakeholder groups, including teachers, administrators, families, and speech language pathologist expected to implement the change were used to guide the development of information at the state level. Strategies to overcome anticipated barriers during the implementation process were disseminated in materials produced by the state department and focused on during discussions and training with the local stakeholders.

**Change in the Preschool Setting**

In comparison to the literature available on continuous improvement for K-12 programs, few resources and little research was completed on the topic focused on
preschool settings. Through a search of eight databases (e.g., Education Research Complete, ERIC, Professional Development, Psychology and Behavioral Science Collection, PsycINFO, Academic Search Premier, Academic Search Complete, Wilson Web) using the terms preschool and early childhood in combination with change, continuous improvement, systems change, and educational change, literature was reviewed that focused on either state or local level change that impacted preschool programs operated within United States. The research completed on the topic within early childhood had predominately presented a state level focus of continuous improvement and did not take into account the local perspective of change (Schultz, Lopez, & Hochberg, 1996). Studies completed at the state level had adopted either a case study or interview based methodology in order to explore continuous improvement efforts. The local level of the education system was promoted as the core of continuous improvement efforts and the influence that lead to successful change (Mojkoswki, 1995). The literature base available to local level of the preschool system was presented as guidance, with little empirical validation for the audience in which the information had been designed to support. The guidance provided took directly from what was known from the K-12 literature. While commonalities existed among the two bodies of literature, the extent to which the factors of change from K-12 supported the local preschool system to support change was unknown. The information available did not take into consideration the unique characteristics of the preschool system or explore the effectiveness of approaches utilized by the audience.
**State level focus of change.** Establishment of a statewide infrastructure of support was one of the first areas that the literature discussed within the focus of continuous improvement in preschool settings. (Kagan, 2001). Gallagher stated “one of the most sticking characteristics of the current programs for young children outside the home is the absence of a comprehensive infrastructure or support system to stand behind the delivery of services to children and families” (p. 2). Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, and Mclean (2005) defined infrastructure as policies, procedures, and organizational structure that guided all programmatic, fiscal, personnel, and administrative decisions. Infrastructures that supported local continuous improvement efforts included (a) guidelines for program evaluation, (b) collaboration with all agencies overseeing early childhood programs (c) data systems in place, (d) licensing procedures for staff and programs, (e) comprehensive planning involving stakeholders at all levels, (f) demonstration projects, and (g) access to technical assistance and high quality professional development (Gallageher & Clifford, 2000; Kagan, 2001; The National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force, 2007; Schultz, Lopez, Hochberg, 1996).

Kahn et al., (2009) reviewed 37 state plans over a five year period in an evaluation of the technical assistance provided to support the implementation of regulations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education in early intervention and preschool special education programs. Researchers identified characteristics of a successful technical assistance system that supported change in order to adhere to the regulations which included (a) the involvement of stakeholder representation at all levels of the system, (b) commitment from state leadership, (c) shared understanding of the
issues driving the need for change, (d) shared vision for how to address the challenges at each level of the system, (e) plan for implementation through a multi level approach, (f) monitoring and evaluation of progress, (g) evaluation of the effectiveness of the plan for technical assistance (Kasprazak, et al., 2011). The successful models for technical assistance, therefore, recognized that "state infrastructure, local infrastructure, and systems of personnel development interacted either to support or to hinder the implementation of effective practices at the local level, which, in turn, affected the outcomes for children with disabilities and their families" (Blasé, 2009, p. 27). The goal of a statewide system of support for early childhood programs in the plans reviewed targeted changing individual practitioners to support child progress. Findings from the studied indicated that the only way to impact the individual was through the development of technical assistance that supported the local infrastructure to carry through change (Blasé). State level of the system needed to promote capacity building and control of the process within the local sector.

**Local level change.** While state agencies can put in place guidance to impact continuous improvement efforts, the authority, procedures, implementation and monitoring must fall to local control. It was too large of a task for state agencies to fully monitor all aspects of a high quality programming and ensure progress towards change (Gromley et al, 2005; Wong, Cook, Barnett & Jung, 2008). Programs have demonstrated failed attempts at fully implementing state program requirements. The local level needed to adopt appropriate procedures to ensure continuous improvement was achievable. Curtis et al., (2008) stated:
Because of its people, a school is a social system. Furthermore, no two schools are functionally alike because of the uniqueness of the individuals who inhabit and affect each of the schools. It is for this fundamental reason that, despite efforts to affect district policies and operational procedures, the school building most often is the focus of system level change efforts. (p. 888)

Local agencies needed to be the lead in organizing school improvement and the state as a supporter of local efforts (Lusi, 1994; Mojkoswki, 1995). Fixsen and Blasé (1993) found that in their implementation of the Teaching Family Model program, dissemination of support and information to assist with implementation needed to move from the state level to the local system through the development of regional training sites. Trying to achieve change at the state level did not support effective, sustainable, replication of the program. Local infrastructure was critical to the implementation of the program.

Considerations for local early childhood systems were emphasized to the field in a federally funded study by Hayden, Smith, Rapport, and Frederick (1999). The Collaborative Planning Project Model was designed to provide guidance on how to develop local collaborative relationships to establish a long term vision of change. Guidance featured in the document stated that in order for change to be possible, there must be an understanding of the current context, shared vision, professional development aligned to the goals of change to enhance knowledge and skills, adequate resources, ongoing support for implementation of the plan, and monitoring and evaluation procedures. Hayden et al., (1999) indicated that local systems can support change in a
program through “actions of systematically planning, implementing and evaluating strategies that impact both the organizations and individuals” (p. 3).

Local leadership was seen as an important factor in early childhood continuous improvement efforts (Kagan, 2001; Schwartz, 1994; Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & Mclean, 2005). Leadership was defined differently across preschool programs and included a variety of individuals. Role of a facilitator was described as being essential to the process. Hayden, Frederick, Smith, and Broud (2001) defined a facilitator as “a person who was acceptable to all members of the group, was substantively neutral, did not have authority over the group, and helped improve the way it identified and solved problems and made decisions in order to increase the groups effectiveness” (p. 4). Facilitators of change needed to remain impartial and be seen by other key stakeholders as someone that was willing to listen to a variety of perspectives on the current context of the program. Additional guidance on the roles and responsibility of leadership in early childhood programs identified the following elements as critical to change which included (a) demonstrated commitment to the goals defined for change and plan developed (b) monitored the development of a comprehensive plan that involved collaborative partnerships and key stakeholders, (c) ensured shared decision making, (d) provided timely allocation of resources, (e) ensured alignment of change maintains a vision for positive outcomes for children and families (Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & Mclean, 2005).

Shared decision making and planning promoted the development of trust, partnerships, and commitment to continuous improvement efforts that lead to successful
change. The Division of Early Childhood (2005) encouraged the involvement of families as key partners in continuous improvement efforts. The family was many times not included in the vision and planning stages of the process, however, commonly viewed as a consumer to the change. Establishment of a shared vision brought in perspectives of all individuals impacted by the change in order to (a) articulate what should be achieved within a three to five year period, (b) build upon what was understood regarding the current status of the program, and (c) begin to lead into the identification of the goals for improvement (Hayden et al., 1999). Once the vision for change had been agreed upon, next steps required the development of a comprehensive plan for determining the priority areas to target for change and the procedures needed to ensure continuous improvement was achieved. Without commitment from the internal and external stakeholders, sustainability of change was challenged.

The final two considerations referenced in the preschool literature focused on the need for ongoing professional development and evaluation efforts. Blasé (1999) indicated that change at the local level was dependent on ongoing support in the way of coaching and mentoring. In the process of continuous improvement, leadership needed to put a priority on the skills and knowledge that early childhood professionals obtained to ensure successful implementation (Schultz, Lopez, Hochberg, 1996). Early childhood professionals in both community based and state funded programs were found to enter the profession with different skills levels and training. Many preschool teachers were hired into their jobs without proper training to support the diverse needs of students they worked with in the classroom (Kagan, 2001). Ongoing professional development was
needed to ensure the capacity of all professionals to carry through change (Schickedanz, 1994). In order to determine if what stakeholders put in place was effective and capacity was established to sustain efforts, evaluation of the process needed to guide decisions about further training needs, resource allocation, and achievement of targeted goals (National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force, 2007; Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & Mclean, 2005). Research on continuous improvement efforts in preschool programs needed to transition the literature base from guidance to validated information. The first stage of making the transition required the exploration of the current approaches utilized by preschool programs in an effort to achieve change.

**Summary**

Discussion of continuous improvement was not missing from the literature available to early childhood programs, however, many gaps existed in order for the local sector to understand what was needed to support change within the context of the preschool system. First, research that focused on the topic of continuous improvement explored the efforts from a state level perspective. Second, literature available to the local preschool sector was developed as guidance with no empirical evidence to support the use of the information presented. Third, the literature base pulled heavily from the K-12 sector without consideration of the unique characteristics of the early childhood system. The need to adapt was not just a historical part of the evolving preschool system; change was described as a continual reality that will be faced by preschool programs (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Change, therefore, had been required of preschool
programs without a clear understanding of the approaches used or the factors that assisted in meeting the many internal and external demands placed on the programs.

While empirically based information needed to be accessible to preschool programs as they engaged in efforts to achieve change, first, an understanding of the current approaches utilized within preschool programs needed to be identified. Literature on continuous improvement and implementation research identified that in order for change in practice to be a reality, an understanding was needed that defined what has occurred, what worked, and what challenges have emerged (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Fullan, 2009; Hayden, Smith, Rapport, & Frederick, 1999). This approach was adopted within the design of the research study. Variation across the context of community based, state funded, and Head Start programs required that continuous improvement needed to be studied within each preschool category separately. State funded preschool programs were targeted for the study to explore the current approaches of continuous improvement in one portion of the preschool system. A grounded theory, qualitative design was employed for the study as it allowed an exploratory framework in which to investigate a research topic that had not been fully discussed prior. The research design allowed the development of an understanding of the topic to emerge from the perspective of the individuals involved within the work. The study resulted in the development of a theory that identified context and process elements that were represented within the continuous improvement efforts of programs that achieved successful change.
CHAPTER II

METHODS

The study explored the current approaches to continuous improvement carried out at the local level by state funded preschool programs. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, little information was available in the literature on the application of continuous improvement efforts within preschool settings. Research efforts had not explored the topic or established an understanding of what was currently supported at the local level.

A qualitative, grounded theory research design was selected for the study. The selected research design provided a structure for which the topic of continuous improvement was explored from the perspectives of the individuals involved. Activities associated with the data collection and analysis process were implemented in five phases throughout the study. A summary of the activities completed by the researcher in each stage is presented in Table 1. Theory development was the result of the research process in which the current context of the studied phenomenon was identified. The selected research methodology, data collection procedures, and analysis process are further described in the chapter.

Grounded Theory Approach

Unique among qualitative research designs, the grounded theory approach presented a systematic process in which to explore the phenomenon. The grounded theory approach, as first defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), emphasized that the theory about a phenomenon should emerge within the context being studied rather than defined by prior experiences, literature, or assumptions employed by the researcher.
Table 1

*Description of the Research Phases and Activities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Phase</th>
<th>Data Collection Activities</th>
<th>Data Analysis Activities</th>
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<tr>
<td>Phase One</td>
<td>• Documentation reviewed</td>
<td>• Review of documentation to determine themes and further information needed during initial interview</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Development of participant specific interview questions</td>
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<td>Phase Two</td>
<td>• First interview with initial participants</td>
<td>• Incident by incident coding process completed after each interview</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Development of follow up interview questions</td>
<td>• Profile development and revisions made based on new information introduced</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Completion of follow up interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Additional participants introduced based on emerging themes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Follow up interviews completed for participants introduced in phase two</td>
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<td>Phase Three</td>
<td>• Focused coding process</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Axial coding process</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Analysis of program profiles using criteria developed for programs that achieved successful change</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase Four</td>
<td>• Theory development</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Program profiles analyzed and reorganized using the theory elements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase Five</td>
<td>• Member check process</td>
<td>• Program profiles reviewed</td>
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<td>Phase Six</td>
<td>• Peer review process</td>
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*Note.* Each phase represented a significant change in how the researcher collected or analyzed data. Activities listed in phase two occurred simultaneously and the order is not intended to indicate a linear process.
Such an approach to grounded theory had been labeled as the objectivist approach, in which data collected through the study was viewed as “objective facts about the knowable world” (Charmaz, 2002, p. 677). The role of the researcher within the objectivist approach was to become an unbiased observer within the research process. Researchers must separate from the participants and research context, disregard prior assumptions and knowledge about the topic being explored in order to uncover the external reality being studied (Charmaz, 2000).

Modern interpretations of the grounded theory approach recognized that both the researcher and participants have information that could contribute to the emerging theory. Information gathered through the constructive approach was co-constructed between the researcher and the participants. Creswell (2002) stated that in using a grounded theory approach, researchers needed to recognize how meaning and actions were constructed; seeing data as views of the phenomena rather than final facts. A constructive approach to grounded theory was selected as the guiding framework for the study. Information gathered through the literature review was considered during the data analysis process in order to explain the theory regarding the continuous improvement process.

Assumptions

Researchers using a qualitative approach strive to address a research focus through a naturalistic, inquiry process. Qualitative research was described as allowing for the exploration of a phenomenon by uncovering the perspectives of the individuals impacted, rather than relying on the researcher’s view of the situation (Creswell, 2002). The role of the researcher was described as not having to separate their position or
knowledge from the situation in which they were studying, but rather to recognize their assumptions of the research focus. The researcher’s prior experiences and understanding of the studied phenomenon had a place in the qualitative research process; the way in which this information was used was dependent on the research design selected. In any qualitative research design, prior assumptions and knowledge of the researcher must be identified prior to the start of the study. Recognition of the researcher’s current understanding and beliefs about the topic assisted in avoiding bias during the data collection and analysis procedures and became critical information for the individuals that assisted with the peer review process. The effectiveness of the peer reviewer process utilized in the study was dependent on an understanding of the researcher’s prior knowledge and understanding of the topic. The list of assumptions was information peer reviewers used as part of their audit of the study to determine trustworthiness of the results. Below is a listing of the researcher’s assumptions regarding state funded preschool programs’ continuous improvement efforts prior to the start of the study. Assumptions stated by the researcher were based on information understood from the literature and prior experiences working with state funded preschool programs:

- Current efforts to support change were viewed as compliance rather than continuous improvement;
- Continuous improvement procedures in state funded preschools were completed in isolation of district operation and other initiatives within the program;
- Administrative involvement and support was critical to the success of the continuous improvement process;
Most state funded preschool programs engaged in the continuous improvement process as a result of external forces, rather than internal initiation;

Competing demands of early childhood professionals took time away from the needed focus to support continuous improvement procedures;

State funded preschool programs implemented continuous improvement efforts within their programs without a clear plan and consideration of the factors that impacted success of the intended change;

Time was a factor that was seen as a barrier from the perspectives of the individuals that needed to support the implementation process;

Successful continuous improvement efforts took into consideration systemic perspectives to support change;

Systems change was defined as “an approach to both program and system’s improvement that focuses on (a) the development and interrelationship of the main components of the program or system simultaneously and (b) understand the culture of the program or system as a basis for changing the system” (Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005, p.180).

