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## “We’re Trying To Have A Childhood”: Parent Notions Of Kindergarten Readiness

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“WE’RE TRYING TO HAVE A CHILDHOOD”:  
PARENT NOTIONS OF KINDERGARTEN READINESS

By

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BA (Coe College) 1988

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A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

In response to the chronic third-grade achievement-gap, public school kindergartens have abandoned Froebel’s traditional child-centered pedagogy in favor of an early academic preparation model that promotes the idea of kindergarten readiness. But top-down implementation of readiness curriculum has not led to sustainable gains and may result in poorer student outcomes. The bioecological repercussions of early academic expectations on young children and their families are not well understood, and parent perspectives on the topic are often marginalized. This qualitative case study explored parent notions of kindergarten readiness using word coding analysis of eight kindergarten and preschool parent interviews. Findings from thematic coding of interview transcripts revealed commonalities in perspectives, most notably, a willingness among parents to help their kindergarten-age children adapt to increased academic expectations even if they disagreed with those expectations. Results from this case study further suggested that well-educated parents were relatively unconcerned about immediate academic preparedness and more interested in supporting playful active exploration and individualized learning. This study points to a need to further explore parent perspectives on kindergarten readiness within diverse populations and suggests that a bioecological approach to investigation on this topic may lead to more effective readiness strategies and improved school policies.

University of New England

Doctor of Education  
Educational Leadership

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Problem Statement .....	4
Background and Context .....	5
Study Setting .....	6
Purpose of the Study.....	6
Rationale .....	7
Importance of Including Parent Viewpoints .....	9
Research Questions .....	9
Research Design and Data Collection.....	9
Seminal Influences .....	9
Inquiry Design.....	10
Avoiding Previously Applied Assumptions.....	10
Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Perspectives .....	11
Theoretical Perspectives.....	12
Historical Conceptions of Children.....	12
Assumptions and Limitations of Using a Qualitative Research Design .....	13
Significance .....	14
Definitions .....	15
Conclusion.....	15
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	17
Early Conceptualizations of Kindergarten .....	18
Development of the Whole Child.....	18

Kindergarten as Enrichment vs. Scholastic Achievement.....	20
Kindergarten’s Traditional Focus on Social Learning .....	20
The Role of Cultural Enrichment .....	21
National Education Policy and the Evolution of Kindergarten.....	22
School Failure and Calls for Reform .....	22
Kindergarten Redefined as a Time of Preparation.....	22
Calls for Better Quality Education.....	23
System-wide Standardization in Education and its Critics .....	23
Readiness Education and the Academic Kindergarten.....	24
The Interventionist Roots of Formal Assessments in Kindergarten .....	25
Assessment Push Down .....	26
Formal Assessments and the Rise of Red-shirting.....	27
Narrowing of Curriculum.....	27
School Readiness Becomes the Focus of Kindergarten.....	28
Children are Required to Adapt .....	38
What Does it Mean To be Ready for Kindergarten?.....	29
Assessment Problems.....	29
Inherent Inequalities Revealed in Assessments .....	29
Individual Differences and Performance Variations.....	30
The Need for Valid and Reliable Assessment.....	30
Readiness Pressures for Young Children .....	30
Accountability Testing Concerns .....	31
Identifying and Measuring Program Quality.....	31
Developmentally Appropriate Practice .....	32
Early Childhood Environmental Ratings Scales .....	32



Program Quality Measures Predict Future Academic Success .....	33
Reconciling Early Assessment Theory and Practice .....	34
The Case for Portfolio Assessments .....	34
Social Inequality and the Deficit Model in Education .....	34
Conceptual Framework .....	35
Alternative Models of School Readiness .....	35
Readiness Without Early Academics .....	37
Readiness and Head Start .....	37
Intervention and the Roots of Readiness .....	37
The Achievement Gap and Head Start .....	38
Assumptions About Economic and Cultural Impoverishment .....	38
Unintended Consequences of the Readiness Focus .....	39
Teaching to the Test .....	39
Opting-Out of Testing .....	39
In Praise of Readiness Reforms .....	40
Achievement Testing with a Readiness Emphasis .....	40
Failure to Include DLL Students .....	40
Predictive Program Elements Examined .....	41
Provider/educator Support Needed for Quality .....	41
Conclusion .....	42
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....	44
Setting .....	45
Participants and Data Collection .....	45
Participants .....	45
Data Collection .....	46

Data Analysis .....	46
Participant Rights, Consent, and Protections .....	47
Potential Study Limitations.....	48
Conclusion.....	48
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS .....	50
Analysis Methods .....	51
Setting .....	51
Participants .....	51
Data Collection.....	52
Analysis Results .....	53
Data Analysis .....	53
First Cycle Coding .....	58
Emerging Themes .....	58
Included Words.....	58
Excluded Words .....	58
Second Cycle Coding.....	59
Thematic Analysis.....	59
Analysis of Excerpts .....	59
Research Questions and Results .....	59
Research Question 1 .....	60
Results of Research Question 1.....	60
Research Question 2.....	62
Results of Research Question 2.....	62
Research Question 3 .....	64

Results of Research Question 3.....	64
Summary of the Findings.....	65
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION.....	69
Review of Research Questions and Summary of Responses.....	71
Review of Research Question 1.....	71
Review of Research Question 2.....	71
Review of Research Question 3.....	72
Interpretation and Alignment of Findings with Literature.....	73
Parents Were Aware of and Concerned About Kindergarten Readiness.....	73
Parents Said Developmentally Appropriate Practices Promoted Readiness.....	73
Parents Believed School Policies Did Not Address Children’s Needs.....	74
Implications and Recommendations for Action.....	74
Parents, Teachers, and Schools.....	74
Recommendations for Further Study.....	76
Conclusion.....	76
REFERENCES .....	78
APPENDICES.....	99
Appendix A.....	99
Appendix B.....	100
Appendix C.....	102
Appendix D.....	103
Appendix E.....	104

LIST OF TABLES

1. Participant Adult and Enrolled Child Characteristics .....51

2. List of Interview Questions in the Order Presented to Participants.....52

3. Parent Comments Excerpted from Interview Transcripts and Organized by Topic...61

## LIST OF FIGURES

1. Word frequency results from first cycle focused coding of all interview transcripts...	54
2. Concept categories resulting from thematic coding of frequent transcript words.....	55
3. Illustration of first and second cycle coding methods.....	56
4. Illustration of the interrelated themes.....	57
5. Interview excerpts illustrating parents' differences of opinion.....	63
6. Parents' concerns about readiness viewed through a bioecological lens.....	64

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

What do parents think about kindergarten readiness? A generation or more ago, the answer seemed fairly straightforward: kindergarten readiness meant that a child would be ready to join other classmates as they learned to sit in a circle for story time, follow directions for using glue and scissors, wait in line to wash their hands, and take turns sharing blocks, puzzles, and toys. Readiness levels among children have always varied, but chronological age was once the only true prerequisite. Parents today asking the question “What does it mean to be ready for kindergarten?” will find that the answer is more complicated for their children than it was for them. Kindergarten entry today involves more than just meeting the age cutoff. It comes with academic expectations and routine assessments for skills and competencies, as school districts urge parents to prepare their children for ‘success.’ Forty years ago, kindergarten in the United States was a child’s first school experience and preparation was nearly nonexistent (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016). The use of academic content in kindergarten classrooms has become standard practice (de Cos, 2001). Little remains of Friedrich Fröebel’s iconic “children’s garden.” Classrooms replete with block corners, puppet theaters, and make-believe kitchens have been converted to resemble first and second-grade counterparts, emphasizing large group instruction. Faced with strict accountability measures designed to reverse third-grade achievement gaps, public schools are eager for incoming students who already possess the competencies termed “kindergarten readiness”: characteristics which include physical development, emotional well-being, social competence, communication skills, and general knowledge (Saluja, Scott-Little, & Clifford, 2000). The topic of kindergarten readiness receives regular attention from researchers, but fewer studies have investigated this phenomenon from the parent perspective (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Cates, Weisleder & Mendelsohn, 2016). Given

their key stakeholder status, parent views deserve additional scrutiny, and research devoted to understanding parent experiences of the phenomenon of kindergarten readiness is timely.

To better understand the current conceptualization of kindergarten readiness, it is helpful to consider the subject within the context of the history of national education reform and related social welfare initiatives. In 1964, President Johnson's "War on Poverty" identified necessary improvements in public education as part of a tidal shift in government policy intended to prevent widespread, severe economic hardship (Bailey & Duquette, 2014). Concerns about public school quality escalated after publication of the 1983 government report, *A Nation at Risk*, eventually paving the way for broad education reforms intended to reduce low-income and minority-student achievement gaps (Gardner, 1983). Following the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002), standardized curricula tied to high-stakes assessments became the norm in public schools, the impact mitigated by subsequent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) with its emphasis on individual state efforts and wider latitude for compliance.

As participants in these mandated reforms, public school students spend considerable time preparing for what are considered critically predictive third-grade math and reading achievement tests (Plank & Condliffe, 2013). A national spotlight on improving third-grade learning outcomes places specific attention on the issue of kindergarten readiness. This focus has served to transform the nature and purpose of kindergarten from what was once a transitional period between home and school into an institution which exists primarily for the purpose of academic preparation. The evolution of kindergarten's purpose can be observed first-hand by visiting formal classrooms in which didactic teaching and academic content formerly reserved for first or second-grade has replaced the traditional child-centered, play-based curriculum.

Despite widespread implementation, few studies have produced evidence supporting the use of academic curricula prior to kindergarten, and relatively little is known regarding the potential benefits or negative effects of kindergarten readiness (Barnett, 2011; Clarke et al.,

2015; Copple & Bredekamp, 2008; Copple, 2009; Main, 2012; Youngblood, 2017). Investigating parent notions of kindergarten readiness constitutes an important next step toward understanding the broader implications of this educational trend and its impact on children and families.

Methodology for this study involved content analysis and interpretation of individual parent interviews using qualitative word coding of recorded interview transcripts. Thematic data analysis was applied to identify salient concepts and facilitate additional interpretations. This introductory chapter begins by describing the context for the study and presents a statement of the problem investigated. The purpose of the study and related research questions follow, with details on choice of approach and researcher perspectives. Researcher prior assumptions included here help call attention to potential study limitations. A discussion of the conceptual framework and theoretical basis for this study follows, lending contextual support for prior studies of note. The rationale and significance of this investigation are addressed, including aspects of the research that reflect on matters of educational leadership, social justice, and student equity. A summary of key points and definitions of terms are included, and the chapter concludes with a preview of Chapter Two.

This study investigated parent notions of kindergarten readiness in light of increasing calls for academic preparedness prior to first grade. NCLB and ESSA legislation stress nationwide school accountability, a focus which has led to public education's adoption of standardized curriculum and assessments, and the time-consuming concerted preparation prior to high-stakes math and language achievement tests in third grade (Chetty et al., 2011). This system-wide focus on meeting achievement goals by third grade has fueled considerable interest in promoting the concept of kindergarten readiness. In the wake of this trend, readiness goals have supplanted developmental learning goals, and play-based, constructivist models of early learning have made way for didactic instruction with standardized testing, rarely seen prior to first grade (Bassok et al., 2016; Chudacoff, 2007; Jeynes, 2006; Ostrowski, 1992; Zigler et al., 2011).



Early childhood educators have expressed concern regarding this shift toward an academic pedagogy, while acknowledging that the traditional kindergarten model alone does not adequately address poor educational outcomes, whose roots may originate before school entry, and are thought to reflect deeper societal inequalities (Abbott-Shim, Lambert, & McCarty, 2003; Claessens, Engel, & Curran, 2014). Although achievement gap concerns have been a catalyst for change in public-school kindergarten, working parents' need for full-time child care has had a role in this phenomenon as well. Numerous studies debate the wisdom of introducing codified academic expectations prior to kindergarten, and relatively little is known regarding the consequences of these expectations on families, since studies of community stakeholder views on the topic of kindergarten readiness are limited (Barnett, 2011; Clarke et al., 2015; Copple, 2009; Main, 2012; Youngblood, 2017). A bioecological framework which contextualizes kindergarten readiness within the family was adopted in this study to help reveal the complex phenomena underlying everyday human experiences (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2017). This investigation of parent notions of kindergarten readiness represented an important step toward understanding the impact of this phenomenon in the lives of children and families.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Kindergarten readiness methods and strategies do not appear to be effective in reducing academic achievement gaps long-term and may even be related to poorer student outcomes; nevertheless, this approach is increasingly common in public education despite a lack of solid evidence and support for its application (Goldstein et al., 2013; Hatch, 2010; Orkin, 2008; Winter & Kelley, 2008). Few studies have explored the bioecological repercussions of early academic expectations on families of young children (Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003; Miller, 2015). A limited understanding of the effects of these expectations beyond the immediate school context suggests the need for broader topic examination and more inclusive discussion, incorporating voices beyond those of the policymakers and administrators (Belfield & Garcia, 2014; Campbell,

2015; Jigjidsuren, 2013; Spencer, 2015). This research gap in stakeholder representation supported a focused investigation of parent perspectives on kindergarten readiness.

### **Background and Context**

The practice of pushing down academic achievement expectations onto younger students has become an established norm, as common core learning standards already exist for both preschool and kindergarten (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013; Duncan et al., 2007; Goldstein et al., 2013). Accountability reforms addressing low-income and minority population achievement gaps have shifted kindergarten pedagogy from a constructivist play-based approach to a narrower model utilizing direct content instruction (Goffin, 1994; Janus & Duku, 2007; Ladd, Herald, & Kochel, 2006; Litkowski & Kruger, 2017; Simerly, 2014; Spencer, 2015; Zill & West, 2001).

Well-educated, middle-income families disagree about the need for early academic preparation for their children and many prefer social and cultural enrichments as the precursor to kindergarten entry; however, some families support kindergarten programs that emphasize early academics out of concern for future school success (Diamond, Reagan & Bandyk, 2010; Hatcher et al., 2012). Despite the controversial nature of their use, formal teaching methods and subject matter deemed appropriate for first or second-grade have become commonplace in kindergarten classrooms (Bassok, et al., 2016; Copple & Bredekamp, 2008; Dahlberg & Moss, 2013; Dombkowski, 2001; Duncan, 2014; Graue, 2006; Graue, 2001; Jeynes, 2006; Warriner, 2017; Yoon, 2015). The trend toward an academic model of kindergarten likely results from state-level efforts to avert chronic low-level student achievement in later grades (Denham & Brown, 2010; Endler, 2003; Mora, 2017). There is notable concern among practitioners regarding the introduction of first and second-grade academic expectations in kindergarten. This change in the nature and stated purpose of kindergarten disregards a considerable amount of evidence which favors the use of curricula and teaching methods based on developmentally appropriate practice

(Copple & Bredekamp, 2008; Denham, 2006; Denham & Brown, 2010; Ladd, Herald, & Kochel, 2006; Snow, 2011; Winter & Kelley, 2008).

### **Study Setting**

The location of this study was a private arts-based preschool and kindergarten, comprised of 140 students, a school director, and nine teachers in a small city in the Midwest region of the United States. The setting was a neighborhood school, housed in a community arts center, with moderately priced tuition, and scholarships available to families. The school was known to be well-regarded in the community and at the time of the study had a modest waiting list. Despite consistent past local support, the arts center stood to be impacted by proposed state and federal budget cuts in the coming year (NCCS, 2017; Peet, 2017; Woodall, 2017). Strong parent support for the preschool and kindergarten was reflected in the historically high rates of volunteerism and participation in school-related community arts-center events. During discussions with members of the arts center board, education program director, and school director, it was agreed that an investigation of parent perspectives regarding kindergarten readiness would be worthwhile. Prior conversations with parents and teachers indicated considerable interest in the topic.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate parent perceptions of kindergarten readiness within an arts-based preschool and kindergarten setting. Schools often set the tone for how parents receive information about kindergarten readiness in their communities, yet many do not routinely solicit parent input on the process (King, 2017). Systematic kindergarten readiness efforts, including family outreach attempts, are still evolving in most states. The ESSA has granted some latitude to states in determining how they will approach these efforts, with specific provisions for successful student transition to kindergarten, including family supports (Samuels, 2016). This legislation also brings broader implementation freedoms compared to NCLB's

mandated limits on school options, thus permitting slightly more state-level influence on the standards for kindergarten, but with varying results in coordination (Samuels, 2016).

According to policy researchers Almon and Miller (2011), a key problem with implementing readiness strategies exists at the leadership level, given that “policymakers persist in ignoring the huge discrepancy between what we know about how young children learn and what we actually do in preschools and kindergartens” (p. 1). For example, state kindergarten standards, commonly derivatives of higher-level K-12 benchmarks, are seldom written by early childhood specialists trained to recognize young children’s typical maturational limitations (Kagan, 1992; Miller & Almon, 2009). In some instances, adoptions of kindergarten-level content standards have not received adequate scrutiny and may even contradict guidelines for developmentally appropriate content, a situation made more troublesome given that validation of early learning standards is a nascent enterprise prone to error (Kagan et al., 2013). Incongruity between kindergarten standards and young children’s learning abilities can severely shortchange efforts to provide high-quality early education, a dilemma that warrants the attention of both educators and parents (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2000).

## **Rationale**

An investigation of parent notions of kindergarten readiness, in light of unprecedented academic expectations for entering kindergarteners appears timely, given the absence of literature regarding parent experiences of kindergarten readiness and the critical role that family support holds in student success (McIntyre et al., 2007; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011). In response to NCLB legislation and its focus on shrinking the achievement gap in third grade, kindergarten classroom expectations increasingly emphasize specific components of academic readiness, such as name recognition and letter writing, and encourage the use of direct instruction covering formal content, including math, science, and social studies (Brown, 2013; Brown & Lan, 2015; Brown & Pickard, 2014; Howes et al., 2008; Jalongo, 2007; Reardon, 2011; Warriner,

2017). The academic kindergarten model does not align with child-centered, developmentally appropriate environments, which are more typically focused on providing opportunities for play-based experiential learning (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Copple & Bredekamp, 2008; Duncan et al., 2007; Hatch, 2010; Ladd, Herald, & Kochel, 2006; Stipek, 2006).

Of equal concern with respect to the alignment of school expectations and student capacities are the social engineering origins of most academic models, which contend that those children in environments deemed ‘culturally impoverished’ require remediation via early academic instruction, a process focused more on child learning than on child development (Goffin, 1996). In her discussion addressing the contrast between developmental and direct instruction approaches to early learning, Goffin points out that traditional academic models are derived from adult learning theories, whose origins are distinct from developmental psychology’s child-based approach. In a developmental view, learning is not “understood as the result of an external event,” but rather a reflection of changes within and because of an individual student’s capacity (Goffin, 1996, p. 100). This aspect of educational intervention creates pressure to give at-risk students early exposure to academic environments, in hopes of mitigating adverse effects.

The struggle between academic models and developmental approaches in early education has led to varying pedagogical emphases at different points in time, with no one favored tradition to build on, and an increasing tendency toward a model conducive to expedient quantitative assessment. The use of developmentally-aligned constructivist curricula, based on observational learning assessments, is routinely deemphasized by policies that promote single snapshot, high-stakes student testing and measurements (Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Ravitch, 2010; Yoon, 2014). In spite of strong evidence for utilizing a more developmental approach, kindergarten readiness efforts favor standards-based scholastic expectations focused on early testing and preparation (Copple, 2009; Gallant, 2009; Lincove & Painter, 2006; Winter & Kelley, 2008).

**Importance of including parent viewpoints.** Pressure from increased expectations for academic readiness prior to kindergarten is also felt by parents, whose support and guidance influence children's academic outcomes. Despite their intrinsic contribution to the educational process, preschool and kindergarten parents' views are poorly represented in literature (Belfield & Garcia, 2014; Bell, 2013; Campbell, 2015; Jeynes, 2006; Jigjidsuren, 2013; Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003; Melton, 2013; Orkin, 2008; Spencer, 2015). Early childhood education frequently emphasizes readiness "independently of the needs of individual children and their families, and the social and cultural contexts in which they live" (Brown, 2013, p. 555). This investigation sought new understandings regarding how parents perceive and are affected by kindergarten readiness and readiness expectations for children.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative inquiry addressed the following research questions:

1. How do parents view the topic of kindergarten readiness?
2. In what ways do parents agree or differ in their perceptions of kindergarten readiness?
3. What concerns do parents have about kindergarten readiness expectations?

### **Research Design and Data Collection**

**Seminal influences.** This study explored parent perceptions of kindergarten readiness through the lens of Jean Piaget's and Lev Vygotsky's theories of intellectual development, framed within a bioecological context. Piagetian and Vygotskian models of intellectual development propose that maturational differences among typically developing children are largely predictable and unalterable. This theoretical understanding of young children's unique limitations, abilities, and predispositions to learning logically favors a child-centered pedagogy with teacher-guided, child-initiated exploration and discourages premature introduction of formal academic methods and objectives (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Daniels, 2016; Fox & Riconscente, 2008; Vygotsky, 2015).

**Inquiry design.** This study employed a qualitative research investigation utilizing individual parent interviews with an open-ended-question format to elicit rich narrative data including individual stories, experiences, and reactions. The basis for using a qualitative design came from an understanding that existing studies of kindergarten readiness tended to explore parent views narrowly and focused on parent adherence to strategies for obtaining future school achievement; few studies were found that broadly addressed parents' views and concerns about children achieving successful academic outcomes (Belfield & Garcia, 2014; Brown, 2013; Duncan et al., 2007; Howes et al., 2008; Melton, 2013; Reardon, 2011; Stipek, 2006).

**Avoiding previously applied assumptions.** The rationale for this study was drawn from evidence indicating that underlying assumptions in prior studies of kindergarten readiness were embedded with a priori researcher belief in the shared goal of ensuring all kindergarten students achieve predefined school readiness (Pacheco Schweitzer, 2016). Additionally, prior studies on this topic have not adequately explored parent perspectives regarding the overall nature, purpose, and appropriateness of kindergarten readiness strategies. Kindergarten readiness studies found in the literature review had many notable limitations, (e.g., many took parent support for readiness efforts for granted) and most studies lacked evidence of readiness strategy effectiveness for improving student outcomes or sustaining the achieved gains (Dahl & Lochner, 2012, 2017).

### **Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Perspectives**

The current push for academic readiness at an early age represents a notable shift away from recognized best practice in early education, warranting further scrutiny regarding both effectiveness and appropriateness. Evidence related to the mechanisms for learning in young children consistently favors less academic, more developmentally-supportive learning environments (Brown & Pickard, 2014; Hatch, 2010; Stowell, 2014; Winter & Kelley, 2008).

Well-intentioned social movements designed to benefit low-income and minority students, such as Head Start, attempt to reverse declines in identified at-risk student populations, but may inadvertently produce undue stress on young children with their expectations of early academic achievement (Abbott-Shim et al., 2003; Dombkowski, 2001; Winter & Kelley, 2008). Similarly, many policy positions in education emphasize the economic and civic necessity of early intervention to aid the most financially disadvantaged, while ignoring evidence of the interventions' limited benefits, diminished effects over time, and the negative effects of unrealistic expectations placed on young children (Barnett, 2011; Claessens, et al., 2014; Larcinese, 2016; Pandya, 2012; Schwerdt, West, & Winters, 2017; Topping, Holmes, & Bremner, 2000). Reflecting national concerns about third-grade reading deficiencies, schools often begin reading-preparation too early to be effective or even beneficial long-term and may even hinder students' future reading proficiency (Brown & Lan, 2015; Carlsson-Paige, Almon, & McLaughlin, 2015; Duncan, 2014; Larcinese, 2016). Bodrova sums up the dilemma for teachers this way, "educators in countries across the globe face the same pressure to start teaching academic skills at a progressively younger age at the expense of traditional early childhood activities" (2008, p. 358).

Belief in the effectiveness of instituting early academic expectations is pervasive, but evidence is limited (Burke, 2017; Denham & Brown, 2010; Lasser & Fite, 2011; Stewart, 2016; Stinson, 2013; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). As worrisome as the policies which perpetuate academic kindergarten is the unquestioned idea that children must be *made* ready for school, which carries the implication that grade-level chronological age should not by itself constitute the sole determinant for kindergarten entry. Such a shift creates immediate effects on families, yet parents have had disproportionately little influence on early education policy and practice in the last 50 years, relative to the shaping forces of education reform and the growing child care industry. Policies in early education are fueled partly by economic and social



incentives favoring dual working-parent households and influenced by strong public concerns about remediation for identified at-risk student populations.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Pedagogy regarding the nature and purpose of early learning has been predominantly based on accepted models of intellectual development proposed by Piaget and Vygotsky. Piaget's theory of cognitive development provides a framework for understanding how knowledge is constructed and organized during childhood, highlighting maturational limitations on perspective and logic, and natural inclinations to explore the world and make sense of what they experience (Fox & Riconscente, 2008; Piaget, 2005). Vygotsky's ecological theory of social learning explains the mechanisms of cognitive development that emphasize cultural contexts and demonstrates how adult guidance and relationships are essential to children's intellectual growth (Bodrova, 2008; Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner & Souberman, 1978; Vygotsky, 1997).

**Historical conceptions of children.** Freudian, Eriksonian, and Adlerian theories of personality development have shaped historical conceptions regarding the nature of children and influenced ideas of how a child's psyche differs from that of an adult's (Ferguson, 2010; Palombo, Bendicson & Koch, 2009; Scheidlinger, 1994). These theorists have been especially influential insofar as they assert the view of childhood as a critically important, uniquely formative period of life, full of opportunities to acquire either healthy or maladaptive inclinations and personality characteristics. Kindergarten pioneer Fröebel likewise emphasized the importance of early social training and educational intervention for both individual success and society's well-being (Marenholtz-Bülow, 1877). Fröebel proposed that it is first in the home, and then in school, (starting with kindergarten) when educational and social experiences shape unformed minds, building habits and competencies that promote lifelong success. The idea that early experiences are profoundly formative is evident across all educational contexts. Nursery school, or what we term "preschool" today, was traditionally regarded as too soon to introduce

formalized instruction, and this view persisted until the late 1960s, when early childhood pedagogy was still focused on gently guiding children and encouraging exploration (Nursery schools: History [1844-1919], 2013). Despite no notable theoretical shifts since the 1980s in our understanding of child development, schools have raised achievement expectations with the assumption that young children can adjust to formal academic settings utilizing direct instruction and routine assessments prior to compulsory school age (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007).

### **Assumptions and Limitations of Using a Qualitative Research Design**

Initial researcher assumptions for this study included the belief that kindergarten has changed dramatically over the last thirty years, largely in response to accountability concerns in education, but also due to an increased need for high-quality, affordable child care options for working parents (Abbott-Shim et al., 2003; Copeman Petig, 2015; Janus & Duku, 2007; Miller, 2015). These socio-economic and cultural factors, combined with growing numbers of single and dual-parent working household served to create strong public interest in full-time Pre-K child care options and also fueled the demand for full-time public-school kindergarten (Abry, Latham, Bassok, & LoCasale-Crouch, 2015; Reynolds et al., 2014). Researcher assumptions about this study were influenced by the arts-based preschool and kindergarten setting's half-day schedule, suggesting parents' limited need for full-time care and moderate interest in academic preparation.

Among the weaknesses inherent in this research design, the most limiting were the ability to generalize findings from a specific population, such as an arts-based school, to the broader public and a lack of diverse perspectives due to a limited demographic participant pool.

### **Significance**

Calls for academic achievement beginning in kindergarten offer limited to no evidence that these gains are sustainable and such expectations minimize children's present and intermediate educational needs in hopes of facilitating future successes (Almon & Miller, 2011; Jaynes, 2006; Lincove & Painter, 2006; Main, 2012). Perhaps even more troubling, pediatricians

and educators warn that ignoring children's basic abilities and limitations in school for the sake of expediency carries the potential risks of child discouragement, anger, and diminished academic achievement overall (High and the Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care and Council on School Health, 2008; Iorio & Parnell, 2015). Young children cannot be expected to thrive without appropriate policies that address their current needs while also supporting their future development, yet their interests are underrepresented on this topic. Evidence-based curricula and teaching methods, coupled with functional measurement tools which can yield valid and reliable outcomes measures are necessary to serve the best interests of students, and must accompany the selection and implementation of early learning standards. As vital school partners and student advocates, parents should naturally be included in research on the topic of kindergarten readiness. Such inclusion will generate more robust, comprehensive understandings of the effects of early academic expectations, and may help determine if such expectations are an appropriate and effective means to closing the achievement gap.