**Sampling Procedures**

Theoretical sampling procedures were used to select participants for the study. Common sampling techniques within grounded theory research included convenience sampling, purposeful sampling, and theoretical sampling (Morse, 2007). In a grounded theory approach, researchers strive to establish a theory explaining the targeted phenomenon. In order to achieve such a goal, participants must be selected that have
direct experience with the process or activities being studied in order for relevant data to be collected and contribute to the theory design (Creswell, 2002). Reciprocal data collection was described as a key factor considered in the selection of the sample and required the continued involvement of the study participants or the introduction of new participants as evolving themes were explored (Charmaz, 2000). While all three of the common sampling procedures used in grounded theory research could have been applied to the study, a theoretical sampling process was selected as it provided the most systematic and focused method for introducing key participants into the study to fully articulate a comprehensive theory.

**Theoretical Sampling**

Theoretical sampling entailed (a) considering all possible explanations of the theory prior to the start of the study by examining the researcher’s assumptions, prior experiences, and relevant literature in order to determine how to select the sample (b) forming a hypothesis for each possible explanation of the process as it was being studied, (c) checking the interpretation of the information uncovered by empirically examining the data, and (d) following up on the most plausible explanation until no further leads in the data needed to be explored (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical sampling procedures allowed a researcher to elaborate and fully define categories that emerged during the analysis of the data until no new information was uncovered. As data were collected, additional themes emerged that were unexpected or not fully explored during the first round of data collection, but central to the emerging theory. Further investigation of the new themes occurred by including additional research participants or revisiting prior
participants in order fully understand what was revealed in the data. Charmaz (2006) stated that “theoretical sampling procedures prompts you to predict where and how you can find data to fill in gaps and to saturate categories” (p. 103). In order to collect the needed information to fully develop the theory, three procedures were used after data were analyzed (a) data were reanalyzed to determine if further information had already been collected on an emerging theme that was not first considered in the coding process, (b) further information was collected from the current participants, or (c) additional participants with direct experience with or expertise in the emerging themes were included in the study.

**Sample Demographics**

A total of 13 participants, representing nine different state funded preschool programs participated in the study. All of the participants represented members of a preschool leadership team involved in activities supporting continuous improvement efforts. Six of the participants defined their role for the program as preschool special education teachers and two identified their role as related service providers. Among the five participants that held administrative positions, only one participant worked solely with a state funded preschool program; responsibilities of the other four administrators included work with other grade levels within the same district. One participant fell within the age range of 20 to 29, four participants were in the 30 to 39 range, four in the 40 to 49 range, and four participants were in the age range of 50 to 59. Participants years of experience in their current program ranged from 3 to 25 years with 3 to 20 years spent working in the area of preschool. Only two of the 13 participants had not read or
participated in a workshop, meeting, or training focused on topics that pertained to continuous improvement within the past 12 months. Resources accessed by the participants on continuous improvement included state and regional trainings on the required continuous improvement process for state funded preschool programs (n = 8), reading an article or book (n = 7), attending a conference with sessions on the topic (n = 7), receiving information from the district or operating agency (n = 8), and discussing the topic with colleagues (n = 11).

Two of the nine programs represented by the study participants were operated and supported by an agency outside of the district. The other seven state funded preschool programs were operated directly by a district. All of the programs featured in the study received state and federal funding for preschool special education programs and two also received state funding for early childhood entitlement grant programs. Within the programs, a range of 2 to 20 classrooms were operated with a range of 4 to 53 staff members supporting the program. Two programs reported serving 25 to 50 children in the program, four programs supporting 51 to 100 children, two reported 101 to 150, two supported 151 to 200, one program identified 201 to 250, and two programs indicated serving over 300 children. Each program reported a preschool leadership team in operation that featured a range of 3 to 9 members that included preschool special education teachers, preschool administration, district administration, and related service providers. Only one program indicated that a member of the leadership team represented an outside stakeholder group.
Sample Selection Procedures

The initial sample for the study was selected from individuals that worked in state funded preschool programs in northeast Ohio. State funded preschool programs in Ohio were defined as entities that received state money to support program operations, were licensed through the Ohio Department of Education and were operated by either a local education agency or a state service agency. Preschool special education and early childhood entitlement grant programs were included in the study. State funded preschool programs were included in the study due to the prior requirements and experiences within continuous improvement initiatives. During the 2008 to 2009 school year, a total of 205 districts operated early childhood entitlement grant programs, 613 districts operated or contracted for the oversight of preschool special education programs; resulting in a total of 21,963 children participating in state funded preschool programs (Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Sansanelli, Hustedt, 2009). The Ohio Department of Education had required state funded preschool programs to participate in continuous improvement efforts focused on the implementation of the Early Learning Program Guidelines since September of 2006. During the 2009 to 2010 school year, the Ohio Department of Education developed the IMPACT continuous improvement document to provide guidance as preschool programs designed procedures to support advancement towards quality. As part of the requirements for implementing the state’s continuous improvement efforts, each preschool program was required to develop a leadership team that included, at a minimum, one teacher and one administrator from the program. The leadership team was
responsible for overseeing the development and implementation of the continuous improvement efforts which included, rating the extent to which the program met quality standards within the guidelines, developing a plan to outline action steps to move towards quality, and evaluating the impact of the plan. Function, operation of the leadership team, and the number of members was defined by the local education agency and varied across programs. The goals for change within the continuous improvement efforts needed to align to one of the 85 indicators of quality; however, the process of implementation and criteria for achieving the change was determined by the local program.

The sample for the study was selected based on the following criteria (a) employed by the school district or operating agency for at least two years, (b) listed as a member of the state funded preschool program leadership team, and (c) represented either a preschool teacher, related service provider, or preschool administrative stakeholder group. An informational flyer, featured in Appendix A, was distributed through the early childhood technical assistance representative for the Ohio Department of Education. Distribution of the flyer included seven counties in northeast Ohio, representing two technical assistance regions. Each technical assistance representative maintained an e-mail distribution list of contacts in each state funded program and organized regional meetings with representatives from the preschools. The technical assistance provider was asked to distribute the flyer to the programs’ contacts as part of the recruitment process. The flyer included information about the intent of the study, criteria for participating, what involvement in the study entailed, contact information for
the researcher, and information on the professional development or technical assistance the preschool program could receive after the study was completed.

Only one individual responded to flyer and was selected to participate in the study. Additional participants were recruited to the study at regional meetings or invited to participate based their involvement within the continuous improvement effort that contributed to an understanding of the themes that emerged. During the initial phone call, the researcher reviewed the intent of the study and ways in which participants would be asked to be involved. A meeting was scheduled to review the Participant Consent Form (Appendix B) and Audio Recording Consent Form (Appendix C), answer any questions regarding participation in the study, and complete the first interview. Each participant was informed, prior to the first meeting, of the documents that were requested to support the content analysis process.

**Saturation**

Participants were informed that they would be asked to continue their involvement in the study until saturation of the categories was achieved. Each participant was interviewed two or three times in order to achieve the needed depth of understanding in the topics that emerged. Additional participants were invited to the study based on their experience with an emerging theme to support the achievement of saturation. Saturation occurs when “gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of your core theoretical categories” (Charmez, 2006, p. 113). Determining a point of saturation did not involve looking for repeated patterns in the data; rather, saturation involved making a decision that no new characteristics of the
process being studied need to be revealed (Glaser, 2001). Saturation ensured the researcher provided depth to the categories, explored variation on a topic, and fully understood the relationship between the categories in order to represent the developing theory and declare saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The following questions, adapted from Charmez (2006), were reflected upon after each stage of the data analysis process to determine if saturation had occurred:

- Have new themes emerged in this round of data collection;
- What type of relationship do the new themes have with the current categories;
- What new categories need to be developed as a result of the data collected;
- What relationship do these categories have, if any, with the theory emerging;
- What gaps remain or have emerged in the current categories.

As a new theme emerged that was not fully explored or had been identified as central to the developing theory, the researcher either approached the current participants to see if they had experience that aligned with the theme or invited additional participants based on criteria focused on the new theme.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Content analysis and participant interviews were utilized in the study to address the research focus. Both data collection procedures were needed to ensure a variety of sources were used to study the targeted phenomena. Content analysis allowed the
exploration of text and documentation that impacted and guided the implementation of continuous improvement efforts in preschool programs. The inclusion of an interview process allowed an in-depth exploration of the topics that emerged through the content analysis process. Conversations with study participants revealed their perspectives, beliefs, and understanding of the topic explored. Throughout the data collection process, the main question that guided the study, “what is happening here” was used to define the procedures utilized (Glaser, 1978).

**Content Analysis**

The purpose of the content analysis process was to establish an understanding of how meaning was communicated and interpretations were conveyed through written text or visual depictions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Documentation generated or used by the participants assisted in identifying their knowledge about the process of change and how they had addressed the continuous improvement efforts within preschool programs. The content analysis process allowed the researcher to review how participants had constructed meaning around a topic without any influence from the researcher (Charmaz, 2006). Specifically, the content analysis process focused on identifying how continuous improvement had been defined for or by the program, plans for the implementation of continuous improvement efforts, and the ways in which programs used documentation to organize the process. Review of documentation assisted in identifying initial themes that needed to be explored and was used to guide the questions that needed to be discussed during the interviews with the participants.
**Documentation.** When participants were initially contacted, procedures for completing the content analysis process were reviewed. A list of possible documents that could be included in the study was discussed with the participant. A description of the documents are presented next.

**IMPACT documents and continuous improvement plans.** In an effort to systematize continuous improvement efforts implemented, each state funded preschool program in Ohio was required to complete a three step process within the IMPACT document during the 2009 to 2010 school year (see Appendix D). First, programs were asked to establish a leadership team that at a minimum included a preschool teacher and a program administrator. Second, the leadership team was asked to rate their program on a scale of 1 to 5 regarding the current level of quality as defined by the 86 rubric elements and document the program scores. Third, the leadership team was then asked to develop a plan for each of the indicators featured in the rubric to support progress towards the desired level of quality established by the Ohio Department of Education.

**IMPACT guidance and training documents.** Program directors and technical assistance providers were responsible for offering training and support to leadership team members as they completed the IMPACT requirements. Information that needed to be shared with key stakeholders in the continuous improvement process included, procedures and requirements for completing the IMPACT tool, recommended practices for establishing a comprehensive leadership team, and resources for developing and implementing a program plan. Training may have occurred in the form of regional meetings, staff meetings, PowerPoint presentations, e-mail correspondence, or
videoconferences. Any written documentation that was provided at the training was asked to be reviewed to explore how approaches for continuous improvement were defined for the preschool programs by internal or external supports.

**Local documentation.** The participants were also asked if they had any other documents or text resources that they used to guide their continuous improvement work in their program. Participants, in addition to the documentation associated with the IMPACT process, provided meeting minutes and agendas from the leadership team activities.

**Procedures.** Each document that was provided for review was analyzed to ensure it met inclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria for the content analysis process included (a) the document was generated, shared, or used by the study participant (b) document focused on either the IMPACT process or another program continuous improvement effort, and (c) document was made available to program staff during the 2009 to 2010 or 2010 to 2011 school year. Documents that met the criteria were reviewed for a general theme and focus, target audience for the document was noted, and any statements, text, or words that aligned with continuous improvement efforts were identified. Information gathered through the content analysis process was considered in the development of questions asked during the interviews with study participants to clarify information or expand on themes that emerged. Questions presented by Charmax (2006) were used to guide the content analysis process and featured in Appendix D. Within one week of completing the content analysis process, interviews were scheduled with the participants.
Interview Process

The second stage of the data collection process included an interview format. An interview process provided an in-depth exploration of an aspect of the participants’ life in which they had substantial experience and insight (Charmaz, 2006). Data collected through the conversations with participants assisted in identifying the current activities associated with continuous improvement and revealed the participants’ interpretation of the experiences. In order to uphold the principles of grounded theory research, a multiple sequential interview process was used. A onetime interview format would have undermined the need to further revisit and explore themes that emerged in early stages of the data collection process (Creswell, 1997). Additional conversations with interview participants or the introduction of new participants into the study provided more opportunities to understand the process being explored. Interpretation, therefore, was not reliant on the sole interpretation of one conversation with interviewees; instead meaning of prior conversations could be explored to ensure an accurate representation of the information being collected (Charmaz, 2002). Responsive interview techniques defined by Rubin and Rubin (2005) were used to guide the multiple sequential interview process.

Responsive interview process. Rubin and Rubin (2005) stated, “depth involves asking about distinct points of view while learning enough of the history or context to be able to put together separate pieces of what you have heard in a meaningful way” (p. 112). The procedures defined for the interview study strived to both uncover the context and process of continuous improvement, while also exploring the perspective of the
interview participants. The quality of the responsive interview process was dependent on
the following elements (a) depth, insight into an individual’s perspective to help
understand what was occurring, (b) detail, provided clarity and evidence of the current
context of the situation while adding layers of meaning and different angles on the
subject or experiences, (c) vividness, aimed to obtain detailed descriptions, examples, or
step by step understanding of what had occurred, (d) nuance, specifics obtained by asking
open ended questions, and (e) richness through long narratives and extended descriptions.
The researcher assumed the role of a supporter, observer, listener, encourager, and
responsive conversational partner, allowing the interview participant to do the majority of
the talking.

**Procedures.** Each participant was contacted to schedule a face to face meeting at
a time and location that was preferred by the interviewee. The length of the interviews
ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. Prior to the first interview, participants were informed of
the anticipated length of time and the possible request for additional meetings to further
discuss the participants’ experiences. The participants were also informed that the
interview would be taped using a digital recorder, the interviewer would take notes
during the conversation, and recordings would be transcribed.

Prior to each interview, a conversational guide was developed to provide focus to
the conversations. The conversational guide, featured in Appendix E, presented both a
standard set of questions asked of all participants and additional questions specific to the
participant based on the information collected from the content analysis process. Follow
up questions that needed to be asked based on prior interviews were added to the
conversational guide before each meeting. An example of a second interview conversational guide is featured in Appendix F. The guide was not used in a way that dictated the conversations, but was a reference for the interviewer and provided focus to the topics that were discussed. Questions featured in the conversational guide were generated to elicit open ended responses; thoughtfully designed in a way that did not promote the assumptions of the interviewer and probed for unanticipated responses and stories of the current process.