### **Definitions**

**Achievement gap:** the perceived disparity in academic performance between groups of students, commonly African American and Hispanic, and their non-Hispanic white peers. Disparities are seen in student grades, standardized-test scores, and high-school dropout and college-completion rates, among other success measures (Ansell, 2004)

**Arts-based education:** an aesthetic, socio-cultural approach to education rooted in visual and fine arts (Chappell & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013)

**At-risk student:** a student identified as potentially needing special education services or interventions (McGee & Dail, 2013)

**Bioecological model:** the study of development within the context of an individual's life, including relationships, social connections, and community (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2017)

**Common core:** (in the United States) a set of educational standards for teaching and testing English and mathematics between kindergarten and 12th grade (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.)

**Early childhood education:** the education of children from birth to eight years (Copple, 2009)

**Kindergarten readiness:** an ill-defined term with no agreed-upon definition regarding various prerequisite kindergarten skills or learning expectations held by schools, parents, or teachers

**Play-based:** utilizing child-devised activities through which they can express themselves and explore things of special interest (Ontario Ministry of Education cited in Peterson & Riehl, 2016)

**Socio-emotional:** the experience, expression, and management of emotions (Cohen et al., 2005)

### **Conclusion**

The concept of kindergarten readiness, based on an assumption that academic preparation prior to kindergarten entry promotes future student achievement, has gained wide acceptance in American public education over the past twenty years. The reconceptualization of kindergarten from a child-centered nursery-school environment to an academically-structured formal classroom experience has been influenced by the emergence of national education policies intended to raise student achievement scores (Act, 2001; Copple, 2009; Dahlberg et al., 1999; Kagan, 1992; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004; Scarr, Phillips, & McCartney, 1990; Smith & Shepard, 1988; Zill & West, 2001). There is a limited understanding of the consequences of instituting wide-spread formal academic expectations prior to first grade, with recent research more focused on successful implementation than on exploring potential effects. Theories of cognitive development, which provide a basis for understanding the mechanisms of learning, describe processes that do not align well with a formal academic approach to early education, yet policymakers appear to ignore this knowledge (Lichtenstein, 1990). Accountability pressures in education have created an overemphasis on the development of the cognitive domain, leaving little time to support children's socio-emotional competencies. The neglect of nonacademic skills produces a de facto mismatch between what schools provide and what children need, increasing

stress, devaluing the early childhood experience, and defeating the purpose of education itself, which is for students to thrive and reach their full potential (Hatch, 2002; Yoon, 2015).

Some education reforms call for abandoning the assumptions held by proponents of early academics, including a passive view of student learning. Recent reform efforts encourage the adoption of an empowering conceptualization of the child as capable, curious, and ready to be a full participant in the educational process (Iorio & Parnell, 2015; 2016). Constructing this new conceptualization requires policymakers to revisit the idea that children need to be ready for school, a reconsideration that proponents of reform say is necessary in order to determine how schools can better adapt to the child. The need to reconsider how public schools “do” kindergarten and promote kindergarten readiness is evident in an educational system which must concern itself with not only future academic achievement, but also current student well-being. Education policy and practice should not solely represent the views of policymakers and educators, but also the interests of children and their families. As invested and influential stakeholders, parents should be given the opportunity to weigh in on important policy issues which concern themselves and their children.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The current conceptualization of kindergarten, once considered a transition period for children entering school, has evolved to include academic-level expectations. Researchers, policymakers, and historians agree that the traditionally accepted notion of kindergarten has abandoned its roots as profoundly child-focused and play-based and shifted significantly to an academic-classroom model reliant on seat-work, direct instruction, and standardized assessments. The purpose of this literature review was to examine evolving beliefs and practices in kindergarten education and explore historical and modern conceptualizations of kindergarten in the United States. This literature review also explored how popular notions about kindergarten have shifted in response to social changes and policy expectations and gave consideration to how the evolving kindergarten model has impacted schools, students, and families.

Commonly held assumptions about best practice in the field of early care and education are outlined in this review, recognizing aspects of unity and disagreement among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. While not a central focus of this study, literature highlighting federally funded interventions for at-risk populations, including Head Start's longstanding preschool programs, is included in this review to help contextualize the social welfare origins of school readiness efforts. Also addressed in this review are notable public policy perspectives emphasizing economic and civic incentives for standardizing early education. These positions offer an optimistic view of the benefits of universal preschool and its potential for eliciting sustainable academic gains, thereby reducing a persistent achievement gap between underserved and more advantaged student populations. Federal policies addressing concerns related to minority and low-income achievement gaps are identified, as are bi-directional socio-cultural trends. These topics include demographic changes in workforce and families, and the rising demand for out-of-home child care, each of which deserves its own consideration and further

exploration. At the end of this chapter is a critical overview of the movement toward increased academic expectations for kindergarteners, an aspect of public education policy and practice which merits further discussion concerning implications for schools, children, and families.

### **Early Conceptualizations of Kindergarten**

It used to be that the only prerequisite for kindergarten was age. From its origins in the mid-1800s as conceived by German educator Fredrich Fröebel, kindergarten represented a transition between home life and formal schooling, granting children additional time to mature and develop skills prior to first grade (Marenholtz-Bülow, 1877). Kindergarten in that era did not require readiness; it *preceded* readiness. Early conceptualizations of kindergarten are described by historians as “a place for free and joyful children to learn through their own discoveries as naturally as gardens grow” (de Cos, 2001, p. 9). The philosophy of traditional kindergarten and its child-focused approach holds the period of early childhood as something special and distinct from primary school—a bridge between the home and classroom (Graue, 2010).

### **Development of the Whole Child**

Initial conceptualizations of kindergarten emphasized “the commitment to learning through play” as a central component of Fröebel’s vision for education (Hoskins & Smedly, 2015, p. 207). The idea of a carefree, child-centered, and decidedly active learning environment was prevalent in the mid-19th century, and came to typify traditional kindergarten classrooms, curricula, and teaching practices (Dombkowski, 2001). The Fröebelian kindergarten, with its focus on the whole child, including intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development, was predominant until the 1990s (Jeynes, 2006). Traditional kindergarten pedagogy incorporated socio-ecological and constructivist beliefs which considered formal schooling inappropriate for young children and favored providing opportunities for learning through open-ended exploration and play. Detailing his views about age-appropriate curricula, Fröebel wrote, “the child, the boy, man in general, should have no other struggle than to be at each stage just what that stage

requires" (1886, p. 19). This view, consistent with intellectual development theorists Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, considers the child to be an active co-constructor of knowledge, whose inclinations and abilities must necessarily guide the process (Fox & Riconscente, 2008). Bodrova (2008) explains "in Vygotsky's view, play is more than a reflection of the child's current level of development: most important, it is a mechanism propelling child development forward."

Historians frequently note Fröebel's unwaveringly child-centered approach, wherein "the whole child was the focus and, in conjunction with this, all aspects of learning were to be linked through first-hand experiences and play" (Hoskins & Smedley, 2015, p. 208). According to Dumbowski, this departure from rote learning helped redefine early education, given that "the fundamentally non-academic kindergarten offered a new form of teacher-child relationship, one that tried to keep the child rather than the teacher at its centre" (2001, p. 529). Equally notable, Fröebel's model did not directly seek to prepare children for primary school and considered kindergarten to be an extension of education in the home. Fröebel's pedagogy, regarded as uniquely suited for young children, touted the superiority of individualized instruction over standardized curricula, an unorthodox position in education at that time. Fröebel explained "education should develop the individual according to the peculiar tendencies of each child's nature, not according to any arbitrary standard" (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000, p. 110).

Fröebel's kindergarten philosophy was developed when the practice of rote classroom instruction was losing favor among middle-class families who viewed mothers as the first teachers. Kindergarten education shares a history with nursery schools. Both of these co-existed alongside social welfare reforms targeting the working poor in the first half of the twentieth century (de Cos, 2001; Hoskins & Smedley, 2015). The origins of kindergarten traditions mirror middle-class beliefs regarding the nature and purpose of education in relationship to families. Discussing the central role of parents, Dahlberg et al. (1999) argue that original notions of kindergarten assumed "mothers, together with fathers, continue to have the main responsibility



for their children, and the home and family provide an environment and relationships of vital and unique importance to the young child” (p. 52). Early descriptions of Fröebel’s work indicate that his concept of kindergarten sought to imitate “a mother’s genial, cherishing way” of playing with children in the classroom (1886, p. v). Consistent with his idealized home setting, Fröebel advocated for simple toys, natural environments, and maternal guidance in an atmosphere devoid of formal academic content (Fröebel, 1903; Graue, 2010; Jeynes, 2006).

### **Kindergarten as Enrichment vs. Scholastic Achievement**

Deciding whether a child is ready to begin kindergarten is at the discretion of the child’s parents or legal guardians (Hatcher, 2005). Kindergarten attendance in the United States is still optional under compulsory education laws, although most eligible children are enrolled full-time (Lincove & Painter, 2006; Parker, Diffey, & Atchison, 2016). Chronic failure to meet academic achievement targets has led schools to assume they must require even earlier academic exposure. This push-down of expectations can mean bypassing alternative intervention strategies, for example, ensuring that minority teaching staff are hired to teach minority students (Hertert & Teague, 2003). Requiring children to begin academics prior to kindergarten entry, if not even earlier during preschool reduces their exposure to more developmentally-aligned curriculum and experiential learning environments adapted from Montessori and Waldorf schools, and more recently, the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) or Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math (STEAM) approaches (Sharapan, 2012). Parent preferences for nontraditional models of academic preparation also include interest in the Reggio-Emilia early education approach, which relies on arts-based project curriculum, integrated subjects, and in-depth child-centered inquiry (Stowell, 2014).

### **Kindergarten’s Traditional Focus on Social Learning**

In past years, kindergarten classrooms traditionally emphasized play-based learning in small groups to foster the social and emotional skills considered prerequisite to future academic

success (Denham, 2006). As late as 1990, there were few purely scholastic expectations in kindergarten, while pretend play, games, art, and music were staple elements. Kagan explains that until the 1990s, “premature instruction was frowned upon until the child was deemed developmentally ready to learn” (1992, p. 49).

**The role of cultural enrichment.** There is evidence that kindergarten is derived from a tradition of intentional cultural enrichment for middle-class families with stay-at-home mothers who send children to kindergarten primarily for social learning experiences (Graue, 2001). Enrichment opportunities foster children’s socio-emotional development, considered prerequisite to successful kindergarten entry. Cultural variations among families can influence whether parents seek out programs that emphasize social enrichment opportunities or prefer early academic interventions such as Head Start, decisions which expose differences due to economic stratification. Access to nonacademic enrichment also reflects available time and financial resources to cultivate and participate in extracurricular events. For example, middle-class parents with stay-at-home caretakers tend to engage in what childhood researcher Annette Lareau termed a “concerted cultivation” process, which prepares children for future success in society, not merely academic attainment (Lareau, 2002, 2011). This phenomenon, she contends, is part of the perpetuation of power through enrichment enculturation and may be accompanied by a lifestyle involving nannies, tutors, family travel, sporting, social engagements, and recreational events.

Concerns about addressing poor student achievement do not always allow time for addressing the importance of developing prerequisite socio-emotional skills for academic readiness. As a result, kindergarten classrooms are less inclined to provide students with open play space and unstructured play time, and more likely to require seatwork activities aligned with standards-based curriculum (Almon & Miller, 2007; Bassok, et al., 2016). Graue expresses concern about the trend to standardize kindergarten curriculum, and advocates for “restoring a developmental approach when accountability demands are pushing formal instruction on the

youngest learners” (2010, p. 28). The intentional deemphasis on social learning in kindergarten derives from pressure to address the risk of low achievement but lacks evidence that less social, more formal academic environments can better meet the current or future needs of young children (Barbarin et al., 2008).

## **National Education Policy and the Evolution of Kindergarten**

### **School Failure and Calls for Reform**

Russell’s research on the history of education suggests early social reforms targeting at-risk students drove education policy toward an interventionist model at a time when “federal Head Start program and expanding preschool education called into question kindergarten’s purpose” (2011, p. 237). Popular notions of kindergarten readiness which ignore age-appropriate expectations for young children result from policymakers embracing early alignment between standardized testing and curricula, and persist despite a lack of valid, reliable learning assessments for young children (La Para, Pianto & Stuhlman, 2004; Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Freeman & Brown 2008). Although the redefinition of kindergarten as an academic environment is primarily a result of policymakers’ achievement gap concerns, it is also driven by the shifting expectations of parents who consider student preparation critical to later school success and has been buoyed by media campaigns promoting early instruction (Puccioni, 2015).

**Kindergarten redefined as a time of preparation.** The desire to avoid future academic failures has brought its own set of outcome risks by putting undue pressure on children to demonstrate academic success at an early age. From the late 1960s through the 1980s, public unease regarding poverty-related school failure and a growing awareness of the importance of early school experiences coincided with a media-driven push for national education reform. Despite warnings from child development theorists and early childhood educators that early academic experiences are not suitable for young children, the traditional model of play-based kindergarten was set aside to allow for a more formal classroom approach; this approach viewed

kindergarten as an extension of and preparation for later academic experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Elkind, 1988; Scarr, Phillips, & McCartney, 1990; Zigler, 1987). Long-standing concerns about the negative impact of imposing early academic expectations on young children have not slowed the trajectory toward formalizing kindergarten in recent years, and public concerns have at times been overcome with the help of newspaper and television narratives portraying kindergarten as failing and needing reform. Russell explains that media portrayals “progressively recast the purpose of a kindergarten education from a vehicle for young children’s development to the foundation for the individual child’s future academic achievement” (2011, p. 256). Some in education sense that kindergarten has shifted to become “a place of tests and diagnoses rather than the social place it was designed to be” (Yoon, 2015, p. 365).

**Calls for better quality education.** The current vocabulary for education reform originates in previous efforts to address pervasive failures in public schools through early intervention and can be traced back to the 1983 publication of “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform,” which generated significant momentum for education reform over the past forty years (Gardner, 1983; Winter & Kelley, 2008). Along with concerns about quality in public education, increasing numbers of women in the workforce have helped drive calls for education reform, as the demand for full-time child care and longer school days has increased. Research indicates that public education policy and practice between 1980 and 2000 increasingly shifted toward an academic model of kindergarten, in response to societal and workforce changes, and coupled with government pressure to address poor academic outcomes (Scarr et al., 1990; Miller & Almon, 2009; Barnett, 2011; Pandya, 2012; Bassok et al., 2016).