Two research assistants were utilized to transcribe all recorded interviews. Transcriptions of the recorded conversations were created in order to complete the data analysis process prior to the next interview with the participant. Within one week, transcripts were created from the interviews. Prior to the data analysis process, the researcher read each transcript to document initial thoughts, interpretations, or additional questions that needed to be asked of the participant. Follow up questions were generated to ask for further examples of ideas presented, seek definitions for terms used by the participants, further explore an emerging theme, or more detail in an experience referred to during the conversation. A first interview with the initial sample was completed within two months of the start of the interview process. All follow up interviews with the initial sample were then completed within the third month of the study. Additional participants were also incorporated into the study within the third month.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis procedures entailed a four step process that embraced the principles of grounded theory and ensured a strong alignment and focus on the data being
collected. While it was understood that a researcher could not approach a study without prior knowledge of a topic, it was imperative that the analysis process was grounded in the data collected and based on the findings. Focusing the study on what was learned and observed from the participants ensured accuracy in the theory that was generated. Corbin and Strause (2008) stated that prior knowledge and experience with a topic should be used as a point of comparison in grounded theory research, but never as the basis in which understanding of the process was generated.

**Initial Coding**

The first two stages of the data analysis procedures occurred simultaneously as data were collected. Charmez (2006) described coding as “categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data” (p. 43). The coding process acted as a liaison between the concrete statements generated in text or stated during an interview and the initial ideas pulled from the data. Coding allowed the establishment of a definition of what was happening in the context of the study and promoted further explanation of the meaning in relationship to the theory generated. Stage one of the analysis process, initial coding, prompted the consideration of what the data were a study of, what the data suggested, and from whose point of view was the data pulled (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). An incident by incident coding process was utilized in the initial coding stage. Incident by incident process required comparison of one occurrence to another and then each occurrence to the conceptualization of themes that emerged in the analysis. For the purpose of the study, each program represented an incident. Interview transcripts were reviewed to identify themes emerging. In vivo codes
were also reordered in the language of the participant to identify key words, terms, or statements that seemed significant to the participants’ experiences with the continuous improvement process. The codes generated in the first stage provided insight into emerging themes that had significance to the later analysis process and identified areas in which further data collection was required. As interviews were completed with participants, profiles of the programs they represented were generated from information reviewed in the transcripts. Information about each program represented in the profiles was organized into three categories based on the themes emerging. The three categories of the program profiles included, conditions surrounding change, procedures used to support and implement change, and outcomes of the continuous improvement efforts.

**Focused Coding**

Focused coding was the second stage of the data analysis process. Codes generated in this stage were intended to be more general, conceptual, and abstract in comparison to the codes created in the initial coding process (Charmaz, 2002). Focused codes were generated to explain and organize the large amount of information identified in the incident by incident coding process. The focused codes were used to document and organize the information into categories that represented general patterns seen in the incident by incident coding process and group together the data in a way that represented the relationship between the information being collected. The themes identified within each program profile were compared and reviewed to determine commonalities across programs. The commonalities identified were then grouped by relevant focused codes. The transcriptions and profiles were recoded using the new focused codes. The focused
coding process was used to determine if gaps existed in the data and if additional interviews needed to be completed to better understand the themes that emerged. Memo notes were used to document the identified gaps and guided the development of additional interview questions. Any new data collected were then analyzed using the focused coding process prior to moving onto the third stage.

Initial analysis of the interview transcripts lead to the development of nine focused codes. The development of the codes assisted in examining themes and patterns that emerged across each of the programs that were discussed by the participants. The focused codes helped to narrow in on the themes that were central to the theory developing. The first focused code, collaboration, was used to identify data that represented information on the division of perspectives within the programs, stated benefits of collaboration as it related to the continuous improvement efforts, and how the programs used collaboration to make connections among the staff. The second focused code identified was approach to change which examined the data that presented information about how programs responded to the need for change, the level of change within the program, and if the process was cohesive or isolated. Communication was defined as the third focused code and sorted data that represented where communication focused on change occurred, references to open communication, how information was obtained, and assisted in exploring the theme of same page. The fourth code was external impact that focused on how factors outside of the program focused efforts for continuous improvement, forced change, or reinforced the need for change in a program. Fifth focused code, organized change, examined how programs focused change, incorporated
data into the process, structured implementation of change, and how information was organized to supported implementation. The sixth focused code was program identity, which represented information on the level to which programs internalized the approach to change. Seventh code, stakeholder perspectives, assisted in organizing information on the various perspectives represented in the continuous improvement efforts, explored the theme of buy in, and opportunity of input. The eighth and ninth focused codes, teacher empowerment and administrative influence, focused on sorting data aligned with the roles of teachers and administrators in the continuous improvement efforts.

**Axial Coding**

The third stage of the analysis process, axial coding, aimed to show the relationship between the focused codes. When codes were applied to the data, the data were viewed as separate components or distinct parts; axial coding brought the data back together and showed the connection between the codes. Strauss and Corbin (2008) stated that through the axial coding process, questions regarding when, where, why, who, how and with what consequences were answered about the experience studied.

Focused codes within each program profile were compared with information in the focused codes of the other programs. Success and challenges defined within the focused codes were examined within and across each program to understand the impact, role, and relevance in the continuous improvement efforts described. Examination of the relationships of the focused codes lead to the development of the criteria for programs that had achieved successful examples of change. The characteristics of the programs that were successful at change included (a) stated examples of goals identified for
continuous improvement efforts (b) descriptions of the impact of the change in the program, (c) demonstration of management of both change initiated internally and in response to external factors, (d) commitment of staff for the targeted change, and (e) examples of the involvement of staff in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of continuous improvement. The characteristics of the programs were used to compare each profile to determine which programs had achieved successful change. Two programs emerged with examples of continuous improvement that resulted in successful change. The profiles of the two successful programs were then analyzed to uncover the common themes that were represented in their continuous improvement efforts and the relationship among the themes.

**Theory Development**

The axial coding process led to the final stage of analysis in which a theory was generated from the themes that emerged within the efforts that lead to success. The process of transforming themes into a theory resulted in the ability to tell a story that presented form, logic, and coherence. Relationships between themes identified in the axial coding process supported the formation of the theory. Information organized in the axial coding process was expanded upon and additional detail provided to ensure a full identification and description of the elements of the continuous improvement process represented in the two programs. The theory was compared with the data from each of the other programs represented in the study to determine which elements of the theory were missing in their continuous improvement efforts. The comparison allowed the
confirmation of what contributed to change and a review to determine if any other considerations were missed within the development of the theory.

**Memo Notes**

Memo notes were used throughout the data collection and analysis process to document the assumptions, interpretations, and comparisons made about the data. Memo notes were integral to the grounded theory process and acted as an intermediate step between data analysis and theory generation by showing the interplay of data and interpretation (Charmaz, 2006). Information communicated in memo notes presented important sources of data as the theory was generated and helped articulate the empirical evidence of the theory’s claims. Initial memos were completed at least once after a document was reviewed or interview completed in order to document the researcher’s thoughts regarding (a) what was occurring in the events reviewed and discussed, (b) context of the situation focusing on emotions or actions of the individuals involved, (c) the when, how, and why of the process implemented, (d) consequences of what had occurred, and (e) connections that were made within the data. Memo notes served as a place to document themes that emerged and needed to be explored further in the data collection process. Information was also documented to describe how categories and codes emerged, identify beliefs, assumptions, defined codes being used, identified gaps emerging in the analysis, and supported comparisons of information across data sources to move towards a more analytical understanding of the phenomenon. Memo notes were reviewed throughout the study; information reported in the memo notes was used as a starting point for forming the theory.
**Trustworthiness**

Evaluating a qualitative research design should be focused on establishing the level of trustworthiness represented in the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness was defined by credibility, resonance, originality, and usefulness (Charmaz, 2006). Establishing trustworthiness of the proposed research design focused on procedures to ensure the accuracy of the data collection process and theory generated.

**Credibility and Resonance**

Establishing credibility was dependent on how well the theory generated was representative of the evidence and data collected throughout the study. A reader of the theory should feel confident in agreeing with the claims being made and see logical links between the data gathered, analysis process, and the argument being presented. Resonance questioned if the study fully developed the ideas shared by the participants and information central to the findings. Additionally, resonance ensured that the findings presented were understandable to the individuals that provided their perspectives to the information analyzed. Credibility and resonance were established in the study through the use of member checks, peer review process, memo notes, and triangulation.

**Member check process.** The member check process was considered by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as the most effective means of establishing credibility. Member checking required taking the data gathered through the study and information generated from the analysis back to the study participants to ensure accuracy of what had been represented (Creswell, 2002). A three step member check process was used to support the credibility of the information collected. First, all interview participants were provide
with the opportunity to review the transcripts generated from the interview process. Only one participant requested a review of the transcripts following the interview process, but declined the opportunity to discuss the transcripts. Second, as follow up interviews were completed, key terms or ideas that were seen as central to emerging codes, categories, or theory were presented to the interview participants to check on the accuracy of interpretation, definitions, and role within the targeted phenomenon. Examples of terms and ideas that were discussed in subsequent interviews with participants included definitions of continuous improvement, disjointed, big picture understanding, and outside of box thinkers. Example of ideas that were further explored included descriptions of teachers viewed as the core of change, how to support everyone being on the same page, and the role of a program’s study groups in the continuous improvement efforts.

The third stage of the member check process included a review of the theory developed. All participants were e-mailed and asked to respond to the following four questions:

1. When you consider the success achieved in your program’s continuous improvement efforts, do the elements of theory represent factors that lead to the success;

2. When you consider the challenges encountered in your program’s continuous improvement efforts, do the elements of theory represent factors that lead to the barriers;

3. Do you feel that your program is represented in the theory developed;
4. What other considerations, if any, do you feel need to be reflected in the results of the study?

Five participants responded to the member check process, resulting in a 39% response rate. Participants were asked to review the visual representation of the theory and the results chapter. All participants agreed that their program was represented in the theory developed. As one participant stated:

I do feel that our program is represented in the theory you have presented. I have been able to identify with the elements that have allowed us to be successful and at the same time the factors that were/are missing and therefore have created challenges for our program.

Only one participant indicated that their program had an element of the theory in place that was identified as absent during the data analysis process. Through further discussion, the participant identified her misconception of the element and determined agreement with the program profile created. The other four participants’ responses to the member check process was aligned with what was identified through the data analysis process as present or absent in the programs’ continuous improvement effort.

**Peer review process.** Peer review process was included in the research design as a means of discussing the generated theory with individuals considered knowledgeable on the topic being studied. Two peer reviewers were selected that had knowledge about the current context of continuous improvement efforts of state funded preschool programs in northeast Ohio and familiarity with qualitative research practices. Peer
reviewer one had been involved in a technical assistance role for state funded preschool programs for 12 years and involved in the field of education for 22 years. The peer reviewer was familiar and had been trained in qualitative research designs. Peer reviewer two had been in the field of education for 25 years, held the role of an early elementary teacher, district administrator, and Ohio Improvement Process facilitator. The peer reviewer had extensive experience and training on developing charter educational programs and operating district and building continuous improvement teams. Both peer reviewers were trainers on the state’s IMPACT process and provided coaching and support to state funded preschool programs.

The reviewers were asked to engage in an external audit of the theory generated by considering the questions presented in Appendix G. Prior to completing audits of the results, the peer reviewers were presented with an overview of the research focus and study. Both individuals reviewed the results of the data analysis process generated from each of the four stages and data confirming table used to organize the focused codes. The reviewers had access to the (a) memo notes in order to understand interpretations generated after each interviewer and as the elements of the theory were defined, (b) the results of the study, and (c) and interview transcripts. Peer reviewers were provided with an overview of how to conduct the evaluation process and the intent behind the guiding questions to ensure understanding of what they were to address in the audit. Peer reviewers were instructed to first read the researchers’ assumptions regarding the topic prior to the start of the study. Second, they were to read the results of the study. Third, the peer reviewers were instructed to review interview transcripts and memo notes to see
if clear links existed between the justifications of the theory elements and what they reviewed in the transcripts and notes. Fourth, the peer reviewers then answered the questions in Appendix G. The peer reviewers were asked to engage in a conversation with the researcher to document their responses to the questions. Both peer reviewers reported evidence of the trustworthiness of the theory generated as evident by the presentation of the theory elements aligned with the data reviewed in the interview transcripts, rational within the memo notes, and justifications provided in the presentation of the study results. Two actions were taken based on the information shared by the peer reviewers. First, peer reviewer two shared that the researchers’ prior experiences may have provided a biased view of the administrators’ impact within continuous improvement efforts that were unsuccessful. The researcher and peer reviewers read through several transcriptions from programs that did not describe successful continuous improvement efforts. At the end of the review, the peer reviewers determined the evidence aligned with what was presented in the results. Second, results of the audit process were used to determine emphasis of the information presented in the discussion chapter including (a) what was reported as unique findings of the study, (b) further research needed on the topic, and (c) the need to discuss the researchers’ role with the state department of education and potential impact on the participants.

**Memo notes.** Memo notes were kept throughout all stages of the study to ensure that the interpretations were documented and considered. A constructivist approach to grounded theory recognized that the results of the study were dependent on both the perspective of the researcher and participants (Charmaz, 2006). In order to ensure
transparency of the assumptions and thoughts of the researcher, memo notes were made available during the peer review process. Key ideas that emerged during the interpretation of the content analysis or interview process were revisited with study participants to check for accuracy and feedback. Documentation of how the key ideas emerged and the participants’ responses were documented in the memo notes.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation was achieved when information used to support study findings was identified across different individuals or perspectives, data sources, and methods of data collection (Creswell, 2002). Triangulation was established in the research design by including information collected from (a) interviews, (b) content analysis, and (c) member check process. A combination of the three data sources provided multiple ways for which interpretations were made regarding the studied phenomenon. The procedures defined to support triangulation ensured that not one source was used to define the elements presented in the theory generated and increased the accuracy of the interpretations made.

**Originality and Usefulness**

Selection of a grounded theory research design communicated the need for the exploration and reporting of a phenomenon that had not been fully understood. Originality and usefulness, therefore, are important factors in the evaluation of grounded theory research designs. Originality referred to the need to ensure that codes generated and findings reported presented new insight, extended what was understood about the topic, or refined current practices or concepts (Charmaz, 2006). Usefulness assisted in
the evaluation of how meaningful the study findings translated to the population targeted for the study.

As defined in the literature review, few studies had focused on the continuous improvement efforts of preschool programs. With increased accountability and continued demand for change, there was a need to ensure that stakeholders understood how to support continuous improvement efforts. As with the intent of any qualitative research study, the goal was not to generalize the findings, rather, to present new perspectives on the current context and process presented within the targeted phenomenon. Study findings presented points of consideration on the topic of study that could lead to further investigation. The research design provided information that was valuable not only to the study participants, but also provided early childhood professionals with information to consider as they engaged in continuous improvement efforts. Continuing to revisit the literature on continuous improvement supported a link between the interpretations made in the study and how it related to or presented new insight into what was known regarding continuous improvement.

Summary

The purpose of the study was the exploration of a topic that had not been fully investigated within the literature. A qualitative, grounded theory research methodology provided a design that represented both a systematic approach within the study while also allowing the results to represent the perspectives of the participants. A theory identifying the elements within the continuous improvement efforts that supports successful change within state funded preschool programs was developed. Presentation of the results of the
study is described in Chapter 3 with a discussion of the impact of the presence and absence of the theory elements within the efforts of the local preschool programs.
CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Data collected through the content analysis and interview phases were analyzed using a four stage process. A theory was generated through the data analysis process that described the elements of continuous improvement efforts that were found to result in successful change. Information regarding the elements of the theory is presented along with a description of the impact of the presence and absence of the element within the continuous improvement efforts described by the participants.

Theory of Continuous Improvement

Data were reviewed within and across the programs in order to identify the elements within the continuous improvement efforts that supported the achievement of successful change. The participants described continuous improvement efforts that characterized varying levels of success in their attempt to achieve change. Change was defined as successful when the preschool staff demonstrated a belief and commitment to the continuous improvement efforts, stated examples of change within the program, understood the benefits of the change for children, family, and staff, and the adjustment in the program was a functioning part of the current program operations. An initial review of the data collected helped to differentiate programs that achieved successful change within the continuous improvement efforts and the programs that did were not able to achieve change. The programs that did not represent all of the elements of the theory resulted in either gaps within the conditions needed to support change or the process implemented.
The theory of continuous improvement efforts that resulted in successful change was represented by eight elements that define both the context in which change was implemented and the process that resulted in actions around the continuous improvement efforts. Figure 1 presents a visual representation of the theory elements. The elements of the theory that represent context presented information around the conditions, relationships, and beliefs that influence the support and describe the response to the process of change experienced in the programs. The three context elements included (a) change as a guiding philosophy, (b) teaching staff, and (c) supportive relationships. The three context elements are represented in the visual as foundational blocks that support and uphold the implementation of the process elements. Each of the context elements play a different role and add a needed element to support the preschool staff’s ability to participate in the process of continuous improvement. The process elements describe the actions taken by the individuals in the program that result in change. The five process elements include (a) understood purpose, (b) opportunity for input, (c) shared decision making, (d) revising change, and (d) communication. The process elements are represented by a cycle in the visual. Each process element represents a step that the preschool program must complete within their activities to support change. Presenting the steps within the cycle conveys the need for the process to be replicated more than once and overtime to support continued efforts of change within the program. All four steps of the continuous improvement process are connected and made possible through ongoing communication. Implementation of continuous improvement efforts representing all elements of the theory resulted in an adaptable program that responded
effectively to both internal and external needs for change. All context and process elements needed to be present within the continuous improvement efforts in order for change to be successful; absence of an element resulted in a gap that presented challenges in achieving change.

Figure 1. Theory of Continuous Improvement
Context Elements

Change as a Guiding Philosophy

The first context element highlighted the role of the program’s mission, belief, and philosophy on promoting a vision of change. Participants representing success in their efforts stated that working from a philosophy of change helped establish a common understanding of what was expected while working with the program. The philosophies supported the staff’s ability to operate from an understanding that they were expected to always strive for improvement, continue to reflect on what was occurring in the program, and consider what could be done to achieve a higher quality. As one participant indicated, the beliefs held by the program regarding continuous improvement were communicated to staff prior to their employment with the program:

That is something that I have been told since I have been hired here. When people try to impress upon you what had been done last year, what had been done in years past, I have always been told by the administrators that we hired you because we want your perspective; we want your fresh experience. We want what you can bring to the table not what had always been done.

Communication of a philosophy for change was noted as the initial step to promoting a vision for continuous improvement. Participants that achieved success within their programs stated that it was the responsibility of the program to ensure that staff shared the same vision about the importance of change. Described by one participant:
We have team interviews so we get to interview, and find what we like. And [our administration] is honest; we have had several teachers in the past that have not come back. Does this person fit in with the philosophy of our team? And while we recognize it might take a few years to grow, will this person grow into what we believe.

A mismatch between the mission of the program and the beliefs of the staff was stated to translate into a barrier for change.

Change was described as a constant and viewed as a positive component in the operation of the programs. Participants used terms such as always changing, open mentality, not stagnant, and visionary district to describe the guiding philosophy that reinforced the need for change. All members of the preschool, from administration to teaching staff, worked from the common philosophy. Functions of the program, discussions among the staff, and activities initiated were described as being aligned to the efforts supporting the program’s philosophy. Another participant described how conversations at the monthly staff meetings prompted reflection and connections back to what the program was trying to achieve through the continuous improvement efforts. A constant state of change was used to describe programs that operated from a philosophy focused on change. As one participant stated, “we are always pushed to do what more we can do for the kids and how can we make this better”.

In programs where change was seen as successful, having a philosophy aligned with a belief and message focused on continuous improvement resulted in programs that were described as having staff “on the same page” about the importance of change. A
level of accountability and a consistent expectation of change were discussed by participants. As one participant shared, “we set goals, benchmarks and we held ourselves accountable to dates, which made [progress possible]”. Within the programs that achieved successful change, the teaching staff was guided by administration to strive for improvement and as one participant described, “our administrators are always pushing us to do what is better. Even though it is overwhelming at times, I think it is the overall philosophy of our district and also our teachers”.

Having a philosophy of change in place was described by participants as contributing to having the “right people in place” to support change. Knowing who the right people were, was identified as directly related to knowing what the program stood for and what the desired outcome of change entailed. As one participant reflected on her program philosophy:

The right people, I mean I think that is number one. The right people, the right boss, administrators, whoever they be, and the right teachers…Making sure that the people have those characteristics… people that have that same philosophy. A lot of it is innate and natural so you need people to have those characteristics. Because you can’t always develop them and you can’t make people think that way. I think of the people that are the leaders, just definitely approachable, welcoming, people that you can be comfortable. . . . So I think that’s really important, is to be able to talk to the people who are above you easily. I don’t know. I really feel the basis for change is people, and what they want to do.
With an absence of a guiding philosophy of change, programs faced inconsistent expectations of change, did not approach change with full acceptance, avoided awareness of the need for change, and lacked alignment between operations and program functions. Participants indicated that without such a philosophy, change was not viewed as a responsibility and staff did not receive the support needed to bring forth change for the program. One participant indicated that staff viewed change as “one more thing to do” and they approach the work with “hesitation”. Staff was said to question the need for change and respond with statements such as “why are we doing this”, “is this just expected of preschool”, “I have to do this and this and now, I have to do this too”, and “when am I suppose to work with the kids”. Unfavorable responses to the need for change were many times contributed to the fact that the staff did not take the time to understand the purpose or intent behind what was being proposed. For two of the participants, change was not expected in the program as staff did not want to reveal or examine what was not going well. The staff was described as taking the approach “if it’s not broke why would we bother to fix it” and “it’s worked this far and we don’t want to stir the pot”. As another participant described, when ideas for change were introduced into discussions at monthly staff meetings, the preschool team would many times respond with “yeah we’re doing it, don’t worry about it”. Challenging aspects of the current program brought a defensive view to the discussions around change. In an example shared in a description of one program:

I think what had happened was that vicious circle of too much responsibility and trying to do what you needed to do, being defensive for what is not happening,
not wanting to admit that you can’t do it all, and not willing to admit that things are not what they should be. Not wanting to open up a can of worms to see that there are more problems than we thought in the process. Administrators have to look at themselves and if they are defensive, then we can’t move forward.

One participant discussed the lack of success in the program’s efforts to change was contributed to the fact that the team had not taken the time to explore who they were as a program and what they were trying to achieve:

Well, I think we need to figure out who we are, but I am not sure we have done that. . . You can’t improve something if you don’t know what is available or what they are taking about. You would like to think that would help paint a picture of who we are, what we want our program to represent, and who we want you to be. . . Part of the problem is, having everyone on the same page at that level. . . We are supporting teachers for a long time for being mediocre, maybe that is because they don’t understand the bigger picture.

The need to “paint a picture” of the current program and future goals, as one participant indicated, would have helped others understand the intent behind continuous improvement prior to required activities for change being imposed.

Without continuous improvement prioritized or expected in the programs, it took an external force to initiate any effort towards change. Participants indicated that staff was not encouraged to engage in activities to support change and it was not a constant part of the conversations that took place. As one participant described, the staff within the preschool program were unable to see their own need for change, “I don’t think that
people on their own might see their need for change”. Another participant indicated the same level of dependency on an external force to initiate change in the program:

They were approached by an outside agency. I did not assume that they finally woke up and needed to do some things and put some things in place and make change happen. . . I hoped, and that change was finally going to happen.

While the external requirement prompted the initiation of activities that would likely lead to change, the continuous improvement efforts were not fully accepted by staff and many times, implemented as a onetime occurrence. When the process of continuous improvement was not internalized in the operations of the program, change was many times viewed out of compliance and driven by a requirement, rather than desire for quality. In these cases, participants indicated that change was “totally surface” and staff approached the need for change with the attitude that “I’m going to do it because I have to”. Another participant described the program’s approach to change out of complacency rather than desire. She stated, “I mean what it should be is not being complacent with what you have and always looking to strive and do better and grow and change. At times however, it has become just something you have to do”.

Change influenced by a source outside of the program, rather than internally driven, resulted in a process that was described as “disjointed”. Activities and modifications made to the program were many times done so in isolation of other continuous improvement activities and were not consistent across the programs. As one participant reflected on the staff’s approach to the state required continuous improvement
process, she identified how the process implemented was not observed as an integral part of the program operations:

I think because it’s part of IMPACT. I think that’s you know, like I said as soon as they hear that, oh, something new, something different instead of this is part of our what we’re supposing to be doing all along. So there’s still a little bit of, it’s time to talk about IMPACT [approach]. It shouldn’t be a separate conversation. We’re not there yet.

Participants found that lack of internal investment and belief regarding the need for change did not allow the continuous improvement efforts to reach potential within the program:

That at the state level, there’s a push for continuous improvement, that there are some vested parties, but that it’s very disjointed and not everybody’s on the same page. I feel like there should be more time and communication should be more efficient and collaborative.

The unaligned approach to continuous improvement was described as quick fixes. As one participant stated as she reflected upon the lack of focus on continuous improvement, “I think it was a little bit of backtracking and then trying to fill in those holes and again… we’re going to Band-Aid it for this year”.

**Teaching Staff**

The participation of the teaching staff was identified by participants as vital to the success of the efforts. Participants indicated that (a) teaching staff needed to be viewed by the programs as central to the continuous improvement efforts and (b) staff needed to
accept the responsibility of the role. The combination of both a view of staff as central to the change efforts and acceptance of the role contributed to needed leadership in the continuous improvement effort.

Both from the perspectives of the administrators and from the staff themselves, they recognized the importance of the teaching staff’s role in the process of continuous improvement. The teaching staff was viewed as outside of the box thinkers, visionary, leaders, and driving force of change. Involvement of the teaching staff in the initial stages of continuous improvement lead to the identification of changes that the team agreed was in alignment with the needs of the program. As one participant described, it was the teaching staff that was approached in order to understand what the program needed to focus on in the effort to build skills and target change, “[Program administration] will always ask us, what do you guys what to research, what do you want to look at, what do you see as your biggest need right now. We are always being asked questions about that”. From the perspectives of the individuals that assumed the traditional role of leadership in the program, their acknowledgment of the contributions of the teaching staffs’ knowledge of the program, children, and families lead to a direct connection with success experienced:

I like to see the teachers take the lead because they are the ones walking the walk. It is hard for me because I don’t spend day in and day out in the classroom and they are the meat of the program so I like to see them talk about our challenges and what may need to change keeping in mind [state required activities]. . . . I think the teachers are instrumental and because the principal has more than just
the preschool, and the preschool is a completely different animal. We are lucky that we have some real leaders in our teachers that speak up and say, we need to take a look at this.

Just as important as it is for the teaching staff to be viewed in a leadership role, there must also be a level of acceptance and an understanding of how to use their unique knowledge about the program to support change. As one participant reflected on how her experiences contributed to the discussion that lead up to the initiation of change:

I think our roles as teachers is to really look at our classrooms and say what’s working with the kids and the direction we need to go. Since we’re with the kids on a more day to day basis, we’re able to look at who’s coming in for next year, know who do we have now, and what are those needs, how should our classrooms be based upon those needs, how should we structure our environments.

An acceptance of the role of a leader in the change process was described by one participant as an “ethical responsibility to children”. For the programs, it was not enough for the teaching staff to go through the motions of the process and accept what needed to happen; staff needed to demonstrate a belief, agreement, and motivation to see the continuous improvement process through and be a direct contributor to the success. As one participant described:

I think that is what is kind of unique about our team. We have a lot of initiative, we’re not okay with just sitting back and going with what’s always been done, and so with all that initiative, we’re always doing things like that [program change].
The teachers that took on the role were described as willing to take risks, move out of their comfort zone, and think creatively about options for the program. One participant indicated that “we’re really open to change; I don’t think it is something that we fear”. Without an acceptance for the need to change and recognition of the role the teaching staff must take in the process, the program would remain unchanged as one participant described:

I think the purpose is because if you don’t acknowledge that things, that there’s a need in every area for, there’s a constant place to grow and make things better. I think if you don’t acknowledge that, then you’re just going to remain stagnant and for me, and I think both the other teachers, you know this is really important.