**System-wide standardization in education and its critics.** The enactment of NCLB in 2002 and similarly structured Head Start standards for early learning in 2007 signaled a significant policy and paradigm shift about the purpose of kindergarten and led to pedagogical transformation system-wide (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006). The accelerated version of

kindergarten pedagogy espouses a preparatory function, incorporating formal academic expectations and methodology borrowed from upper grade levels, including direct instruction and routine learning assessments (Brown & Pickard, 2014; Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Main, 2012; Zacher-Pandya, 2012). This transformation to a more formal academic conception of kindergarten stands in sharp contrast to earlier notions of best practice in early childhood education based on Fröebel's idea of a children's garden, which emphasized social interaction, imaginative play, and natural environments (Fröebel, 1903; Graue, 2011; Jeynes, 2006).

Critiquing what they viewed as the nearly wholesale rejection of traditional kindergarten pedagogy, the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) pointedly warned of "tightly sequenced and often inappropriate grade-level lists of expected skill acquisition in each of the subject areas" (2000, p. 6). Advocates of a developmentally-based pedagogy acknowledge the benefits of aligning preschool curriculum with kindergarten expectations yet remain critical of a pedagogy based on giving children an early introduction to academics (Coppie, 2009; Coppie & Bredekamp, 2008). More recent approaches to standards alignment in early childhood education seek to unify early learning policy positions and practices with state-level school district concerns and emphasize the importance of partnership between parents and teachers (Feldman, 2010).

### **Readiness Education and the Academic Kindergarten**

Historically, kindergarten curricula has avoided formal academic content areas such as math or science and provided interdisciplinary, play-based social learning environments with open-ended exploration. Kindergarten's traditional art, music, and storytelling activities are designed to accommodate a wide range of students' developing skills, and the small group structure encourages children to engage in social learning (Claessens, et al., 2014; Zigler et al., 2011). A review of literature covering the history of kindergarten practices from 1980 to 2015 shows a steady trend toward increased academic expectations for young children, including more

teacher-directed large group instruction, and less emphasis on addressing individual developmental differences, along with fewer child-directed activities and more seat work (Brown, 2013; Copple & Bredekamp, 2008; Dombkowski, 2001; Winter & Kelley, 2008). Routine pre-kindergarten testing and skills assessments are a relatively new phenomenon, but increasingly, age-qualified kindergarteners are asked to demonstrate specific abilities such as number or letter recognition prior to enrollment (Beatty, 1995; Russell, 2011).

### **The Interventionist Roots of Formal Assessments in Kindergarten**

There is evidence that the idea of school readiness itself is rooted in social welfare reforms, including Head Start's early interventions for at-risk populations (Abbott-Shim et al., 2003; Brown, 2013; Education, 1983; Lewit & Baker, 1995; McDermott, Rikoon, Waterman, & Fantuzzo, 2012). In the search for educational excellence, however, early childhood reforms have had unintended negative consequences. Education policy researcher Puccioni cites concerns about long-term effects from the mismatch between young children and increased academic exposure, explaining that it can be disruptive given that the "transition to kindergarten is regarded as a pivotal developmental period, as patterns of achievement and behavior established in kindergarten can have profound impacts on children's developmental trajectories," (2015, p. 130). In a preparatory kindergarten model, the burden of achieving adequate academic progress has shifted increasingly onto students and away from parents and schools (Daniels, 2016; Fox & Riconscente, 2008; Gopnik, 1997; Meltzoff, 1999; Zacher Pandya, 2012). Staking future academic success on early intervention efforts that include frequent formal assessments can backfire and exacerbate socio-economic inequalities (Gallant, 2009; Main, 2012). Describing the social justice implications and unintended outcomes of early intervention efforts, Graue explains that "the more important question is related to the equity of requiring a level of performance for admission to free and public education, given both the variation in rates of development in young children and the variation in the environments for young children" (2006, p. 47).

Kindergarten entry is predominantly age-determined and not systematically denied or granted to any child on the basis of demonstrated achievements or skills. Nevertheless, efforts aimed to improve academic outcomes yield policies and practices inherently incompatible with recognized maturational timetables, and the variable needs of still-developing young children. One example of this disconnect is the fact that educators are fully aware that the process of knowledge construction in young children occurs primarily through guided exploration and self-directed discovery, a precept openly ignored in learning environments that utilize one-size-fits-all, direct, formal instruction (Fox & Riconscente, 2008; Vygotsky, 2015). As the concept of kindergarten has evolved to focus primarily on academic preparation, related expectations increasingly favor the school's desire for immediate evidence of student achievement and ignore the students' developmental need for informal learning environments (Bassok et al., 2016; Duncan, 2014; 2016; Jeynes, 2006). As this trend continues, it remains incumbent upon schools to secure academic achievement models that are appropriate, equitable, and effective for students. This may require expanding the public-school definition of readiness to more accurately reflect young children's learning proclivities and maturational limitations along with their need for additional time to develop reliable, testable skills.

**Assessment push down.** While the use of standardized assessments is common within kindergarten classrooms in the United States, these measurement tools were not originally designed for testing young children (Rock & Stenner, 2005; Shepard, 2008). As with the push down of formal academic curricula from upper grade levels, formal testing prior to first grade is adapted from achievement measures designed for older students. Applying these measures to young children with their typical variations in development produces unreliable results. Formal testing also ignores "the heterogeneity that characterises early childhood education" which necessarily "gives rise to differences in approaches to curriculum, to teaching, and consequently to the assessment of early learning" (Dunphy, 2010, p. 41). More accurate and reliable

assessment of young children has been obtained through the methods of teacher observation and systematic documentation of growth, learning, and development using portfolio evaluations.

**Formal assessments and the rise of red-shirting.** Wide-spread utilization of formal assessments in kindergarten came in specific response to NCLB mandates (NCLB, 2002). Pressure for early student accomplishment has likewise influenced notions of kindergarten readiness and elicited responses from schools, parents, and teachers who must adjust to the new demands. The practice of routine entrance testing for kindergarten alongside a narrower curriculum has notably been “denounced by educators” as developmentally inappropriate for young children (Lewit & Baker, 1995, p. 130). Specifically, this focus on kindergarten readiness puts some children at risk of failure to successfully meet grade-level advancement requirements and may encourage parents and teachers to engage in *red-shirting*— the practice of voluntarily holding a child back a calendar year before kindergarten entry (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Singman, 2013). Studies investigating parent recollections and beliefs about schooling have found that parents view readiness differently for their children than they did for themselves, and express concerns about the increased academic expectations that exist now for children (Belfield & Garcia, 2014; Guddemi et al., 2014; Puccioni, 2015; Spencer, 2015).

**Narrowing of curriculum.** Reform-driven early academic expectations have led schools to mandate achievement standards that govern kindergarten curriculum and teaching practices. A report on school readiness demonstrates how policies outlining requirements for documenting educational success, beginning in kindergarten, are harnessed to a narrow set of scholastic expectations and outcomes, with limited opportunities to demonstrate academic achievement (Lewit & Baker, 1995). Routine testing in kindergarten remains widespread and is growing despite warnings by educators and pediatricians who decry performance pressure and exposure to formal learning environments (American Academy of Pediatrics in Schor et al, 1995; Atkins-Burnett, 2007; Russell, 2011). Fulfilling earlier academic achievement outcomes goals requires



that parents and schools work together so that children arrive at school with adequate preparation. In this paradigm, early testing is seen as a useful way to help determine which children need additional supports. Yet, an investigation of academic outcomes for preschool students in programs with differing levels of academic focus concluded that by sixth grade, students demonstrated negative effects from “overly academic preschool experiences that introduced formalized learning experiences too early for most children's developmental status” (Marcon, 2002, p. 5). Given persistent concerns about both immediate and long-term negative impacts of early academic expectations, the question of whether formal instruction should begin at age five deserves critical consideration among policymakers, parents and teachers.

### **School Readiness Becomes the Focus of Kindergarten**

The first National Education Goal in 1990 stipulated that all children in the United States would start school “ready to learn” by the year 2000, a catch-phrase implying that students would be ready for a kindergarten resembling the formal academic environment of first or even second grade (Howes et al., 2008). NCLB legislation echoed this aspiration and mandated state-level adoption of standardized learning and achievement goals (State of Arkansas, 2002).

Demand for specific accountability outcomes in education has led to requirements which can begin as early as preschool to prepare for formal assessment in kindergarten (Dombkowski, 2001; Ladd, Herald, & Kochel, 2006; Winter & Kelley, 2008). Mandates for early preparation and assessments and their requirement formal academic environments ignore research claims that academic kindergarten pedagogy contradicts students’ need for individually-paced learning with accommodation for variable rates of maturation (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Gullo, 2005).

**Children are required to adapt.** Pedagogy emphasizing early achievement results in kindergarteners who have less time to play and socialize as scholastic requirements take priority (Bell, 2013; Brown & Lan, 2015; Edson, 1990; Gallant, 2009; Jeynes, 2006; Kane, 2014). Given increasing and earlier requirements, the burden of preparation is such that kindergarten is no

longer expected to make itself ready for children; rather, children are expected to conform to kindergarten's expectations (Smith & Shephard, 1988; Iorio & Parnell, 2015, 2016).

**What does it mean to be ready for kindergarten?** Notions of kindergarten readiness have historically centered on the idea that the adults in the school should be ready to meet the needs of the children, a view that encourages families to focus on helping children prepare socially and emotionally for the experience. More recently, the notion of readiness has come to mean that a student should be *academically* ready for kindergarten (Jeynes, 2006). Not surprisingly, opinions among parents and schools regarding what student readiness is and how to measure it may not coincide. Lewit and Baker (1995) note that the notion of readiness varies widely with no common agreement on its definition, and can for example, be used equally to describe a student who is ready to learn (potential ability) or more specifically, a student who has achieved a specific level of readiness (demonstrated ability).

### **Assessment Problems**

The process of accurately gauging a young student's level of school readiness involves a host of measurement problems. Assessment of ability and academic achievement in the early years is complex and unreliable. In addition to normal variations inherent in young children's performance, the presence of developmental delays, social awkwardness, language barriers, and socio-economic distress can all affect whether or not a young child appears academically ready according to a standardized assessment (Dombkowski, 2001; Duncan et al., 2007; Freeman & Brown, 2008; Jeynes, 2006).

**Inherent inequalities revealed in assessments.** An academically-focused kindergarten includes elements potentially stressful for young children, especially for those who lack experience or preparation. Naturally occurring individual differences in early achievement may simply reflect inherent disparities in access to early education which contribute to non-ability-

based performance differences (Abbott-Shim et al., 2003; Brazee & Johnson, 2001; Gullo, 2005; Janus & Duku, 2007; Maxwell & Clifford, 2004; Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2000).

**Individual differences and performance variations.** Unsurprisingly, variations in performance on early assessments may also be reflective of typically occurring maturational differences in motor abilities along with executive functions such as memory and reasoning, or may be related to variations in cultural backgrounds, all of which can impact demonstrated ability. Limitations regarding the predictive ability of early achievement tests add to concerns about their use, as these measurement tools were not developed with the wide range of young children's behaviors and developmental skills in mind (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Brown, 2013; Denham, 2006; Denham & Brown, 2010; Gordon, 2013; Singman, 2013).

**The need for valid and reliable assessment.** Encouraged in part by the advent of ESSA, with its requisite focus on achievement standards and outcomes testing for preschool and kindergarten, some educators advocate the use of a portfolio assessment which includes representative sample work and classroom observations of individual students. Observationally-based snapshots provide qualitative information about child progress and address reliability issues inherent in assessment testing for young children due to their performance variability, a problem which Neisworth and Bagnato (2004) coined as 'the mismeasure of young children'. Portfolio evaluation is considered to be a valid measure of child ability using naturalistic observation. This qualitative measure of achievement potentially avoids the mislabeling of at-risk students solely due to language or cultural diversity by utilizing year-long strength-based snapshots of students' developmental growth and learning progress over time (Main, 2012).

### **Readiness Pressures for Young Children**

The increased emphasis on accountability testing in K–12 public education is also present within preschool (Pre-K) education environments (Bell, 2013; Claessens et al., 2014; McDermott

et al., 2012). Education reforms mandating student assessments based on NCLB-related common standards are often coupled with similar standards and testing requirements in preschool programs, many of which have their own federal funding accountability issues to satisfy (Zacher-Pandya, 2011). Passage of NCLB in 2002 and the subsequent 2007 Head Start Standards mandated system-wide changes to public education's early childhood education programs, generating debate due to their departure from more developmentally aligned pedagogy (Janus & Duku, 2007). Concerns among educators about the suitability of academic expectations for young children have grown in recent years (Brown & Lan, 2015; Gallant, 2009; Main, 2012).

### **Accountability Testing Concerns**

Calls for increased school accountability using frequent assessments have included a reliance on high-stakes testing which determine critical future education funding (Bordignon & Lam, 2004; Schor et al., 1995). High-stakes testing in the early grades is routine despite evidence that traditional testing methods lack reliability and are unsuitable for young children, while portfolio-style documentation-based assessments are considered more valid and reliable measures at these ages (Brazee & Johnson, 2001; Copeman Petig, 2015; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004; Zacher-Pandya, 2011). Another consideration which favors using early childhood portfolio assessments is the ability to avoid testing ceilings that unintentionally ignore the gains of more precocious learners. Concerns about early assessment also include the narrow focus of traditional academic tests with content-specific areas used to measure growth and development, usually geared toward math and reading which may not effectively capture year-over-year gains in early childhood related to social, emotional, and physical development (Gewertz, 2014).

### **Identifying and Measuring Program Quality**

The practice of utilizing learning assessments and systematic program quality ratings at the preschool level is not itself particularly controversial, with broad agreement among educators that many accountability reforms include desirable and perhaps inevitable consequences of

increased scrutiny, funding restrictions, and taxpayer concerns (Snow, 2011). Objections to standardized assessments tend to center on the methodology and not on the goals themselves.