Division of stakeholder groups and mounting levels of frustration were described as barriers to supporting change in programs where the staff was not valued as the core of the process. In many of the programs, the absence of a key role in the change process was not always linked with lack of support for the teaching staff or the opportunity to present ideas for change. Many of the participants described feeling support from their administration, but not having the opportunity to have a key role in the change process. For one administrator, she took efforts to “do all that after hours . . . I try to protect them from all of that work”. The well meaning intentions of the administrator resulted in a situation where the staff was unable to discuss the continuous improvement efforts or understand the connection with the many initiatives being carried out in the program. One participant indicated that the “teachers are the last to know” about any requirements for change or work that needed to be carried out as “it is not like we get included or it’s
an option to go to that meeting”. Isolation of the teaching staff from the process of continuous improvement, whether as a means of protection or lack of recognition of their role, resulted in what was described as a division among the administration and teaching staff. As one participated shared, administration approached meetings regarding continuous improvement with an “us and them” mentality:

I think the point is to have equal membership; however, it is hard not to have the administrator hat. We are the teachers and not at the administrative role so we are not there equally because I am not an administrator.

Teaching staff with an undefined role in the process were described as being able to “dabble in change, but we don’t have the authority to make that change”. When the role was viewed solely to “carry out the change”, one participant indicated that, “the teachers were just told “it needs to be done”. Participants indicated that it was not always a result of administration not being willing to change, but not having the capacity to carry out the continuous improvement process. As shared by one participant,” the first thing you would run into is at our own administrative level just saying, well, that is how we do things. Not taking the next step to realize that maybe we can effect change”. As another teacher reflected on how to increase the effectiveness of the change process, she stated “I would like to see one of us be leaders”.

The success of the teaching staff’s role was not only inherent in being viewed as a critical element to the process, there was also needed responsibility on the part of the staff that was not always fulfilled. For one program, “unless it was mandated,” the teaching
staff did not take the efforts of continuous improvement seriously. One participant described a level of resistance from the staff in supporting the change efforts:

Depends on who they are; some bite the bullet and some don’t and some are active participants and some are passive but they listen and get the information. I would like to have everyone participate in the process or at least not be so resistant. The teaching staff needed to understand the relevance of the continuous improvement efforts in order for them to accept the role they needed to take.

As one participant stated:

They wanna see their data improve, so they’re really looking at those child focused outcomes, so that’s where the change has been I think easier. Anything that they perceive as research based and ability to change the lives of the kids, they’re all over it.

When it came to discussing programmatic issue that may indirectly impact the children, some of the teaching staff did not see the relevance of supporting these goals for change and did not understand how to move “outside of the box to take on a new role” beyond their classroom. Participants reflected that time needed to be taken to help staff make a transition to a vision of program wide application instead of being stuck within the walls of their classrooms.

Supportive Relationships

The context element of supportive relationships goes beyond just the collaborative nature observed in the programs representing successful change; it presented a connection among the preschool staff that was described as the development
of trust, respect, and someone to listen when others were in need. The relationships represented in the element were defined in two ways (a) the relationship between the administration and staff and (b) the relationships within the teaching staff. As one participant shared, “I think you need to spend time building relationships with staff first. I try to spend a lot of time with people and I try to develop relationships with people and I try to foster that among everyone else”. Building a sense of comfort and connection among the staff was described as essential support for change by one participant when she stated:

I think that first, they have to have a foundation of, or a sense of, that it’s like a community to work with, where you know I think before you can even set up an improvement plan, you have to be able to work together at meetings and come together and be able to discuss things

It was through collaborative connections among the staff that contributed to the relationship built and trust in what others’ contributed to the continuous improvement effort.

From the perspective of one participant interviewed, she stated that the “most important factor is our administrators. They are very supportive of any change that we want to make”. She went on to state examples of how administration provided support to the teaching staffs’ initiation of change, “Sometimes money [is a barrier to change]. Administration here is pretty good about writing grants, or finding some kind of money, and we have a lot of opportunities”. Taking the time to support the efforts of the teaching staff was cited as the initial way to build relationships between the two groups. It was
through the relationships that administration and staff could take the next step of openly discussing what was happening in the program and what needed to change. Program administration was described as a key factor in contributing to the comfort staff felt when taking a role in the continuous improvement efforts. The administration helped create a context in the program where staff expressed their opinions and contributed to change. The support portrayed a needed level of value for the teaching staff that helped them to understand the importance of their role in the efforts. The teaching staff in the programs recognized that “administration takes the extra steps to understand the work we are doing and where we are coming from,” and are willing to “listen and provide answers to our questions”. The support of the administration contributed to the teachings staff’s ability to keep informed about what was leading to change and take on an active role in the process. As one participant stated, “luckily, we have a very supportive administrator who if we say we have this idea and we think it would benefit this kid and we have some research to back it up; usually, we are able to get the things we need to go from there”.

When it came to the relationships among the teaching staff, the participants provided many examples of the type of support the group provided each other. As staff worked to make changes in their classrooms or explore options within the targeted change, many participants indicated that in their program, “there is always someone you can go to when you need help”. As one participant shared:

We all have respect for each other, and I know we value each other’s opinions.

You know, but even on a day to day basis, we pop in each other’s rooms and say
“What do you think about this?” . . . [It is] a support system we kind of given each other.

Through the support provided among the staff, change was approached as a collaborative process, “so that one person is not left with trying to figure it all out on your own and feeling that you have to do it alone. If we all experience it together we can all [be represented in the process]”. Collaboration was a constant through every stage of the process and viewed by the program as a strength within the continuous improvement effort. Through the lens of collaboration, the “team was able to put aside their own feelings and try to find the answers of what we need to do rather than relying only on the perspective of one individual. When relationships were established with mutual trust and respect, one participant indicated that “everyone values your opinions, it is a safe environment to ask questions and others will help you find the answers you need. We all have respect for each other and we value everyone’s opinion”.

Absence of the element of supportive relationships was impacted directly by the administrators in the programs. When supportive relationships were not fostered, participants described situations where frustration and discourse among the staff replaced the needed connection. The reason for the staff’s dissatisfaction with the efforts of continuous improvement was rooted in situations related to the programs’ administration. As one participant stated when describing the lack of progress observed in the program, “if you are only the legs or if you are only the idea person and it really has to come back to the people above you and they don’t have time to get to it because they have too much to do, then those things were not happening”. Operating from what one participant
described as a “hierarchy of authority” resulted in a process where clear divisions among
the preschool were created that led to staff receiving information about what needed to
change, rather than being an influential part of generating the direction. Participants
indicated that what resulted was resistance, lack of trust, and acceptance of the change
being asked of the staff. Administration took on the role of “making sure it’s getting
done” and would often fail to consider the supports staff needed to ensure the change was
possible. As one participant stated, “if they are being negative in the staff meeting, I
usually try not to react to it at all”. Shared by another participant:

   Certain staff would ask for meetings with me and a lot of it is just listening. I also
   have learned that sometimes it is better to put it back on them and help them to
   figure out the best way to work through it and then you kind of say, here are our
   options and I can work though it [for them] and it will be obvious how I got the
   information or you can work on.

As a participant shared, the well intended approaches to addressing the concerns of staff
resulted in taking out their frustration with the program administration by demonstrating
resistance for the change. Another participant shared, for change to be successful “one
person can’t have the relationship with everyone”. It was stated by a participant that it
was important for the staff to know who to talk to when they had a concern and the
teachers on the leadership teams tried to fulfill that role. They would assure the staff that
their concerns would be voiced, but when the administrators took on the sole
responsibility, efforts were held up and concerns shared were not addressed. Without a
demonstration of support from the administration, connections were not made and what
resulted was staff working in a “bubble” or “silo”. As participants shared, they were then left wishing for a collaborative partnership to support efforts in the program.

**Process Elements**

**Understood Purpose**

When considering what lead up to the actions and activities described by the participants, programs that began with a solid foundation and rationale for change initiated a process that was better received than programs that used other means of selecting an area to target. In programs where change was successful, the participants recognized the role of providing a rationale behind the change that was being proposed. As one participant shared, “we kind of learned together that we can’t just say we like this because we know it is good and we like it but we need to find some pros and cons”.

Programs that demonstrated change identified a rationale for the need from many different sources including data collected in the classroom, needs identified from the state process for continuous improvement, research from the field, professional development activities, and the needs of children being served. As one participant indicated:

> I think for the most part it [idea for change] is either lead by some training or workshop that we go to or the kids that we have. These are the two ways that we think, okay this is something that we have to improve on, let’s go from here. So say we have, you know we did a bunch of work on autism a couple of years ago because we have a flood of children into our program on the spectrum and we felt that what we had was not benefiting them. So we needed to research that further.
As one participant shared, change was identified through multiple sources, which included identification of the needs of the student and what was known through current research:

I would say collaboratively we look at the needs of the students first. We do have some general ideas I would say because we do have those returning kiddos and then based on the screenings towards the end of the year we can kind of project for the next year. Just some guidelines, our [team] is really good about telling us what is new, up and coming. Not trying to toot our own horn but I do think that we try to stay up to date on those things and really saying this is an area we need to do more on and then we brainstorm on what we need to do.

Prior to presenting a need for change, participants indicated that they would take time to research and consider support for the need. Steps were taken in these programs to ensure a thoughtful approach was used to support an understanding of the need. Members on the preschool team were more likely to listen to the suggestions for change if the initiator of the idea was able to answer questions grounded in data or facts. Discussions that took place with others allowed the individual that was interested in presenting an idea to gain an understanding of initial perceptions of the staff and how to best develop the idea for change. In one example shared by a participant, a suggestion for change was identified by an external factor and not every member of the team was in full support. In order to examine the need for the continuous improvement efforts, members of the preschool team described the steps taken to present additional information about the proposed change:
We just recently had a meeting, and [preschool team member] who’s really good with numbers, she put together a whole PowerPoint. She kind of talked to everybody separately, and put together a PowerPoint, and kind of presented it, and then we all met and talked. So as she went through each slide, everybody kind of threw out you know, this is what I like, this is what I don’t like, this’ll work, this won’t work.

Without consideration of the purpose of continuous improvement, change translated into efforts not maintained in the program. Changes in these programs were described as reactionary “many times goals come out of urgency” or change was addressed when staff “panicked” in response to an external program requirement. Initiating change without thoughtful consideration of the need resulted in continuous improvement efforts that were described as not a match for what the program felt was needed. As one participant reflected on the continuous improvement effort driven by an external requirement:

We didn’t really see it [external requirements] as an issue for us, and yet that’s what we were forced to work on, as were other things that, and I don’t know what that would’ve been . . . stopped us from asking questions about the other things that we may have all bought into, worked on. We couldn’t because we had to work on those other pieces and parts. I think the difficulty is that sometimes we feel as though we’re trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. They may not be items that I truly feel that we need to be focusing on, there’s other things I’d rather be focusing our attention on.
Elements of change were carried out in an isolated or disjointed manner. The staff was described as working in separation from each other as a result of not understanding the purpose behind the initiated change. A lack of reason for change lead to efforts carried through with little purpose or understanding for the need:

I try to be supportive when [the administrator] makes a change. I try to put a positive attitude on it. Some people will say, “oh why does she have us doing this or that”. I try to put a positive twist on it. I try not to do that, I figure there is a reason.

As another participant stated, one of the weaknesses of the process observed in her program was situated in the fact that members of the team did not take the time to understand the purpose even when it was presented:

I think, working with people that just don’t get it and trying to figure out a way to understand the true intent and guide them to carry out these different things and really not just being at the surface, but really understanding why and being able to carry all of that over consistently. I think that is one of the biggest challenges.

Lacking the “big picture” as one participant shared, left the staff only understanding pieces of the effort in place. Another example of the response to change without the needed understanding was evident in the following statement:

The four of us, because we understood why we were doing it. The teachers were just told “it needs to be done”. And you know, we would say it needs to be done “because of”, you know, but I think at times they became more frustrated with it than we did.
Establishing a rationale and purpose for the change that was communicated to the entire preschool team built support from both the administration and teaching staff. The support lead to the needed discussions that resulted in buy in of the process and continued to support the teams’ understanding of the need.

Opportunity for Input

“We all have input” was mimicked as a central theme throughout the programs that provided numerous examples of successful change. The opportunity to voice an opinion or present an alternative option to what was being consider was valued by the participants interviewed. As one participant expressed:

We also have a team meeting, where the entire staff, meaning all of the staff and therapist meet and we do that once a month. That is a nice place that if we are going to make a whole program change that effects everybody that is a huge place where we discuss a lot of that. Taking things back and forth.

Having the opportunity for input and negotiation of the direction of the continuous improvement efforts allowed preschool staff members to feel that they contributed to the movement underway. This was true, whether or not, their ideas were reflected in the final outcome. Having the opportunity to provide input into the change and engage in ongoing conversations, allowed perspectives and options that might not have been considered prior, influence the direction of change. As one participant shared:

Well, although they may be the initiators that some change needs to occur, everyone has to have an opportunity to talk about what those changes might look like and you know . . . For example, we talked about the different areas for the
classroom and we had some initial ideas, and we’re kind of leaning one way, and then somebody had kind of an out of the box idea and threw that on the table and we talked some further, and you know when we looked at strengths and weaknesses, we decided that was more the way to go.

As shared by one participant, the program administrators conveyed that before change occurred in the program, all of the staff needed to take time “to wrap our brains around how are we going to do that . . . That gives us all a hand in developing it together”.

The opportunity for the entire staff to discuss what was being considered for the program, allowed not only a “brainstorming session”, but also the opportunity to work through disagreements regarding beliefs and the understanding of each members’ role in the process. As one participant shared:

We just start talking and then eventually there’s someone who has a different opinion, and then so we say, okay, we’ll now you know we have to be getting everybody’s input and putting something together with the pros and cons, and what it would look like for us. You know, agreeing. It’s a ball that starts rolling slowly, kind of gets faster and faster, as we go.

It is through the discussion of how the changes in the program translated into practice that allowed what was implemented to be a match for the context and needs of the staff, children, and families involved. To achieve a discussion that resulted in a positive outcome for change, staff indicated that they all had to understand the need to present their true feelings of what was being proposed. Honesty from staff helped to resolve feelings of frustration with the efforts. Ongoing conversations of this nature additionally
helped to build a comfort and familiarity among the staff that assisted others in being able to better understand perceptions and feelings about the ideas being considered. It was through honesty and open communication where team members “got a sense” about the buy in of the staff. Ensuring everyone that was part of the program “have really bought into the process”, were willing to support the efforts, and recognized that it benefited children and families involved were stated as what the participants believed were benefits of the change process that motivated others to be a part of the work. Summarized by one participant:

I’d want to find out what was most important to the people being the staff . . . because you can make as many changes as you want, but if people don’t, aren’t interested in the kinds of things that you’re trying to better, then not only is it not going to work from the staff’s perspective because they’re not going to buy into it. So keeping in mind what the staff changes would be.

As one participant reflected on a decision that differed from her preference, the opportunity to talk with others and understand where they were coming from with the suggestions contributed to her acceptance of the final decision:

So I’m not saying there’s complete buy-in because sometimes I think that different people should be assigned to different parts of the program, but on the whole I think that we’ve made some good decisions for next year. And I get the sense that everyone feels that way as well.
Participants interviewed stated that in programs where opportunities for input were limited, the teaching staff on the preschool leadership teams spent time trying to make sure everyone was heard. For these programs, the leadership teams were not only responsible for helping to keep the momentum of change going in the programs, but they also had to fulfill a role that was not supported by the programs’ administrators. The members of the team felt that their efforts were meaningless when the program’s administration failed to follow up on the suggestions provided. The administrators presented an uncomfortable context in which input could have been shared. Participants indicated that they “were afraid to bring things up or unsure of how to bring up the need for change” as fear or a level of defensiveness from others prohibited the type of conversation needed to ensure input was possible. Lack of opportunity for input resulted in staff hearing the message that “okay, we need to look at this; this was a change we need to implement” without participation in the conversation that lead up to that decision. As one participant reflected on what she would have done to improve the continuous improvement efforts in her program, she focused on how others were included in the change process:

I think knowing what I know and what I’ve seen this past year, it seems like some of the change has been made just because we’re told, you need to change this. I think maybe it needs to be number one everybody on the same page, and say, alright everybody, where do you want to see, what goals do you want to set for the program? And now let’s work towards it. . . . I mean the way change is going to be implemented is going to be on our level.
Resentment of the direction of change that was imposed rather than agreed upon came from participants’ perspective that their understanding of the program was not considered in the actions being taken. As shared by a participant, “I think that the people who are working on the IMPACT document aren’t people who are working in the classroom and don’t have that kind of day to day [understanding]. And so there’s just not a connection”.

The opportunity to voice an opinion, share a different perspective, or present an option not first considered were all ways that helped to build connections between the change initiative and the staff. Through discussions about the continuous improvement efforts, the members of the preschool program could see the meaning behind the work they needed to carry out.

**Shared Decision Making**

The third process element represented the collective need to finalize the direction of change prior to implementation. Participants stated that the final decision within the continuous improvement efforts needed to represent shared agreement among all members of the team. For some programs, a shared decision making process represented a collective nature that was described as having the opportunity to present what you believe was right for the program and then having your perspective considered at the time the final decision was made. Other programs viewed a shared decision making process as one in which everyone involved in the change engaged in discussion at the same time and location, and identified the targeted outcome for the program. In both situations, participants could see themselves represented in the final decision.
The core of the shared decision making process was described as the steps taken to achieve a compromise in the final outcome. As one participant described, the presentation of different opinions lead to a process that resulted in everyone meeting at a common ground:

I can’t think of many times where we really disagreed . . . I think it’s more you know, people give their valid points, it’s more like an objective thing rather than people pin-pointing and blaming. So I think they give their valid points and then looking at the points side by side and saying, okay well, let’s try this first and meet in common ground.

The decision that resulted through a collaborative effort was one that the entire preschool team was comfortable committing support. As one participant described, the final decision was made through, “collaborative discussion . . . everyone felt that they had a say in it, rather than you know, just certain members like our administrators having discussion and then saying, well this is what we’re gonna do. Working together really helped alleviate [disagreement among staff].

In another example shared by a participant, there were different routes carried out within the shared decision making process depending on the focus of change. The differences between the procedures were reflected on when the administration was brought into the discussion about how to approach change. As the participant shared, “if it is a bigger program change that is going to cost money” the administration is brought into the conversation from the start. If the change was focused on classroom practices,
the teaching staff discussed options, put together a collaborative decision, presented it to
the administration, and finalized the intend change:

So I think then our director and principal took people’s opinions and thoughts into
account and made the final decision, but I think all voices were able to be heard
and I think probably the majority, most of the time, unless it’s a financial decision
and end up getting to make the change.

In both descriptions of the shared decision making process, staff and administrators had a
role identifying the targeted change.

In other situations where the decision was isolated from opportunities for
conversation and input, staff did not receive the decision favorably, as shared by one
participant, “you know, in retrospect maybe that’s some of the tension, the reluctance
that we’re seeing, is that they’re not part of it [decision making process]”. Participants
often commented that they sought out opportunities to be reflected in the decision when
the need for change was demanded of them, “you know there doesn’t seem like there’s
enough communication and joint decision making”. As one participant stated, “buy in or
see ownership, probably not. . . accept, yes,” was the result of a decision making process
participated in by only a few members of the team or in complete control of the
administration. Given the opportunity to change how the process of continuous
improvement was implemented in the program, another participant focused on how the
staff was involved in the decision making process:

I think in retrospect in looking back at how we selected ours, it needs to be a total
team decision. Yeah I think it’s probably not. Once it gets to that point, it’s a
done deal. Okay. I mean in there lies the problem... now we’re bringing it back to the staff and saying “you’re going to start doing this”, so yeah I guess not being in the planning half of it, I could see where I’d be going “what do you mean”.

Shared decision making process reflected for the programs a situation that validated the need for involvement of all. Imposing change onto others resulted in a process met by resistance. Involvement that started with the opportunity for input and continued into the shared decision making process were steps identified as critical to achieving support for the work that resulted after change was defined for the program.

**Revisiting Change**

A natural step that connected current efforts within the continuous improvement activities to future directions was the opportunity to reflect on the impact the change had in the program. Change was not viewed as a tentative application and adjustment to program operations. Participants recognized the need to review what had occurred within the program on an annual basis to consider which direction to take next. Discussions and analysis of the impact of change was not held until the end of the school year; monitoring was ongoing. As one participant shared:

Things that have led to the success would be our staff, including teachers and administration have been open to continuously looking at how we do things and if it’s matching the needs of the students that we are providing services to. You know the faces of, the nature of the students, the disabilities that we’re serving have changed. In the four years that I’ve worked in the preschool and every six months, we are spending time looking at whether we’re meeting those students
needs and if changes need to be made for them, or for the next school year to be more appropriate.

To a novice member of the preschool team, the constant conversation seemed repetitive; however, it became clear the need for the reoccurring conversations supported the change in the program. As one participant reflected:

I don’t think I completely understood it my first year. I just kind of went through the motions of, okay we have a meeting, and now I get it, the reason why everybody feels like we have to continuously change. Whereas, I think my first year, I just kept thinking oh my goodness, I thought we just did that, now we’re doing it again, and now I get it.

Incorporating the process of revisiting change into the continuous improvement efforts communicated to the staff that change was constant and a process of trial and error might be needed before the right match was identified for the program. One participant provided context for the purpose of revising change:

I think we start throughout the year. We’ve had these discussions for a while now. I think that they take more of the solidified form, it’s more concrete once we get to the end of the year. But we are constantly saying, okay we’re seeing this now, what direction do we wanna take for next year? What changes do you want me to keep? Or what changes do you want me to make? And we kind of set those goals and then we tweak them. . . . So we were trying to brainstorm different ways of how we can make that work.
Other programs approached change as a onetime occurrence and struggled to provide examples of the impact of the change or describe the level of success achieved in the program during the interviews. As one participant shared, their activities around revisiting change were not to evaluate the success of the process, but to remember what they were working on. She stated:

I think some of the challenges are remembering some of the details in the plan. I think we have some things that are really specific and it requires some leg work on either my part or some of the teachers. So some of that’s been challenging, some of those details that haven’t been a part of the program . . . I think like a lot of it comes down to planning, and then for me to be more involved with the follow through of those steps and you know they have all these team meetings and we don’t always talk about IMPACT at each one of them but I need to start sending more reminders about okay we need to remember we’re doing this….we’re going to need to remember we’re doing that, because we’re going to make a couple changes.

Having the opportunity to revisit change was also impacted by the lack of follow up and the fact that during conversations “a lot of things are thrown out [to consider] with no result”. The process in place for programs that did not have the opportunity to revisit change was hindered by the fact that discussions did not result in change to practice.

**Communication**

The frequency of communication stands among one of the elements that divided the level of success achieved by programs. Communication of a formal and informal nature,
are intertwined in each stage of the continuous improvement process. As one participant indicated, conversations about program changes “are not just our monthly meetings it is every morning and at lunch”. Another participant discussed how the program’s professional learning communities, which were required by the district, resulted in conversations that aligned and supported the change efforts. It was through communication that participants stated they were able to establish an understanding among the team regarding the purpose and need for change, ensured that everyone had the opportunity to present their considerations regarding the change, established a decision about change, and evaluated and discussed the direction to take change.

Opportunities to communicate with others resulted in sharing of information that informed the need for change, “basically in our monthly meetings we just started talking about the research that was about an inclusive classroom and the benefits of that. [One of our teachers] was very good at bringing information back from conferences and meetings”. For programs in which communication was recognized as a central part of the change process, weekly to monthly meetings were scheduled and held as “sacred” parts of the program’s schedule.

Breakdown in communication resulted in information being disseminated in a way that was detrimental to the change process. As one participant shared, information was “filtered down and so gossip and chattering had already started, feelings had been hurt”, as they were not included or privileged to the information being shared with some”. Programs described their means of communication as a weakness to the change
process. For one program, they had to address communication procedures among the staff prior to addressing the needed change staff sought to address:

And communication kept hitting us in the face. Communication was a big one. It was not good when we started and it was the place we needed to start before anything else could happen. We had to improve how staff was finding out things and figure out what the process was, and if there was a process in place to share things with the staff. We talked about regular staff meetings and I think we accomplished that, although they still need to be cancelled and switched around.

What was being communicated when the process was ineffective was described by another participant as “the pieces and parts and never the whole story”. Staff in the preschool never felt as if they were fully informed about what influenced program changes and what the program tried to achieve. Participants stated that they felt fortunate if meetings were held twice a year to discuss program operations. As one participant stated, “just let us be a part of the conversation”.

Summary

Through the study, three context and five process elements emerged and defined a theory of continuous improvement that lead to successful change in state funded preschool programs. The absence of one context or process element resulted in a gap or development of barriers as change was targeted in the program. It was only through the consideration of all the elements of the theory that programs demonstrated the needed practices and considerations that supported continuous improvement efforts. Due to the nature of the research design, generalizations of the results of the study are limited;
however, considerations for both practice and future research are discussed in Chapter 4.

Possible explanations for the results of the study are also presented.
CHAPTER IV
DISCUSSION

The theory developed was one interpretation of continuous improvement efforts within the state funded preschool programs included in the study. Results presented what was understood from the study participants and conveyed commonalities described among programs that achieved success within their attempts to support change. The study brought attention to considerations that must be further explored in order to understand the scope of influences impacting change in a preschool setting.

The role of the researcher was to present a theory that represented a balance between the perspectives of the participants and the researcher’s interpretations. Possible explanations for the results of the study based on what was understood from the perspective of the participants were explored. This chapter features explanations of the researcher’s interpretation of the results. First, pulling from prior experiences with state funded preschool programs in northeast Ohio, interpretations presented in this chapter feature a discussion of possible rationales for the results described. Second, comparisons made between the elements of the theory and what was understood within the current literature was explored. Third, two unique findings emerged through the study that demonstrated differences between the preschool and K-12 sector. The role of the teaching staff and the administrators differed from what was described in the K-12 settings. The theory developed had a notable absence of two factors that supported the change described in the K-12 literature. Fourth, recommendations based on the theory for the different levels of the early childhood system that impacted state funded preschool
programs are presented. The final section of the chapter features considerations for future research that extends the understanding of the continuous improvement efforts within preschool programs and presents next steps within efforts to identify validated information for the field.

**Comparison of Theory Elements and K-12 Change Factors**

Development of the theory assisted in communicating an understanding of the relationships, roles, and impact of elements within continuous improvement efforts carried out by the preschool programs featured in the study. While the elements that emerged through the study were not absent from the literature featured in K-12, the relationships between the elements represented the unique considerations of the preschool structure. In Chapter 1, the framework developed by Michael Fullan was used to organize the vast amount of information available on continuous improvement models in K-12 programs. Eight common factors identified to support change were articulated.

Clear connections emerged between the eight factors of change and what was revealed about state funded preschool programs through the study. In a review of the results, considerations that supported change within the K-12 settings had identifiable application with the preschool sector; however, differences existed within the role of the elements. All of the elements presented within the theory had a connection with what was presented in the K-12 literature. Two of the factors of change discussed in the K-12 literature, however, were not featured in the theory.

When considering a discussion of change across the fields of business, medicine and social sectors, commonalities existed in what must be addressed to support change.
Each professional field, however, described the elements differently to represent the unique aspects of the work, structure, and context. The exploration of efforts to support change in preschool settings yielded similar results to the vast array of literature on the topic in K-12. Examination of the elements revealed similarities in the purpose, but differences in the roles. Commonalities between the preschool theory and the K-12 literature were not unexpected, but needed to be explored before alignment could be described. As with other initiatives that originated within K-12 (e.g., response to intervention, positive behavioral support), similar core principles existed in the models developed for a preschool audience; however, the application of the principles took into account the characteristics of the preschool system.

**Context Elements**

Context elements defined in the theory aligned with four of the change factors described in the K-12 literature including (a) fostering coherence making, (b) focusing on leadership, (c) moral purpose, and (d) building capacity. Information presented in Table 1 features similarities and differences that existed between the context elements and K-12 factors of change. Similarities were identified in the purpose and focus of the context elements and change factors, involving similar stakeholders, activities, and connections that needed to be made in order for the conditions for change to be possible. Differences were inherent in the influential power described. For example, the preschool programs described the change philosophy element as influencing everything that occurred within the continuous improvement efforts. The change factor, fostering coherence making, was described as being driven by other factors within the continuous improvement efforts.
The difference between the influential nature of the change philosophy in preschool and fostering coherence making in K-12 may be aligned with the different levels of demands on the programs. Across K-12, the same influences are considered to impact each grade level. Initiatives impacting education are many times marketed and implemented with the intent of a K-12 application and oversight provided by one state agency. Even though a larger population is served in K-12, reform or change was generally applied to the setting in a way that impacted all grade levels in a similar manner. For the state funded preschool programs included in the study, demands that competed for time and attention were more expansive than what their K-12 counterparts experienced. The programs had to adhere to the K-12 regulations, as well as rules and requirements defined specifically for preschool. Oversight for the early childhood system was provided by multiple state agencies; each had different external influences on the state funded preschool program. For the programs that had a philosophy for change in place, the staff members recognized the importance of establishing a focus in an effort to manage the many influences and provide continuity within the work. For K-12, what impacted one grade level generally impacted the others; so need for alignment, while still an important consideration in efforts of change, was not embraced with the same level of immediacy as observed by the preschool programs.