### **Developmentally Appropriate Practice**

Standards for curriculum, teaching methods, and quality measures in early childhood education published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in their various position papers, including those covering Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) guidelines, are widely recognized to constitute best practice. NAEYC's DAP guidelines inform foundational requirements of state-level child care licensing regulations and Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS) addressing child care program quality, along with individual states' learning standards for Pre-K-12 education (Goffin & Barnett, 2015; Lipscomb, Weber, Green, & Patterson, 2016; Snow, 2011). Quality rating standards for child care programs and preschools typically emphasize cognitive development, active learning, and the importance of nurturing teachers who promote intellectual and socio-ecological aspects of the child's growth and development (Bassok et al., 2016). This constructivist approach to student learning in early childhood requires its own set of quality measures, which differ significantly from elementary education's standard model of direct instruction, grounded in behaviorist theory with a focus on content-driven learning outcomes.

### **Early Childhood Environmental Ratings Scales**

Program quality rating systems, such as the Early Childhood Environmental Ratings Scales (ECERS), routinely used by state-level QRIS evaluators to assess child care program quality, are administered in preschools and child care centers to help identify and rate high-quality programs and pinpoint areas for program improvement (Brown, 2013; Reardon, 2011). The primary emphasis of many rating scales is using environmental observations of teacher-child interactions to assess how well teachers interact with children and, in turn, how well they facilitate their growth and progress using developmental checklists and portfolios. Within rating

systems such as the ECERS, there are continuous quality improvement steps a program can take to adjust itself to the needs of the child, including providing additional professional training or support for higher quality teacher-child interactions (La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004).

### **Program Quality Measures Predict Future Academic Success**

The widespread belief among educators that formal academic achievement testing in young children is stressful, unreliable, and lacks validity has led to calls for better assessment measures (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004). Environmental rating instruments, which examine and rate the overall program, classroom environment and teacher qualities, avoid the unreliability of traditional child testing. Research focusing on the validity of the Classroom Assessment Rating Scale (CLASS) measurement tool found that early learning environments and teacher-student interactions may be superior predictors of program quality and student achievement, compared to the less reliable individual learning measures (La Paro et al., 2004). Research on the use of environmental rating scales has also suggested that high-quality teacher-student interactions are closely tied to positive learning outcomes and, along with program quality, may be the best predictors of future academic success for young children (Burchinal et al., 2008; Hamre, 2014; ). In a related study on predictors of learning outcomes for preschoolers, Curby, Brock and Hamre (2013) identified nurturing and supportive teacher-student interactions as the most important contributors to high-quality learning environments, emphasizing teacher consistency as an effective indicator for future academic success. This is a significant finding, given the need to focus time, attention, and resources on the most powerful determinants, and its application may help direct limited resources toward those factors which are most likely to lead to positive student outcomes. Continued interest in state QRISs may likewise influence public schools to focus more directly on improving teacher-student interactions and to create learning environments in preschool and kindergarten which can support these high-quality interactions.

## **Reconciling Early Assessment Theory and Practice**

Despite broad agreement among early childhood educators regarding essential criteria for program excellence, such as quality adult-child interactions, caregiver responsiveness, and caregiver warmth, frustration remains about choosing outcomes measures, since sufficiently valid and reliable early learning assessments are unavailable (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Bagnato et al., 2014). In response, educators have adopted qualitative methods of student assessment using holistic appraisals of student achievement with a strengths-based approach to evaluation, built around student observation and sample-based portfolios of student work.

### **The Case for Portfolio Assessments**

Special education teachers who utilize strength-based student evaluations define portfolio assessments as “a purposeful collection of work designed to represent the child's efforts, progress, and achievements” (Stockall, Dennis, & Rueter, 2014, p. 32). So-called portfolio-based “authentic assessments” are inherently designed to be individual measures of achievement and stand in contrast to more typical quantitative assessments preferred by public school districts (Brazee & Johnson, 2001; Gullo, 2005; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004). The portfolio assessment method is currently favored by many early childhood practitioners and includes developmental checklists, naturalistic observations, and work sampling intended to document student progress over the course of the year to capture both breadth and depth of learning (Bell, 2013; Brown & Lan, 2015; Gallant, 2009). Portfolio assessment effectiveness can surpass that of standardized tests for the purpose of tracking the progress of preschool and kindergarten students, but is less common in kindergarten, as portfolios are time consuming and ill-suited for compiling quantitative data comparisons of student achievement or aggregating data (Stockall et al., 2014).

**Social inequality and the deficit model in education.** The deficit-model of student achievement dominates within educational assessment systems. Much of the federal funding and resources is interventional in nature: schools must “play catch-up” because today’s child is

already behind (Hughes, 2010). In a socio-cultural critique of school readiness, the term ‘at-risk’ is used to describe students who fit the profile, but this approach may perpetuate inequality due to reliance on cultural and socio-economic stereotypes. Some policy critics consider the term ‘at-risk’ to be a political construct used to explain differences seen in children who are merely poor. They suggest remediation efforts originate in school attempts to normalize children who come from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and socio-economic levels (Iorio & Parnell, 2014; 2016).

Whether intentional or not, kindergarten readiness policies rely on a deficit-model view of student assessment, focusing on what children lack, rather than what they bring to the classroom. Prerequisite skills for kindergarten entry are narrowly defined, and students from economically disadvantaged households tend to fare poorly on behavioral checklists (Zill & West, 2001). Readiness education, with its roots in social justice efforts to alleviate poverty and eradicate discrimination, also reflects longstanding social and political interests that seek to maintain power through emphasizing conformity (Iorio & Parnell, 2014). Consideration of the socio-political nature and purpose of readiness education provides an important lens for critical examination of the limited discourse inherent in education policy development. An inclusive dialogue on the effectiveness of kindergarten readiness efforts involving diverse stakeholder groups may lead to new understandings and more organic solutions. The opportunity to include parent perspectives in this discussion remains relatively wide open.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Alternative Models of School Readiness**

Traditional kindergarten pedagogy does not effectively address current concerns about poor student achievement in later grades, and more recent readiness approaches do not appear to be effective for this purpose either. An alternative view of kindergarten readiness has emerged from a variety of early education approaches, including the Reggio Emilia model, which challenges the assumption that young children with diverse skill levels are somehow not ready



for school. The Reggio Emilia philosophy cultivates children in an arts-based environment where they are considered capable, self-determined, and inherently ready to learn, albeit with typical individual variations in maturity and ability. This reconceptualization of readiness places the burden onto parents, school, and the community itself to determine the type of education that is best for young children, and forces alignment of curricula with more holistic and far-reaching standards that reflect the full spectrum of children's current and future developmental needs.

There is growing awareness in the search for effective readiness education regarding the importance of teacher-child relationships in determining student outcomes (Ahnert, Piquart, & Lamb, 2006; Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2011; Hamre, Hatfield, Pianta, & Jamil, 2014; Hamre, 2014; Landry et al., 2017; Schmitt, Pentimonti, & Justice, 2012). The Reggio Emilia approach, rooted in art and culture, emphasizes this relational aspect of education, and gives relational learning primary consideration, along with an awareness of the unique characteristics of children, parents, cultural background, and the broader community. New (2007) asserts that this approach "has become a catalyst for conversations about a society's responsibility to its youngest citizens" (p. 5). Most readiness efforts in early education, however, do not embrace an overt collaboration of those most deeply involved: children, families, teachers, who remain underutilized sources of knowledge (Li-Grining et al., 2010; Zhai, Raver & Li-Grining, 2011).

Well-regarded alternative models of kindergarten education, including Waldorf, Montessori, and the Reggio Emilia approach advocate for child-directed learning and consider overall student engagement, joyfulness, and well-being to be important in and of themselves, as well as predictive of future academic success (Stowell, 2014). With origins embedded within the Italian culture and the centrality of family, the Reggio Emilia approach employs thematic emergent curriculum in early education and reflects wider cultural beliefs about the nature of young children. This approach views the student as a capable co-constructor of knowledge, encouraging self-determination and intellectual freedom. In this model the student is seen not as

a mere recipient of knowledge and skill but a full participant in his or her own education. This holistic, strengths-based conceptualization of learning and learner rejects the notion of a passive student, and imagines eager, ready pupils who possess innate learning potential, rich prior experience, and unique talents and skills. The STEAM model of adult-facilitated, child-directed experiential education similarly utilizes project learning, promoting individual and collaborative learning, scientific and mathematical creative problem-solving, and artistic self-expression.

**Readiness without early academics.** A typical Reggio Emilia classroom immerses students in both individual and group project work, reflecting pedagogy grounded in scientific and aesthetic exploration that also integrates child-inspired content areas and topics. Montessori classrooms similarly place joint responsibility for the discovery and learning process on student and teacher, with materials specially designed for sequential experiential learning. Waldorf schools emphasize hand-made toys, outdoor exploration, natural materials, and imaginative play, limiting technology in favor of engaging children in sensory-rich interactions intended to promote a connection to nature and spiritual awareness. Defenders of these approaches consider their focus on experiential learning to be excellent pre-academic preparation (Stowell, 2014).

### **Readiness and Head Start**

**Intervention and the roots of readiness.** Proponents of alternative kindergarten models of education such as Montessori, Waldorf and Reggio Emilia claim these approaches provide meaningful, rich learning environments; however, their critics contend that at-risk students cannot afford to lose valuable time with play-based enrichments and should focus on academic fundamentals such as literacy and numeracy skills. Nevertheless, claims of successful academic intervention in kindergarten are seldom supported by evidence (Howes et al., 2008; Plank & Condliffe, 2013; Reardon, 2011). Kindergarten readiness strategies appear to be neither appropriate nor effective for raising student achievement and may simply reflect an education

culture lacking tolerance for naturally occurring diversity in various socio-economic groups (Iorio & Parnell, 2016).

**The achievement gap and Head Start.** Head Start programs work within aspects of cultural diversity that are believed to influence future educational success. Hinitz (2014) details the history of Head Start, laying out the origins and purpose of interventionist ideology and practice in early education over the past forty years to help at-risk students achieve levels closer to their affluent peers. Evidence of the immediate benefits of Head Start programs for at-risk populations remains tied to significant doubts regarding their ability to obtain student achievement and produce equalizing effects over time (Abbott-Shim et al., 2003; Duncan et al., 2007; Janus & Duku, 2007; Reardon, 2011). Compelling evidence regarding the overwhelming impact of underlying socio-economic disparities suggests that family economic well-being is the most powerful predictor of future student success (Dahl & Lochner, 2012, 2017). Despite no clear, substantial evidence of the long-term effectiveness of their programs, Head Start policies continue to lead national kindergarten policy, defining early education practices. Head Start's legacy includes initial successes promoting early literacy and has garnered positive attention by at times adapting Montessori methodology to its individualized programs (Manswell, 1996).

**Assumptions about economic and cultural impoverishment.** Viewed from a socio-political context, there is evidence that the primary aim of early education is to produce student conformity via standardized curricula, a goal which takes precedence over children's need to mature and develop at their own pace with self-determination. The commonly applied deficit-model in education, which views variability of individual differences as inherent liabilities carries the assumption that economic hardship and cultural impoverishment are synonymous. Although well-intended, systems designed by policymakers to help underserved children and families may nevertheless be essentially prejudicial in nature, as they originate from a narrow and privileged point of view which seeks to merely mitigate or erase, not comprehend or

appreciate student differences. Evidence supports the view that the term ‘readiness’ is itself historically tied to social engineering efforts in education and continues to serve the purpose of promoting student conformity, thus diminishing equality (Hinitz, 2014).

### **Unintended Consequences of the Readiness Focus**

It has been argued that the primary goal of school readiness is not to promote student learning, but rather to produce evidence of school progress toward ambitious, aspirational and what some consider increasingly unattainable achievement outcomes (Halle, Vick Whittaker, & Anderson, 2010). ESSA legislation (2015) has eased regulatory oversight of many readiness mandates and helped create broader latitude for states to selectively allocate school resources and still avoid penalties for failure to achieve adequate yearly progress goals (Act, 2001).

**Teaching to the test.** High-stakes testing, which ties educational funding to teacher evaluations or to specific student outcomes has contributed to test-driven curriculum. While difficult to track, the practice of teaching to the test is considered commonplace, as the schools most likely to need outcomes-based funding—those which are already underfunded, lacking basic resources, and serving disadvantaged students—can be the first to lose funding when they don’t meet the yearly progress standards. This practice of punishing low-performing schools leads to curriculum that is designed de facto to be test preparation, a risky shortcut that in many ways defeats the purpose and validity of testing by circumventing the intended process and robs students of valuable instructional time (Yoon, 2015).

**Opting-out of testing.** Facing pressure from parents to redirect teacher time and energy away from test prep activities, some wealthier school districts in the U.S., such as the Cherry Creek School District in upscale northeast Denver decided to forgo federal school funds and let parents opt-out of testing requirements in favor of more autonomy and less time spent preparing for and taking tests (Aragon, Rowland & Wixom, 2015; Parent Exemption from State Assessments, n.d.). But school districts critical of mandatory testing requirements do not

necessarily have a clear choice to relinquish funding, and many participate with unpopular accountability reforms, including testing requirements, core content curriculum, and federally-rooted, top-down school district oversight out of economic necessity.

**In praise of readiness reforms.** Notably, some districts praise NCLB's increased accountability focus, and have embraced reforms, including routine testing, touting improved student achievement, increased parent participation, and enhanced teacher awareness of quality standards (Halle, Whittaker & Anderson, 2010). In schools where low student achievement has been a historic fact, accountability measures are considered critical to promoting student readiness and in some cases to bringing about necessary improvements in teacher training, instructional methods, and assessments (Fry & Taylor, 2013; Grace & Brandt, 2006).

#### **Achievement Testing with a Readiness Emphasis**

In this climate of mandated school accountability heralded by the enactment of NCLB, frequent student testing, along with significant instructional time devoted to test preparation has become the norm in education, even at earlier grade levels, and with potentially negative consequences (Zacher-Pandya, 2011). Researchers note that this model of continuous quality improvement as it is applied in education has reshaped not only how we teach, but how we view education overall (Freeman & Brown, 2008). In a system focused on measuring outcomes, the goal of education is not essentially about instilling academic knowledge and skills; it is about continuous preparation for the next stage of academic life while limited to testing what is easily quantifiable. It worth noting that subsequent to accountability reforms, researchers found the overall educational experience has become more reductionist, less personal, and frustratingly ineffective, particularly for minority students (Hallam et al., 2014; Miller & Smith, 2011).