Results from the study presented a unique consideration of the teaching staff’s role. The element of teaching staff within the theory maintained two purposes by highlighting the need for teachers to be seen as the core of the continuous improvement efforts and for the teaching staff to accept the responsibility of the role. An examination
Table 2

Comparison between Context Elements in State Funded Preschool Programs and K-12 Factors of Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preschool Context Elements and K-12 Factors of Change</th>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change Philosophy (P) and Fostering Coherence Making (K-12)</td>
<td>• Prompted alignment between continuous improvement and other program activities</td>
<td>• Change philosophy influenced all other elements of the theory&lt;br&gt;• Fostering coherence making was influenced by three other factors of change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Staff (P) and Focusing on Leadership (K-12)</td>
<td>• Identified the need for leadership to support continuous improvement</td>
<td>• Teaching staff promoted as central to change process&lt;br&gt;• Individuals in traditional roles of authority viewed as leaders in K-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Staff (P) and Moral Purpose (K-12)</td>
<td>• Emphasized accepting responsibility and commitment to change</td>
<td>• Moral purpose includes community, staff, and families&lt;br&gt;• Teaching staff only focused on internal program staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive Relationships (P) and Building Capacity (K-12)</td>
<td>• Focused on accessing resources and collaboration to support efforts for change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Items followed by a P identify context elements from the preschool theory and items followed by K-12 represent factors of change from the K-12 literature.
of the elements identified a prioritized role for teachers as leaders of change and placed the administrators in a supportive role of the teaching staff. Role definition identified in the theory presented a different view than what was commonly articulated in K-12 models. As Sarason (1971) stated, “educational change is dependent on what teachers do and think” (p. 193). From the initial stages of continuous improvement in the educational system, it was recognized that teachers can influence the success of change. The role, however, was often marginalized to the receivers of information and implementers of change (Fullan, 2007). Teacher leadership was often limited to the walls of the classroom (Lynch & Strodl, 1991; Urbanski & Nickolaou, 1997). Leadership for change within the K-12 system was generally reserved for the individuals seen in traditional positions of authority within the educational structure (Crowther & Olsen, 1997; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2001; Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2002). Smith’s (2005) case studies of elementary, middle, and high school programs that succeed at change highlighted the success as a direct result of the building and district administration. Even in the efforts to convey the importance of teacher leadership, the administrator was found to maintain the key role in the process (Murphy, 2005).

Focusing on leadership for change in the K-12 literature was described as a driving force of sustainable reform (Fullan, 1991). The factor of change was described as representing the need for teacher leadership, but fulfilling the role was limited by a lack of equality with administrators throughout the entire process of continuous improvement. The context element described in the theory focused on the teaching staff as central to the
change efforts and their participation as leaders was described as crucial throughout all stages of the continuous improvement efforts. Successful change observed in state funded preschool programs was dependent on teachers being viewed as leaders with an understanding that they were the core of change. Preschool staff members were identified as the true leaders of the continuous improvement efforts. Administrators needed to support the teaching staff and act as a liaison between the needs of the program and resources to support progress towards the goals for change.

Differences in how leadership was defined within the goals for change may rest in the variations of roles of authority in the K-12 and preschool sector. First, the individuals that were identified as program directors and supervisors for preschool were many times hired into the agency for a K-12 administrative position. Preschool was viewed as an added responsibility to the current job duties of the administrator. Second, the majority of rules and regulations that governed preschool fell to the management of the preschool teachers directly; where the K-12 educators in the same agency had a team of administrators providing support. Third, many of the preschool programs featured in the study were not housed in a K-12 setting with an onsite administrator, presenting increased responsibilities for the preschool staff. Due to the state funded preschool structure, the staff had to assume a role of leadership within daily program responsibilities. Assuming the role of leadership within the efforts to achieve change only mimicked the central role the teaching staff took to support operations.

Process Elements
The process elements represented a cycle of activities that defined the observable continuous improvement efforts in the state funded preschool programs. Four stages of the process included (a) understood purpose, (b) opportunity for input, (c) shared decision making, and (d) revisiting change. Participatory decision making process, which was promoted in the early childhood literature, was not represented in the considerations of the programs included in the study as a result of the absence of the family participation in the continuous improvement efforts. Involvement of families in the continuous improvement efforts was notably missing considering the position taken by the field of early childhood. Guidance to preschool programs emphasized the importance of involving families in all stages of the continuous improvement efforts (Division for Early Childhood, 2005; Gallagher & Clifford, 2000; Hayden, Smith, Rapport, & Frederick, 1999). Participants in the study did not reference consideration of families or involvement in the described continuous improvement efforts. While early childhood literature prompted family participation, discrepancies were noted in the actions of the state funded programs. The approach to working with families represented by the state funded programs may have been influenced by the role defined from the local agency providing oversight; which generally modeled the minimal role of families in the K-12 sector.

The four elements represented as the stages in the theory aligned with three different factors of change within the K-12 literature, including (a) moral purpose, (b) cultures of evaluation, and (c) cultures of learning. Table 3 features alignment and similarities of the process elements and the K-12 factors of change. Unlike the context
elements, only similarities existed within the purpose and roles described for the process elements and the K-12 factors of change. Considering the program characteristics that differed between K-12 and preschool settings, variations in the context and conditions to support change were expected. Actions and activities inherit in the process of continuous improvement were presented consistently in preschool and K-12 programs. The actions that lead to change, therefore, were not defined by the setting. A review of the process elements revealed potential applications across all settings within the educational system.

Table 3

*Comparison between Process Elements in State Funded Preschool Programs and K-12 Factors of Change*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preschool Context Elements and K-12 Factors of Change</th>
<th>Similarities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understood Purpose (P) and Moral Purpose (K-12)</td>
<td>• Conveys an understanding of the need for change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understood Purpose (P) and Cultures of Evaluation (K-12)</td>
<td>• Promotes using data to identify the focus of change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity for Input (P) and Cultures of Learning (K-12)</td>
<td>• Accessing knowledge needed to understand change through ongoing conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Decision Making (P) and Cultures of Evaluation (K-12)</td>
<td>• Involvement of all members of the program in the final decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Members of the program value learning from each other to advance their understanding of how to support change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revisiting Change (P) and Culture of Evaluation (K-12)</td>
<td>• Promotes monitoring of the impact of change and use of data to guide future decisions in the process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Note._ Items followed by a P identify context elements from the preschool theory and items followed by K-12 represent factors of change from the K-12 literature.
Communication, the fifth process element in the theory, provided needed connections among all of the other elements presented. While the presence of communication allowed each of the process elements to function appropriately, communication was only recognized as central to continuous improvement when it was absent in the efforts described by participants. When communication was strong and effective, it was an undertone to the process that was taking place. Communication was represented in a similar role in the K-12 literature. Communication was considered a silent, but important element in the theory and was never discussed as an influential factor in efforts of change. It was central to all of the factors of change, but not listed as an element in itself. It was through communication, that people, information, and resources were able to connect and form the foundation for change.

**Tri Level Development and Change Knowledge**

Two change factors did not emerge among the elements presented in the theory. First, considerations of tri level development were absent as a contributing component to the success achieved in the preschool programs. Tri level development represented the needed coordination and alignment of efforts within continuous improvement across all facets of the educational system. Considerations presented within tri level development focused not on changing individuals, but addressing the system in an effort to support the sustainability of change overtime (Fullan, 2009).

The majority of the individuals that participated in the study had involvement only in the local level of the preschool system. Few references were made to the efforts taking place outside of the preschool program itself and the programs’ relationship with
the K-12 sector. When participants shared information about district wide efforts, it was in isolation of the preschool activities and did not demonstrate evidence of a connection among the continuous improvement efforts. With the notion of a K-12 system represented not only in literature, but also practice, preschool programs were viewed as a separate educational setting outside of the agency or district that provided oversight. Increased responsibility fell to the teaching staff as the preschool programs had limited resources and support in comparison to their K-12 colleagues. Isolation from the other areas of the educational structure resulted in the preschool programs able to bring forth change without the influence or coordination of the district or agency level.

All participants discussed the influence of the state department of education’s required continuous improvement process on the efforts in place at the local level. Participants agreed that the required continuous improvement process defined by the state helped with the organization and written documentation generated. Since the state’s process defined specific practices that the preschool programs had to address within the goals for change, participants felt the required process limited or interfered with what many identified as the real areas of needed change. Programs in the study that represented all of the elements of the theory in their continuous improvement efforts were able to adapt to the external required process and made needed connections between the local desired change and the state mandated requirements. The adjustment, however, fell to the efforts of the local level and was not reciprocated within the requirement and actions of the state. Programs that were missing one or more of the elements of the theory adversely viewed the state required process and addressed it as compliance, rather
than improvement. Without an established internal process and desire for change, the removal of the external support and influences resulted in failure of the continuous improvement efforts. The investment and belief in the need for change was sparked by the external influence and not present in the preschool programs prior to the state’s requirement. Successful continuous improvement efforts described by participants started through internal initiatives that were able to balance the external demands.

Knowledge of what supports change was identified as an influential component in the development and implementation of the other eight factors described in the K-12 literature (Curtis, Castillo, Cohen, 2008). Without knowledge of what successful change entailed, individuals viewed change as ineffective before the process had the opportunity to fully develop. As Fullan (2009) stated, “without change knowledge, you get failure” (p.16). Participants in the study did not reference a needed understanding of what impacted change as a part of the considerations that either supported or hinder the continuous improvement efforts. Lack of focus on change knowledge within the results may be associated with the minimal presentation of the topic in the early childhood literature. Participants indicated that what they understood about continuous improvement was influenced by their experiences within the program, rather than formalized training on the topic.

What contributed to the success achieved by some of the programs represented in the study may have been inherent in what one participant indicated was “having the right people in place”. Members of the preschool teaching staff in the programs that achieved success were described as individuals willing to take on the responsibility of what was
needed and to assume the role that would contribute to improvement in the program. Success achieved, therefore, was tied to the individuals that held positions with the preschool programs and not necessarily a structure within the program that allowed the possibility of change. Classrooms and schools are said to become effective when qualified individuals are brought into the program (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). While effective programs may not translate into systems that support change overtime, having the right individuals in place may present temporary success. Still unknown is what will occur to the success achieved as staff change over time. Lacking knowledge of change may hinder progress in programs that do not recognize what must occur to sustain change through transitional periods within a preschool program. Considering what was described by the participants in the study, success was inherent in what the current staff and administrators brought to the situation, and not the program itself.

**Limitations**

Use and consideration of the results of the study should be approached with caution. Several limitations needed to be noted that were rooted in the design of the study and the sample included. First, sampling procedures had to be adjusted during the course of the study to address a lack of response from the initial invitation to participate. Intent within the initial design was to select participants from a sample that volunteered for the study; rather, the initial participants included were approached to consider participation. Theoretical sampling procedures were still maintained in the study as additional participants were introduced based on emerging themes. Second, some participants were aware of the researcher’s role within the state department of education.
shared by the participants may have been influenced by this knowledge. A multiple sequential interview process was employed in the design as a way to account for an accurate representation of the state funded preschool programs. Participants may have been unwilling to share information about aspects of the programs operations or continuous improvement efforts. Third, while a specific process was defined for peer reviewers as they examined the trustworthiness of the presented results, complete elimination of prior experiences and knowledge of state funded preschool programs could not be controlled. Fourth, the results of the study described only the activities of the programs featured in the study. Further research is needed to understand what extent the theory can transfer to other state funded preschool programs.

**Recommendations**

Several considerations should be addressed at different levels of the educational system to support continuous improvement at the local level. Literature from both the K-12 and early childhood field promoted an understanding that in order for change to be successful continuous improvement must be focused on, controlled, and fully supported at the local level. Recommendations for the state, district, and local levels were developed. The recommendations were based on the results of the study and were intended to bring attention to potential considerations throughout the early childhood.

**Recommendations for the State Level**

Participants indicated that the external process of continuous improvement developed by the state department of education had varying impact and roles in the local effort depending on the internal success achieved by the program. Sustainment of change
required that a match existed between the internal and external influences guiding continuous improvement (Fullan, 2009). External influences, such as state agencies, needed to promote the efforts of continuous improvement while also recognizing that each local system operated a unique structure. The following recommendations provide considerations to state level agencies as requirements for continuous improvement efforts are designed:

- Sample state funded preschool programs prior to the development of policy and regulations to ensure an understanding of the current context of local efforts to support change;
- Building awareness and organization of the process should be the goal or support provided to local programs through required continuous improvement activities;
- Develop goals for change that do not dictate actions, rather, guidance from the state should help inform local programs of a process of change and how to identify areas to target within the continuous improvement process;
- Allow elements of flexibility in the structure of the continuous improvement efforts and provide choices on how programs may approach required activities;
- Provide technical assistance to both administration and teaching staff regarding change knowledge as it relates to the preschool setting.

**Recommendations for the Local Level**

**Program administration.** Individuals that direct the continuous improvement efforts maintained power within the decision making process, accessed and disseminated resources, and were observed as having authority within the educational system (Curtis,
Castillo, & Cohen, 2008). While the responsibilities were generally reserved for individuals in traditional roles of leadership, it was important that all members of the preschool team had a connection and part within leadership activities. Below are recommendations for the individuals that represent administrative roles in the preschool system. The considerations help bring forth distributed leadership and support to all members of the state funded preschool program:

- Adopt a vision for change and communicate it to all members of the team;
- Communicate the importance of the teaching staff’s role in the continuous improvement process;
- Define what opportunities and responsibilities are available to the teaching staff that depart from the traditional definition of their role within the classroom;
- Identify the role of the administration as an equal member among others within the preschool team;
- Identify time within the program schedule for ongoing conversations and meetings throughout the school year to discuss the continuous improvement activities;
- Change cannot be dictated; the need must arise from a collective and cohesive process that reflects considerations from all members of the team;
- Recognize that the primary role of preschool administration is to provide support to the teaching staff in the way of resources, time, and the creation of a safe environment where conversations about change can occur;
Present the administrator as a facilitator and not an authority within the process of change;

Create opportunities and conditions within the program were relationships can be fostered among all members of the preschool team;

Reinforce the focus of change and the guiding philosophy of the program on an ongoing basis;

Become an expert on change knowledge and use this information as a basis for making decisions and introducing continuous improvement into the program.