#### **Failure to Include DLL Students**

In her review of research on academic reforms, Zacher-Pandya (2011) describes the far-reaching negative effects of accountability measures on student learning, especially those of

high-stakes testing, and details the specific failure of testing policies related to NCLB when evaluating English or dual language learners (ELL or DLL), who are more likely to be penalized under this assessment model. In the many studies cited by Zacher-Pandya, English language learners (ELL) are less likely to achieve positive academic outcomes if they are subjected to high-stakes testing classroom environments. Such environments emphasize test preparation but offer less time spent on individual student instruction. In these cases, minority ELL students are left behind as their gains are tied to more targeted ELL instruction, yet individual language gains are not well documented by standard language testing (Janus & Duku, 2007; Yoon, 2015).

### **Predictive Program Elements Examined**

Drawing upon studies predicting positive learning outcomes for Pre-K students in high-quality early childhood programs, Hughes (2010) attempts to isolate which predictive elements were the predominant contributors to positive outcomes and identifies teacher-student interactions as a key factor. Hughes asserts that high-quality teacher-student interactions, characterized as responsive, interactive, and supportive, are essential for both classroom management and children's social and emotional development, and should be assessed along with other meaningful quality measures in classroom environments.

**Provider/educator support needed for quality.** Researchers contend that teacher-child relationships, considered foundational to program quality, are in fact the most directly influential predictors of student success, contributing more than other environmental factors (Curby & Brock, 2013; La Paro et al., 2004; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004; Tout, Zaslow & Berry, 2006). A frequently overlooked but critical point in education is that in order to provide nurture and care consistently to children, adults must have their own basic needs addressed. According to Hamre (2014), high-quality teacher-student interactions, despite being important determinants of student outcomes do not occur regularly due to problems with overcrowding, poor teacher training, or lack of awareness. Still more challenging is the fact that high-quality teacher-student interactions

remain infrequent even after Social Emotional Learning (SEL) training occurs, if simultaneously teachers do not receive sufficient professional support or adequate classroom resources, scarce commodities in a field known for low pay and difficult working conditions (Sheridan, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that there is significant disagreement between researchers and policymakers about the appropriateness of increased academic expectations for young children, yet limited knowledge about the consequences or effectiveness of these expectations. Investigators who study child learning outcomes should consider broadening the scope of inquiry to reevaluate commonly held notions of kindergarten readiness. Literature regarding commonly held best practices in early childhood education emphasizes that the process of educating young children is inextricably tied to addressing not only future outcomes, but just as importantly, meeting current developmental needs (Bodrova, 2008; Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Copeman Petig, 2015; Copple, 2009; Copple & Bredekamp, 2008; Gallant, 2009; Guddemi et al., 2014; Hamre, 2014; La Paro et al., 2004; Main, 2012; Spencer, 2015).

The reconnection of educational theory and practice in early childhood education requires a realistic appraisal of young children to determine which pedagogy and curricula will effectively serve their best interests. Regrettably, schools focused on kindergarten readiness cannot prioritize children's immediate needs, for example, the need for nurturing teacher-child relationships, while they remain focused on improving future learning outcomes. Although kindergarten readiness has its roots in well-intended achievement-gap interventions, its methods appear to be largely ineffective for this purpose and counterproductive for student success. In their social critique of readiness education, Iorio and Parnell (2015, 2016) suggest a rethinking of the relationship of school to student which emphasizes individual child strengths and focuses on opportunities for growth and learning. They contend that schools ought to be the ones who adjust

to accommodate young children's unique characteristics and capacities, especially the social-emotional needs and self-governance limitations common to this age.

A bioecological strengths-based approach applied to kindergarten readiness efforts views young children within their unique individual family and social context, defined as whole and capable persons who are different from, but not inferior to older children. The strengths-based lens can be used to help reverse damage done by educational dependency on deficit-model thinking. Cultivating parent involvement can help support a strengths-based approach in education as well. While parent engagement is considered essential to student success, the task of meaningfully contextualizing individual children within their family circumstances is difficult to achieve on a wide scale without significant effort and applied resources. Maintaining critically important parent engagement and family support in the young child's educational environment can be an elusive goal, especially among populations of DLL/ELL students and others with dual-working parent households (Holliday et al., 2014; Winter & Kelley, 2008). Understanding parent perspectives and concerns during a child's transition to kindergarten has been identified as a particularly useful strategy for effective educational reform. However, parent concerns about kindergarten readiness are not well documented, as research has mainly focused on educator perspectives (Belfield & Garcia, 2014; Campbell, 2015). The inclusion of family viewpoints in the quest for kindergarten readiness is also hampered when investigations prioritize successful implementation of existing readiness efforts over the discovery of parent perspectives (Bassok et al., 2016; Bell, 2013; Clark & Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2008; Stewart, 2016).



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Efforts to promote kindergarten readiness, identified by NCLB and ESSA legislation as essential to improving K-12 student achievement, remain controversial because methodologies conflict with the traditional kindergarten pedagogy based on a recognition of the developmental needs and maturational limitations of young children (Brown & Pickard, 2014; Denham, 2006; Endler, 2003; Janus & Duku, 2007; Kane, 2014; Lincove & Painter, 2006; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007; Singman, 2013; Yoon, 2015; Zill & West, 2001). Reports published subsequent to enactment of NCLB cite persistently poor student outcomes in mathematics and reading as early as third grade (Brown & Lan, 2015; Campbell, 2015; “NAEP Mathematics and Reading Highlights,” n.d.). There are numerous investigations focused on early learning outcomes, but few studies exploring how parents perceive kindergarten readiness efforts (Belfield & Garcia, 2014; Hatcher et al., 2012; Hover, 2014; Jigjidsuren, 2013; Kane, 2014; Litkowski & Kruger, 2017; Mapson, 2013; Melton, 2013; Orkin, 2008; Recchia & Bentley, 2013; Simerly, 2014; Spencer, 2015). Parents of kindergarteners have participated in studies of kindergarten readiness (Pandya, 2012), however parent inclusion in such studies has tended to focus on how their support of school readiness helps children meet academic expectations with the blanket assumption that parents have a favorable opinion of kindergarten readiness programs.

This qualitative investigation of parent notions of kindergarten readiness was designed as a case study utilizing parent interviews in an arts-based preschool and kindergarten setting. The study collected interview data to address the proposed research questions:

1. How do parents view the topic of kindergarten readiness?
2. In what ways do parents agree or differ in their perceptions of kindergarten readiness?
3. What concerns do parents have about kindergarten readiness expectations?

Interview questions were constructed in an open-ended discussion format to encourage dialogue and included prompts which a) invited participants to recollect when they first thought about the topic of kindergarten readiness; b) asked whether participants believed that their ideas about kindergarten readiness were influential in their decision to send their child to an arts-based school; and c) explored how they viewed their child's future academic preparedness.

### **Setting**

The setting for this study was a private arts-based preschool and kindergarten program in a small city with a young, diverse, and predominantly well-educated population. The nonprofit community arts center included a longstanding arts-based preschool and newly-opened arts-based kindergarten situated in this neighborhood's downtown area, with options for half-day programs and before and after-school care. As an arts-center volunteer, active board member, and education programs liaison, the researcher was granted permission to conduct the study on-site, including access to relevant program documents and approval to conduct parent interviews.

### **Participants and Data Collection**

#### **Participants**

After IRB approval was obtained and participant consent was granted, a total of eight interviews were conducted. Subjects were recruited via a school-distributed written letter invitation to participate in the study (Appendix C). The sample size of eight respondents was obtained from a pool of the 140 preschool and kindergarten parents (defined as either the child's parent or legal guardian). Participants were chosen by the researcher on a first-come response basis for the available interview times. Participants confirmed interview appointment times via email and/or text messaging directly with the researcher. All participants self-identified as parents of children in the preschool or kindergarten, with the held assumption that their individual notions of kindergarten readiness were informed by this common connection. A summary of researcher biases and assumptions is included later in this section.

## Data Collection

Over the course of six weeks, eight separate one-on-one parent interviews were conducted. Volunteer participants were recruited from the school's initial pool of 140 families which included all eligible parents/legal guardians of preschool and kindergarten students. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each. Interviews were held in a conference room in the arts center building, except for a single interview that was conducted in a meeting room of a private office building on the nearby college campus, arranged for the convenience of the parent and researcher who both worked in the building. Six interview questions written by the researcher were derived from relevant themes in the literature review.

Prior to the interview, each participant received a written introduction to the study and its purpose and an explanation of participant risks, benefits, and rights to consent or withdraw participation (Appendix A). Participants were selected on a first-come basis for availability, and interview times were chosen by mutual agreement. While commonly applied in qualitative studies involving interview transcripts, a member check utilizing interviewee reverification of transcript data was not indicated in this case, with limited evidence for its value in a case study research design of this size and type (Barbour, 2001; Thomas, 2017).

## Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis began with three initial line-by-line readings of interview transcripts to establish familiarity with each word's conversational context. Initial transcript readings were followed by data analysis consisting of combined coding methodologies, including what Saldaña (2016) describes as *in vivo coding* (verbatim), *descriptive coding* (topical), and *values coding* (identifying beliefs, attitudes, values) to determine the range of expressed ideas and worldviews, and to help discern meaningful themes and patterns of responses related to the topic of kindergarten readiness (Onwuegbuzie, Frels, & Hwang, 2016). An *eclectic coding* method, described by Saldaña as "a purposeful and compatible combination of two or more first

cycle coding methods” was utilized to identify and derive deeper meanings from patterns of words through descriptive and thematic categorizations (2016, p. 346). This process was a precursor to further data synthesis and consolidation. A *focused coding* (topical descriptors) was applied to identify frequently occurring concepts (Onwuegbuzie, Frels, & Hwang, 2016).

Second cycle coding confirmed adequate data saturation, as indicated by the emergence of many expected overarching categories in a sample size of less than 12 participants (Barbour, 2001; O’Reilly & Parker, 2012; Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2016). Using the 40 conceptual categories obtained by thematic coding of the 33-item frequent word list, *axial coding* (distilled from first cycle codes) was applied to develop narrower, more meaningful concept categories (Onwuegbuzie, Frels, & Hwang, 2016). Subsequent application of *elaborative coding* (refining theoretical constructs) was applied to the transcript data to examine whether or not parent responses aligned with researcher predictions, and to elicit codes relevant to a developing theory of parent notions of kindergarten readiness.

### **Participant Rights, Consent, and Protections**

Written consent from participants was obtained prior to the study, which included the disclosure of potential risks and benefits of participation, participant rights, including the right to deny consent throughout the duration of the study, and an explanation of all measures to protect data and participant confidentiality (Appendix A). Participants’ interview transcripts were numerically coded using numbers in place of names to obscure identity, and digital-code key lists with corresponding participants’ names were stored on a password-protected computer hard-drive in the researcher’s locked private office. All paper documents were also coded to remove personally identifiable data and assigned corresponding numerical participant codes. Paper documents used in the study were stored in a locked drawer in the researcher’s locked private office. All participant emails and text messages were deleted subsequent to data analysis.

Approval from the University of New England's Independent Review Board (IRB) was obtained prior to data collection.

### **Potential Study Limitations**

Potential limitations of this study included the small participant sample size, the homogenous characteristics of participants who were all white and college-educated, the use of only one school location, possible population factors inherent or specific to private school or arts-based school parents, and the board member to staff member relationship that existed between the researcher and the school director. These factors may have been relevant to the data collected and to generalizability of the analysis and conclusions. Case study results are not inherently intended to be generalizable, therefore the limitations in respect to sample size and uniqueness were not disqualifying. Limitations due to researcher bias and relationship are addressed in the analysis chapter of the dissertation, with a disclosure of researcher history and school connection, and a description of the researcher's philosophical and personal biases.

### **Conclusion**

Despite serving a primary role in their children's academic success, parents hold disproportionately less power to advocate for themselves and their children's best interests within the larger educational system (Barnett, 2004). Workforce considerations have led to an increase in public schools offering full-day kindergarten, reducing the family burden of paying for full-time child care. Parents may consider the readiness expectations placed on children prior to kindergarten entry, and when making their decisions about school choice or preferred time for kindergarten enrollment (Belfield & Garcia, 2014). Challenges encountered by parents trying to meet schools' readiness expectations underscore collateral effects of fluctuating national education policies and related changes taking place at the district, building, and classroom levels. The exclusion of parent perspectives when shaping national education policy represents a significant oversight, and suggests a wider, systematic marginalization of important stakeholders.

School efforts intended to inform parents about kindergarten readiness present an important opportunity to explore parent perspectives on a poorly understood topic which has been the cause of much interest, debate, and concern. Young children face increased school performance pressure despite evidence that premature academic exposure may be ineffective or even detrimental to future school success. As advocates for their children, parents hold a unique perspective regarding what may or may not be in their child's best interests educationally.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

Kindergarten readiness, an ill-defined concept based on the idea that kindergarten students ought to possess specific skills, knowledge, and learning dispositions prior to school entry, is a current subject of interest to parents, educators, and researchers. There is a growing national movement promoting pre-primary formal academic preparation, but there is insufficient research to adequately critique or question the suitability of kindergarten readiness efforts which utilize higher grade-level academic curricula and expectations (Howes et al, 2008). Instead, much of the literature on the topic of kindergarten readiness consists of studies whose purpose is to help educators implement readiness programs or strategies to promote family engagement in the process (High & the Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care and Council on School Health, 2008; Piotrkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2000). Although teachers' concerns regarding the suitability of readiness expectations were frequently addressed in literature, few studies have investigated the parent viewpoints, or addressed how participation in readiness efforts may affect families (Hatcher et al, 2012; Kim, Murdock & Choi, 2005).

This qualitative study investigated parent notions of kindergarten readiness and explored parents' perceptions of kindergarten entry expectations using a bioecological lens to interpret findings. Participants were drawn from the existing pool of parents whose children were enrolled in an arts-based private preschool and kindergarten. The social context of this arts-based school setting was deemed unlikely to include many parents who favored an academic kindergarten. Data were analyzed to identify patterns among parent perspectives, and to gain insight into the impact of kindergarten readiness expectations on children and their families.

## Analysis Methods

### Setting

After IRB approval was obtained and participant consent was granted, a total of eight interviews were scheduled and conducted. Participant volunteers were all parents of children enrolled in the school's preschool and kindergarten, and were scheduled in one-on-one, open-ended interviews. Participant availability was limited due to conflicting school events at the end of the semester, and family vacation plans which overlapped with the interview schedule period.

### Participants

The first round of emailed and classroom-posted invitations to participate in the study produced a total of six interviews. Subsequent emailed re-requests for participants, coupled with the use of a researcher-initiated snowball technique for eliciting additional volunteers (requesting current interviewees to recruit others from the group) yielded two additional participants, for a total of eight parent interviews. Demographic data were collected on interviewees and their children.

Table 1

#### *Participant Adult and Enrolled Child Characteristics*

Interviewee	Adult characteristics						Child characteristics		
	Sex	Age range	Language	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Relationship	Age	Sex	Classroom
1	F	30-40	English	White	MA	Mother	5	F	PS
2	F	30-40	English	White	BS	Mother	4	M	PS
3	F	30-40	English	White	BA	Mother	6	F	K
4	F	40-50	English	W/Hispanic	Post-Doc	Mother	5	M	PS
5	F	30-40	English	White	MA	Mother	4	F	PS
6	M	30-40	English	White	MA	Father	4	F	PS
7	F	30-40	English	W/Hispanic	MA	Mother	5	F	K
8	M	30-40	English	White	MA	Father	5	M	PS

Table abbreviations: M=male; F=female; PS=preschool; K=kindergarten



All study participants were white, English-language speakers, between 30 and 50 years old, and college educated. There were two self-identified Hispanic mothers. Two participants reported their education level to be a bachelor's degree and the rest of the participants indicated they held graduate degrees. One mother reported a post-doctoral level of education. Among the eight interviewees, there were a total of six women and two men. Among their respective eight children, there were five girls and three boys, all between four and six years old.

### **Data Collection**

Interviews consisted of six open-ended questions on kindergarten readiness and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Interviewees were encouraged to elaborate candidly on their views and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Interview sessions were audio-recorded and manually transcribed from digital audio files into Microsoft Word format. Interview questions were constructed to elicit parents' beliefs, attitudes, and values regarding kindergarten readiness. Interviews were conducted over a six-week period in May and June of 2018.

Table 2

#### *List of Interview Questions in the Order Presented to Participants*

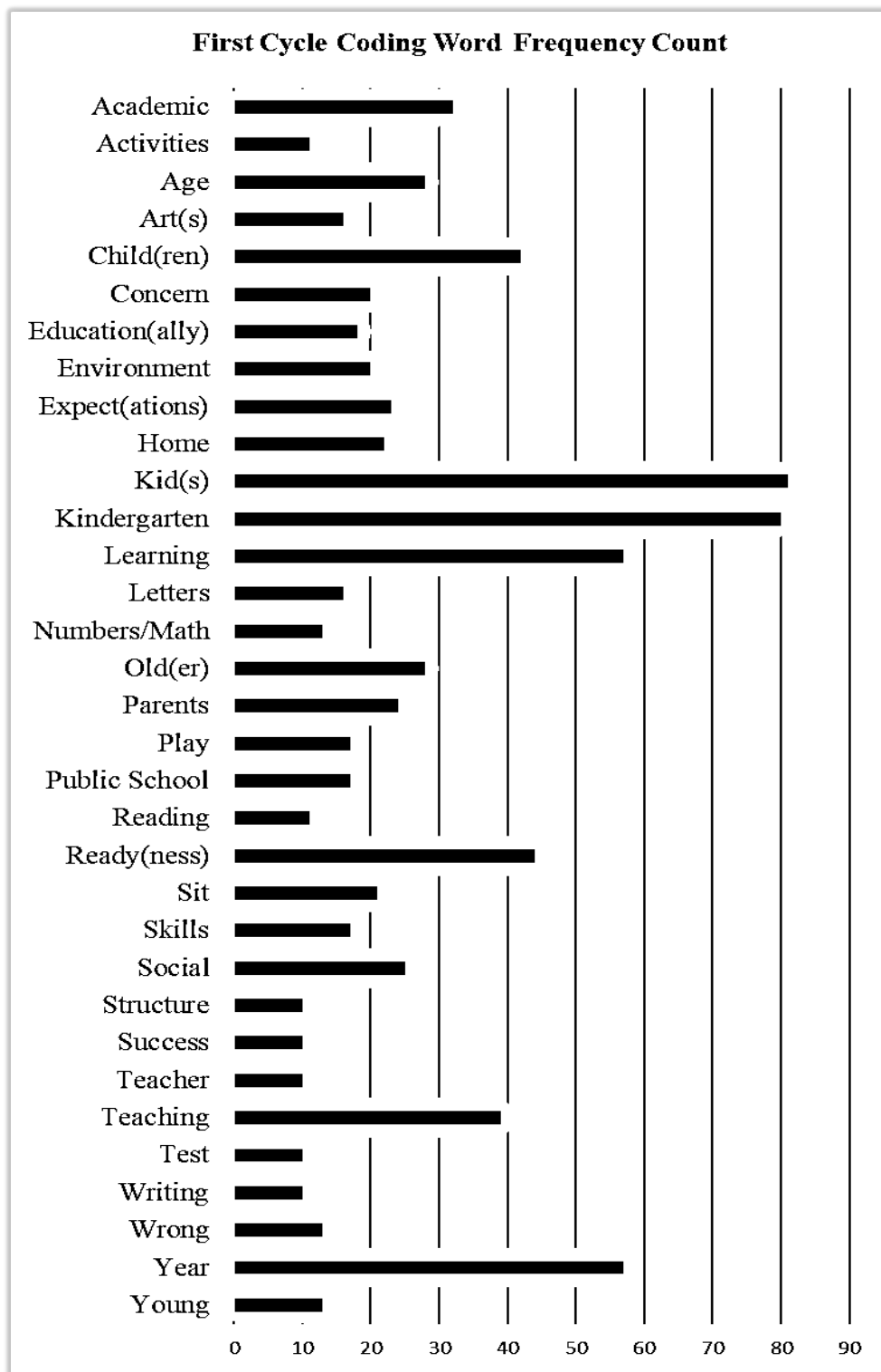
No.	Interview question
1	Are you familiar with the phrase "kindergarten readiness"?
2	When did you first become aware of or start thinking about kindergarten readiness? In what context or situation?
3	What were your first thoughts about kindergarten readiness? Was it something that you wanted to think about? Was this a positive or negative topic for you?
4	Has the idea of kindergarten readiness been a factor in your choice of preschool or kindergarten? Or future school decision for your child? If yes, in what way(s)?
5	What are your thoughts about school expectations for children in general?
6	Have you thought about whether your child will be successful next year in school?

## Analysis Results

Qualitative data derived from the purposive sample of eight parent interviews included a rich variety of responses with notable agreement among participants, although thematic emphases varied by individual. Interview data were manually coded, categorized, and organized, along with participant demographic data, using an Excel spreadsheet. Interview transcripts were analyzed to interpret meaning and to identify salient patterns of similarity and contrast among participant responses. Qualitative data analysis, consisting of first and second cycles of thematic coding, took place over a period of eight weeks and was chronicled in the researcher's journal notes. Thematic coding was applied to data using researcher-identified conceptual categories in an effort to construct an analytical and theoretical interpretive framework for the results (Gibbs, 2007). First cycle focused coding was applied to create a list of frequent terms found across all interview transcripts and resulted in a total of 33 individual codes (Figure 1). Words appearing 10 or more times which were significant to the topic of kindergarten readiness were coded. Academic terms such as 'school' and 'education' appeared frequently, as expected; however, terms related to children's play and socialization appeared less frequently than were predicted, such as the word 'friend', which notably appeared only five times, an unexpected finding in an arts-based early childhood setting emphasizing play-based activities (Carter & Nutbrown, 2016).

### Data Analysis




Interview transcript data were initially coded in vivo to derive meaning directly from the original transcript text, and subsequently analyzed through several coding cycles. Application of in vivo coding produced a total of 82 words which seemed to be relevant to the topic of kindergarten readiness. Using this list, first cycle *focused coding* (Saldaña, 2016) was applied to identify the most frequent and significant terms, resulting in list of 33 words, appearing a minimum of 10 times each (Figure 1).



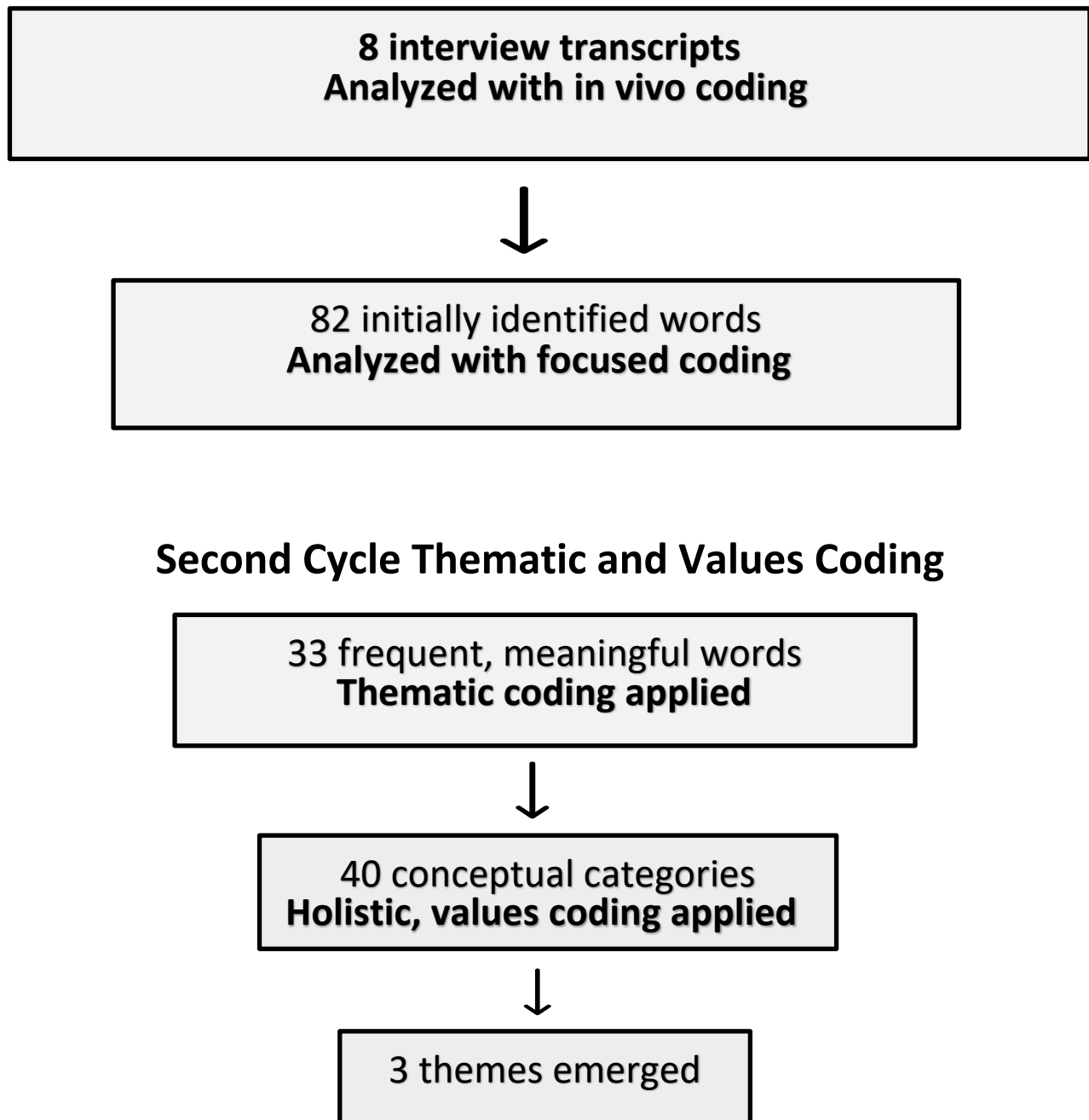
*Figure 1.* Word frequency results from first cycle focused coding of all interview transcripts. Words which appeared in either singular or plural forms, (e.g., *art* and *arts*), or in variations of the same stem word, (e.g., *write* and *writing*), were combined into a single frequency count.

Second cycle thematic values coding applied to the list of 33 frequent words resulted in the development of 40 conceptual categories (Figure 2). Conceptual categories are “broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (Creswell, 2013, p. 186). These conceptual categories reflected the data’s main themes. While guidelines for sampling adequacy to produce data saturation are often ill-defined, an attempt by the researcher to ensure sufficient depth and richness of data yielded results which met the degree of qualitative data variability sufficient to warrant thematic coding (Guest, Bunch & Johnson, 2015).