Teaching staff. The teaching staff played a critical role in the continuous improvement process. As identified in the study, responsibilities included both leadership and implementation of the desired change in the program. Teacher leadership had less to do with authority and more with the understanding of what the role entailed and the passion to take on the responsibility (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). The following recommendations present considerations that are intended to prepare the teaching staff to understand and participate in a successful role within the continuous improvement process:

- Demonstrate willingness as a leader in the program and foster a willingness to extend the leadership skills inherit inside the classroom to benefit the program;

- Recognize that the teaching staff holds the key knowledge regarding the program that can directly impact children and families in a positive manner through continuous improvement efforts;
• Support open communication and build comfort in sharing beliefs, ideas, criticism, and praise of the program;
• Recognize that the impact of change is not immediate and will take time;
• Participate in the opportunities to guide the direction and share input into the continuous improvement efforts;
• Prepare a rationale for the need change to help others understand the intended purpose;
• Become an expert on change knowledge and use this information as a basis for making decisions and supporting the continuous improvement effort in the program.

Future Research

Application of the Theory of Continuous Improvement

The theory was an initial understanding of the current conditions and practices related to continuous improvement efforts of state funded preschool programs. There was much to understand regarding the application of the theory beyond the sample included in the study that would warrant further research. Considering the study was conducted in a state that required continuous improvement activities, application of the theory in state funded programs without dictated requirements for change would increase the transferability of the theory to the population. The theory represented considerations of unique characteristics of state funded programs from one state. The extent to which the theory transfers or aligns to programs with different funding, program requirements,
and organizational structures would deepen the understanding of how the elements of the theory impact different contextual conditions within state funded preschool programs. Implementation of continuous improvement efforts aimed to modify and change aspects of the current program’s operations to move towards quality or increase effectiveness of services offered to children and families. Supports needed for the successful implementation of the elements of the theory and how the considerations within the theory sustain changes over time would need to be understood in order to examine the effectiveness of the theory.

**Impact of Change Knowledge on Continuous Improvement Efforts**

Individuals involved in bring forth continuous improvement should have a working knowledge regarding the process of change (Curtis, Castillo, & Cohen, 2008). Without a practical understanding of what change entailed, discouragement of the process and loss of support from staff emerged due to lack of immediate results within the efforts being implemented. Evident from the participants included in the study, early childhood professionals had not been exposed to knowledge about change and effective continuous improvement models. Absence of such information may continue to lead to barriers and ineffective practices (Fullan, 2001). What happens to the theory of continuous improvement when the variable of formal training on change knowledge is introduced would continue to deepen an understanding of how to support successful change in state funded preschool programs.

**Roles of the Stakeholders in Continuous Improvement Efforts**
One of the unique findings of the study presented a different interpretation of the roles assumed by the teaching staff and administration than what was understood in the K-12 literature. Further research to understand the context of why the roles of the two groups differed in state funded preschool programs and the factors that lead to the emergence of leadership opportunities within successful continuous improvement models would inform an important factor within the process of change. Sustainability of change was observed as impacting the leadership taken at all levels of the system (Hargreaves et al., 2003). Even in the K-12 research, what was understood about teacher leadership was based primarily on case study research with a presentation of mixed levels of success and impact on the overall system and continuous improvement efforts (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, 2002; Griffen, 1995; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Fernandez, 1997; Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2002). The teaching staff element was presented as a critical role in the theory and needs to be explored further. How leadership in preschool programs is fostered among the different members of the team, what skills and knowledge are required to assume the roles needed, and what responsibilities must be negotiated between individuals assuming different levels of leadership must also be explored.

**Conclusion**

Continuous improvement activities were observed to be an essential part of preschool programs as a result of the ever changing landscape and continued redefinition of the programs and opportunities made available to young children and families. In order for programs to be responsive to the internal and external demands, an understanding of the elements within continuous improvement efforts that lead to
successful change needed to be inherit in the knowledge available to early childhood programs. The theory presented an initial understanding of what could be considered as programs bring forth change at the local level. Elements that defined the theory were presented in two categories. The context elements identified what contributed to the conditions for change within the preschool programs. The process elements presented information about the steps required as programs engaged in continuous improvement. Elements conveyed what supported successful change considering the characteristics of a preschool setting. Further research is needed to develop a comprehensive understanding of the application of the theory throughout the preschool system in order for the information to be validated as the elements that support change.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT FLYER
APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT FLYER

Continuous Improvement Process in Preschool Programs

Help Impact the Future of Continuous Improvement Efforts for Preschool Programs

Early childhood professionals are continually faced with the need to make changes within their program. Whether it is a requirement from an outside agency or an initiative started within the program, preschool programs are engaging in continuous improvement efforts to support a desired level of change. As early childhood professionals, we have few resources available that provides information on how to successfully support change in our programs as few studies have focused on exploring the context in which preschool programs must engage in the process of change.

A study is being conducted to better understand how state funded preschool programs in Northeast Ohio are approaching the process of continuous improvement, what success they have achieved in supporting change, and what challenges they have faced in the process. Information used from the study will help to depict the approach that programs are taking to support change.

Participants in the study will be asked to share documentation their preschool program has created to guide the continuous improvement efforts and meet with the principal researcher to talk more about their program’s experience in supporting change.

In order to participate in the study, individuals must meet the following criteria:

1. Work on the preschool leadership team as defined by the Ohio Department of Education to support program continuous improvement efforts

2. Work with current preschool program for a minimum of two years
APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

**Study Title:** Continuous Improvement in Preschool Programs

**Principal Investigator:** Sarah Jackson, M.Ed.

You are being invited to participate in a research study. This consent form will provide you with information on the research project, what you will need to do, and the associated risks and benefits of the research. Your participation is voluntary. Please read this form carefully. It is important that you ask questions and fully understand the research in order to make an informed decision. You will receive a copy of this document to take with you.

**Purpose**

Early childhood professionals are continually faced with increased demands of accountability and quality within their programs. In order to meet the demands placed on preschool programs, early childhood professionals are required to engage in continuous improvement efforts in order to change aspects of their program. The purpose of this study is to explore how preschool programs approach the process of continuous improvement to better understand the current context in which preschool programs must demonstrate change.

**Procedures**

Individuals interested in being involved in the study will be asked to participate in two ways. Participants may be asked to complete the following activities over a four week period.

First, the principal investigator will ask to meet with you to discuss various documents to review as part of the data that will be collected. Review of the documents will help the investigator to understand what you and your program have developed as they have approached the process of change. A list of possible documentation to provide to the investigator will be reviewed with you so that you are familiar with some of the sources
to share. The principal investigator will be the only one that has access to the documents shared by the participant.

Second, you will be asked to meet with the principal investigator to discuss how the preschool program has developed a process for supporting change. The interview may take between 30-90 minutes and will be scheduled at a place and time that is convenient for you. The principal investigator may also contact you again after the initial interview to further discuss the information that was shared during the first meeting. You will have the opportunity to choose if you would like the follow up with the principal investigator as either another face to face meeting or through a series of e-mail correspondence.

As a participant in the study, you will have the opportunity to review all information that is collected by the principal investigator. After a review the documentation you provide, the principal investigator will offer you the opportunity to review the notes collected during the review. You will also have the opportunity to review all interview transcripts in order to clarify any statements made during the discussion.

**Audio and Video Recording and Photography**

All interviews that are conducted during the study will be recorded in order to generate transcripts of the interviews. The principal investigator will be the only individual that will have access to the audio recordings and they will only be used so that written transcriptions of the discussion can be documented. All audio recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study. You will be given the option of listening to the audio recordings prior to the development of any written transcriptions.

**Benefits**

The potential benefits of participating in this study will include the opportunity to reflect and discuss your program’s process for supporting change. After the completion of the study, the principal investigator will be willing to meet with you and your program to discuss what should be considered within the continuous improvement process and work with your program to support the implementation of change within your program.

**Risks and Discomforts**

The researcher believes that you will not encounter any risks that would not be encounter in everyday life as part of your participation in the study. However, during the interview with the principal investigator, you will be asked to discuss your participation in continuous improvement efforts occurring in your program. You may not feel comfortable sharing
information asked during the interview. If you do not wish to answer a question asked by the principal investigator, you do not have to provide a response and may ask to move on the next question.

**Privacy and Confidentiality**

Your participation in this study will be kept confidential. Your name, the name of your program, and any references made to your coworkers will not be known to anyone other than the principal investigator. Your study related information will be kept confidential within the limits of the law. Any identifying information will be kept in a secure location and only the principal investigator will have access to the data. Research participants will not be identified in any publication or presentation of research results. Confidentiality may not be maintained if you indicate that you may do harm to yourself or others.

**Voluntary Participation**

Taking part in this research study is entirely up to you. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You will be informed of any new, relevant information that may affect your willingness to continue your study participation.

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact Sarah Jackson at 330-990-3405 or Sanna Harjusola Webb at 330-672-0597. This project has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may call the IRB at 330.672.2704.

**Consent Statement and Signature**

I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that a copy of this consent will be provided to me for future reference.

________________________________________  _______________________
Participant Signature                       Date
APPENDIX C

AUDIO CONSENT FORM
APPENDIX C

AUDIO CONSENT FORM

Continuous Improvement in Preschool Programs
Principal Investigator: Sarah Jackson, M.Ed.

I agree to participate in an audio-taped interview about my preschool program’s approach to continuous improvement part of this project and for the purposes of data analysis. I agree that Sarah Jackson may audio-tape this interview. The date, time and place of the interview will be mutually agreed upon.

__________________________  ______________
Signature                           Date

I have been told that I have the right to listen to the recording of the interview before it is used. I have decided that I:

_____ want to listen to the recording    _____ do not want to listen to the recording

Sign below if you do not want to listen to the recording. If you want to listen to the recording, you will be asked to sign after listening to them.

__________________________  ______________
Signature                           Date

Address:
APPENDIX D

CONTENT ANALYSIS QUESTIONS
APPENDIX D

CONTENT ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

Date:_______________ Document Reviewed:_____________________

1. How was the text produced? By whom?
2. What is the purpose of the document?
3. What is the structure of the text? What rules govern the development of the text?
4. What are the parameters of the information?
5. On what and whose facts does this information rest?
6. What does the information mean to various participants?
7. What does the information leave out?
8. Who has access to the facts, records, or sources of information?
9. Who is the intended audience for the information?
10. Who benefits from shaping and/or interpreting this information in a particular way?
11. How, if at all, does the information affect actions?
12. Which contextual meanings does the text imply? What, if any, unintended information and meanings might you see in the text?
APPENDIX E

INITIAL CONVERSATION GUIDE
APPENDIX E

INITIAL CONVERSATION GUIDE

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me to discuss how your preschool program approaches a process of continuous improvement. As I shared with you when we talked prior I am trying to develop an understanding of how programs support change within preschool programs. I have several questions that I put together to help guide our discussion, but I am hoping that we can have more of a discussion rather than a typical interview. My only intent with these questions is to understand the process; the questions do not have right or wrong answers.

One of the reasons that I wanted to talk with you today, is that you are listed as a member of your preschool leadership team.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lead Question</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have a scenario that I would like you to consider:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a preschool program that is interested in making changes to the program’s curriculum and they are not sure how to go about making such a change in their program. Since you have experience participating on a leadership team, they have asked to meet with you to discuss the process of selecting and implementing a new curriculum</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How would you guide this program?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction Questions</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do you define continuous improvement?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you describe to me the continuous improvement efforts carried out in your program?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What lead your preschool program to engage in the continuous improvement efforts?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you were talking to someone unfamiliar with continuous improvement, how would you define the process for them?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe your program’s experience with continuous improvement efforts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How has your preschool leadership team been involved in the continuous improvement process?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Leadership Team Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How would you describe your role with the preschool leadership team?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How was the leadership team formed?</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are the typical activities of your preschool’s leadership team?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Can you talk with me about what a typical meeting might look like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Share with me how the plan was developed (if a plan is mentioned as part of the activities).?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How did the leadership team decide what would be included in the plan for continuous improvement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How is your plan or outcomes of the leadership team meeting used?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the role of your district/agency in supporting your preschool program’s continuous improvement efforts?</th>
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</table>

**Change Specific Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In what ways have you observed change in your preschool program?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What areas has the program targeted for change?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tell me more about (specific change stated)

a. How was __________ selected as a needed area of change?

b. What steps were taken to support this area of change?

c. Who was involved in the process and how would you describe their role?

d. What happened after the _____ was implemented/introduced to the staff in the program?

e. What was the outcome?

f. How long did it take for the change to occur?

g. What impact has the change have on the program?

h. What do you see as the considerations or process that supported the targeted change?

i. What would you or the program have done differently? Or What do you see as the areas that prevented change?

j. Repeat if needed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Analysis Review Questions</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Closing Questions</th>
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<td></td>
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</table>

What do you see as key challenges in supporting continuous improvement process in state funded preschool programs?

What advice would you give to a program as they prepare to implement a continuous improvement process?
APPENDIX F

SAMPLE FOLLOW UP CONVERSATION GUIDE
## APPENDIX F

### SAMPLE FOLLOW UP CONVERSATION GUIDE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lead Question</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When you consider the process of continuous improvement that has been implemented here in your program, what are the factors that have impacted success achieved or challenges encountered?</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defining Continuous Improvement</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revisit the participant's definition of continuous improvement and have them define further.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel that your definition of continuous improvement is what has been carried out in the program?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Follow Up Question</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| As I thought more about our first conversation, I noticed that you described upfront discussion and piloting of your ideas for change before a formal adoption takes place.  
  - Can you describe further the steps of this process?  
  - What lead you or your team to initiating change in this manner? |  |
| Would you say that the other staff members have similar opportunities to bring forth change in the same way that you have experienced? |  |
| You made a comment when we met about how at times personalities of the team members can impact the success of change? Can you talk to me more about what you meant? |  |
In our last conversation, you stated, that you will discussed the proposed change until everyone is comfortable. Can you talk to me more about how this has played out in your program?

You mentioned feeling supported as you and your colleagues carried out efforts toward change; how would you describe this support?

How do you define outside of the box thinkers?

**Final Question**

If you have the opportunity to design a process for making change, what are the important considerations you would look at in the design of the system for change?
APPENDIX G

PEER REVIEWER QUESTIONS
APPENDIX G

PEER REVIEWER QUESTIONS

Credibility
- Is the data sufficient to merit the claims within the theory? Consider range, depth, number of interviews in comparison to the claims made.
- Have systematic comparison been made between the data and themes, and the data and the elements of the theory?
- Are there logical links between the data gathered and the argument made?
- Where do you feel that bias of the researcher might have influenced the findings?

Originality
- Do the theory elements present a different perspective on the topic? Does the theory offer new insights?
- How does the theory challenge, extend, or refine current ideas?

Resonance
- Have taken for granted meanings been explored?
- Do the themes and the theory represent the fullness of the studied experiences?

Usefulness
- Is the theory developed something that can be used in people’s everyday lives?
- Do the categories and theory represent a generic process?
- What will the theory contribute to the knowledge of others?
REFERENCES
REFERENCES


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