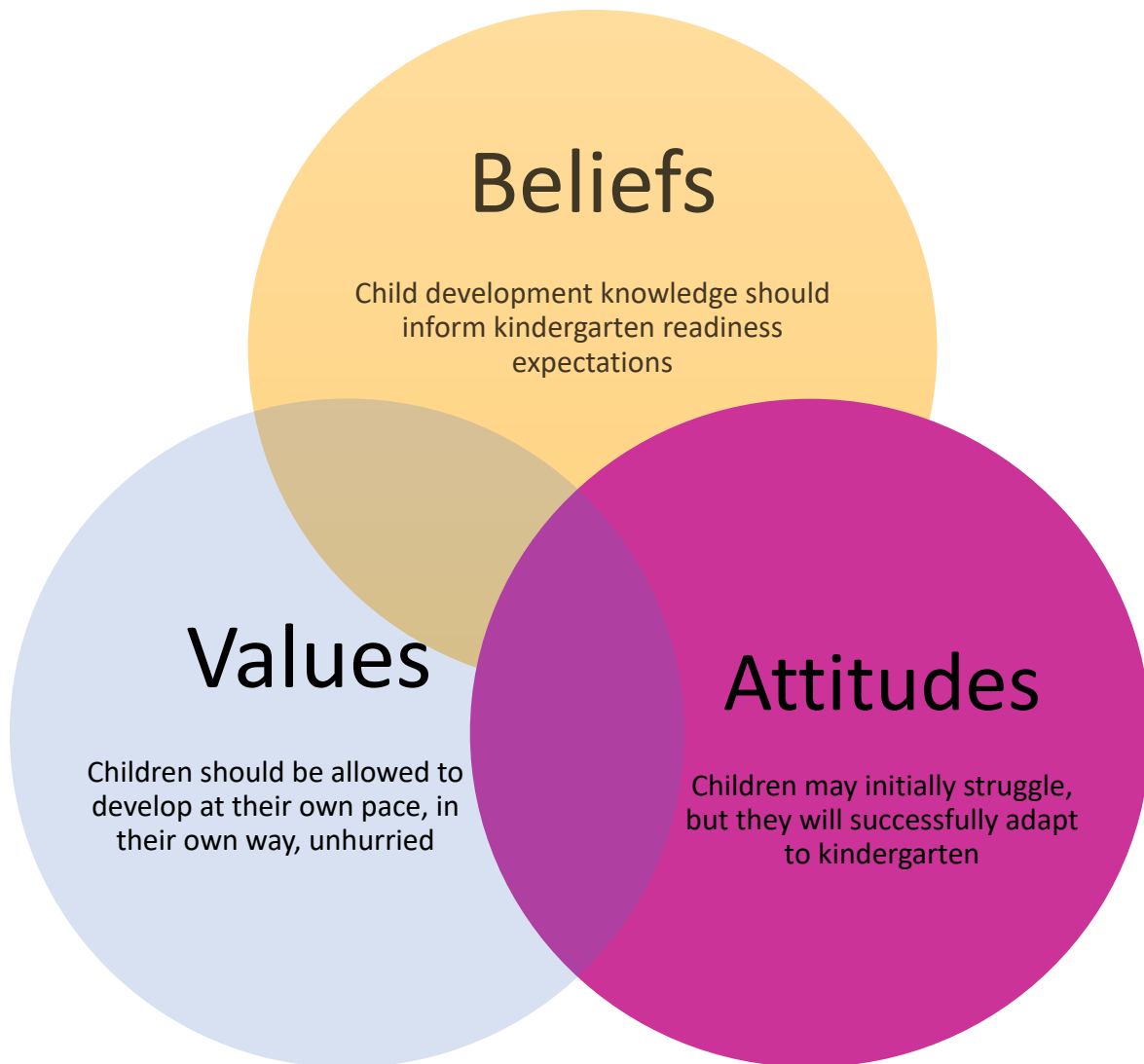
<b>Getting Along is Important</b>	<b>Self-determination Good</b>	<b>Social Skills are Necessary</b>	<b>Structure is Necessary</b>	<b>Individualized Instruction is Preferable</b>
<b>Pushing Kids is Wrong</b>	<b>Art is Good for Children</b>	<b>Preparation is Helpful</b>	<b>Kids Need Content Learning</b>	<b>Positive Attitude is Important</b>
<b>Freedom is Good</b>	<b>Conformity is Overrated</b>	<b>Children Need Encouragement</b>	<b>Children are Naturally Curious</b>	<b>Sitting Still is Difficult for Children</b>
<b>Friendships are Valuable</b>	<b>Diversity Awareness is Good</b>	<b>Children need Nurturance</b>	<b>Parents Feel Happy, Content</b>	<b>Following Directions is Difficult for Kids</b>
<b>Let Children Develop at Own Pace</b>	<b>Confidence is Good</b>	<b>Skill Building Should Be a Focus</b>	<b>Parents Feel Confident</b>	<b>Parents Worry About Children Adjusting</b>
<b>Perseverance is Good</b>	<b>Children Do Better with Choices</b>	<b>Children Need Playtime More than Instruction</b>	<b>Parents Feel Optimistic</b>	<b>Parents Don’t Worry about Readiness</b>
<b>School Success is Important</b>	<b>Kids Need Time to Mature</b>	<b>Adjusting is Difficult</b>	<b>Parents Feel Frustrated</b>	<b>Parents Feel Critical of Schools</b>
<b>Creativity is Worthwhile</b>	<b>Exploration is Important to Learning</b>	<b>Active Learning is Preferable</b>	<b>Parents Feel Concerned</b>	<b>Stressing Out Children is Wrong</b>

Figure 2. *Concept categories resulting from thematic coding of frequent transcript words. Thematic analysis and values coding led to the emergence of 40 concept categories organized by a) beliefs  (no shading); b) attitudes  (light shading); or c) values  (dark shading).*

## **First Cycle In Vivo and Focused Coding**



*Figure 3.* Illustration of first and second cycle coding methods. First cycle in vivo and focused coding of transcripts led to second cycle thematic and values coding. Application of values coding led to the emergence of three distinct themes.



*Figure 4.* Illustration of the interrelated themes organized according to parent beliefs, attitudes, and values. Conceptual categories were derived from values coding of interview transcript data. Application of values coding to the initial 40 conceptual categories resulted in the emergence of three interrelated ideas about kindergarten readiness and school expectations.

The 40 coded concept categories were analyzed via values coding (Figure 2) and those results were organized into parent beliefs, attitudes, and values (Figure 4). Subsequent data analysis involved *holistic coding* (applied to the entire data set) from a bioecological framework of interpretation. This conceptual framework considered data in the contexts of school setting and parent-child relationships. Holistic coding was used to identify transcript excerpts considered particularly meaningful to the topic of kindergarten readiness, which illustrated some aspect of the parent-child relationship.

**First cycle coding.** Using an initial coded list of 82 transcript words selected for relevance to the topic of kindergarten readiness, first cycle *focused coding* (Saldaña, 2016) was applied to identify 33 frequent and significant terms, occurring a minimum of 10 times (Table 1). After completion of word frequency counts and application of first cycle descriptive coding, qualitative data were analyzed using eclectic coding, combining initial coding methodology (single word concepts) with thematic data analysis (broad concept or category coding).

**Emerging themes.** A total of 40 provisional concept categories (e.g., socialization, development, play) emerged from second cycle line-by-line transcript re-reading for patterns of meaning, and consideration of the 33 frequent words (e.g., social, sitting, skills) (Figure 1).

**Included words.** Word frequencies listed in Figure 1 were chosen as highly relevant to the topic of kindergarten readiness, with the most frequent occurrences across all transcripts. Words were derived from in vivo and focused coding cycles.

**Excluded words.** Words with fewer than 10 instances across all transcripts do not appear in Figure 1's word frequency list. For example, the following words were excluded, with number of occurrences in parentheses: creative (5); family (6); friends (8); games (3); group (8); preschool (5); recess (4); stressful (5); technology (3); and writing (3). Judging by their infrequency, these terms were considered less representative of parent views and given less weight in subsequent thematic coding and formation of conceptual categories.

**Second cycle coding.** The initial group of emergent themes drawn from frequent words was combined into concept categories, with care taken to rely on a balance of excerpts from all interviews, and a particular effort made to avoid errors of over-representation or under-representation of individual participant data, given the small sample size of eight interviews.

**Thematic analysis.** After first cycle eclectic coding, which Saldaña refers to as a “first impression” phrase-capturing process, thematic analysis was subsequently applied during the second cycle to identify meaningful units of data for further refinement (2016, p. 11). Figure 2 illustrates the resulting themed categories related to the topic of kindergarten readiness which emerged from this second coding cycle.

**Analysis of excerpts.** Subsequent data analysis involved *holistic coding* (applied to the entire data set) using a bioecological interpretation, a conceptual framework which considered data in the context of parent-child relationships. Further in vivo coding of transcript excerpts was used to help determine meaningful answers to the research questions.

### **Research Questions and Results**

Research questions were constructed on the basis of a) the researcher’s prior assumptions about the tone and substance of parent views on kindergarten readiness; b) the likelihood of similarity among all views of parents of children enrolled in an arts-based preschool; and 3) the results of a literature review demonstrating a strong public interest in the topic and the need for additional open-ended exploration. The researcher’s prior assumptions about parent views on kindergarten readiness included the expectation that since parents were well-educated (all held college degrees) and had chosen to enroll their children in an arts-based school, they would be inclined to view early academics as either unimportant or undesirable.

Questions were written in an open-ended format to elicit rich responses, and worded to avoid bias and a priori assumptions, aiding discovery of new information. Questions were intended to help identify and explore parent notions of kindergarten readiness. Interviews were



conducted on-site at the school, a setting considered familiar and comfortable to the participants, to help generate candid dialogue from parents. The research questions were also intended to discover whether parents believed that school expectations affected themselves or their children, and what the nature of those impacts might be.

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question, “How do parents view the topic of kindergarten readiness?” was included to elicit parent beliefs, attitudes, and values regarding kindergarten readiness and to help determine if researcher assumptions based on a bioecological interpretive lens showed alignment with parent notions of kindergarten readiness. This question also provided a basis for examining whether parents’ common connection at an arts-based school was reflected in their expressed views on the related topics of arts-based education, creativity, or imaginative play.

**Results of research question 1.** Interview data revealed a considerable variety of participant responses related to the issue of kindergarten readiness, including comments about the stress of school expectations, and opinions on the value of art, the importance of play, on the need for letting children develop at their own pace, preference for individualizing instruction as a way to maximize learning, and views concerning the role that socialization had in determining school success. Selected interview transcript excerpts were organized into emergent categories of parent perceptions of expectations, stress, play, socialization, readiness, learning, art, and school success (Table 3).

Table 3

*Parent Comments Excerpted from Interview Transcripts and Organized by Topic*

Topic	Comments
Expectations	<p>kids that age are meant to move and not be doing one thing for too long</p> <p>I don't think it's an age-appropriate expectation to put a 5-year-old at a desk all day</p> <p>I don't think we necessarily respect kids where they're at</p> <p>his success at sitting and following all those rules may be his struggle</p>
Stress	<p>I'm definitely aware of the stress that they're under for both the kids and the teachers with testing requirements</p> <p>I want them to go to college, I want them to finish school, and I don't want it to be bad from the get go</p> <p>don't push them or rush them through</p>
Play	<p>how much time is left for play because that is really important</p> <p>these kids who are five or six-years-old are only getting two recesses a day</p> <p>this school really does reflect the values and philosophy of play and imagination and activity that we reinforce at home</p>
Socialization	<p>it wasn't the academic that I was worried about; it was all the social side of things</p> <p>there's so much missing in their social skills because they focus too early on the academics</p>
Readiness	<p>I would like my child to be writing his name when he goes into kindergarten</p> <p>kindergarten readiness is more about your behavior toward learning than it is what you've already learned</p> <p>I want my kids to be as ready as they can to start school</p> <p>I am worried that she will be behind on academics a little</p>
Learning	<p>somewhere she could be an independent learner that was important to us</p> <p>teachers are under pressure and there's a lot going on, how can they possibly respond to kids' different ways of learning</p> <p>it is more about growing than it is about where you're at compared to everyone else</p>
Art	<p>an environment where it's very creative and active learning...we feel that's what serves her best going into kindergarten than any other skills</p> <p>he loved doing art so much that he didn't miss me</p> <p>it's an arts-based thing so there's lots of experimentation and movement</p>
Success	<p>they feel good because they're successful</p> <p>we all want our kids to thrive and be successful</p> <p>being successful and happy in a group is just as important to us as her getting along well academically</p> <p>we just want her to get a good education</p>

## Research Question 2

The second research question, “In what ways do parents agree or differ in their perceptions of kindergarten readiness?” was included to explore variations and similarities among parent beliefs, attitudes, and values regarding kindergarten readiness, and was based on researcher assumptions about the existence of similarities among parent responses. Researcher assumptions included the expectations that a) most parents would have a favorable view of arts-based education; b) most parents would express some concerns about potential stress on their children from academic expectations; and c) most parents would be disinclined or reluctant to put pressure on their children in order for them to gain specific prerequisite readiness skills.

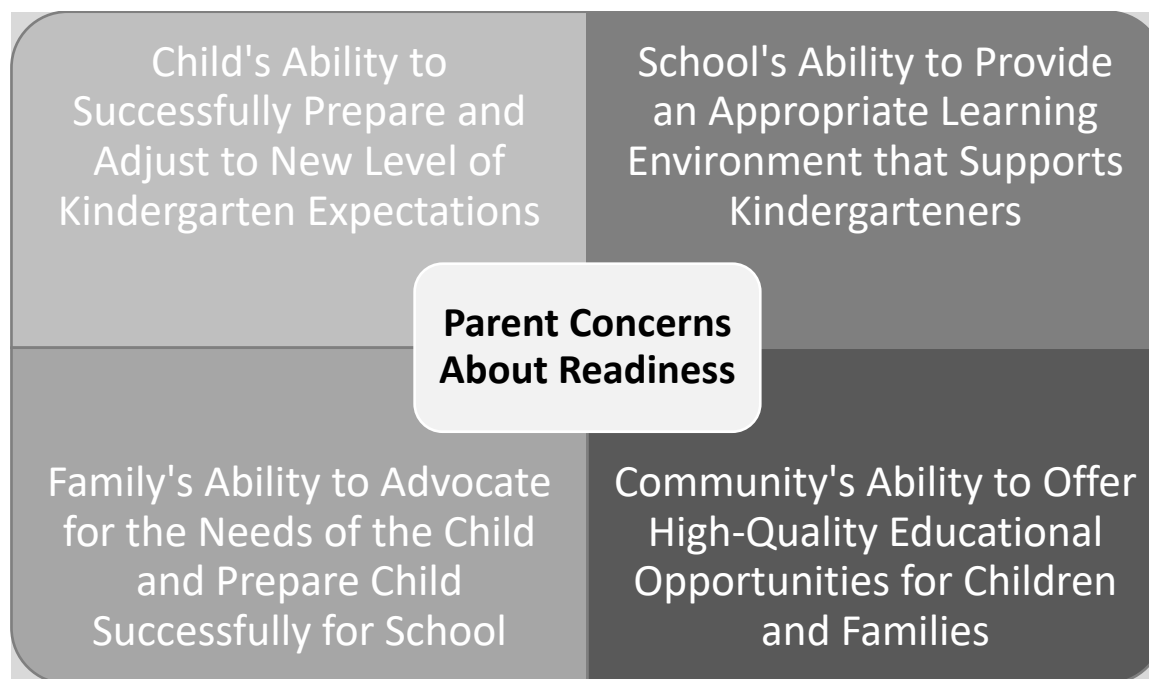
**Results of research question 2.** Differences of opinion among parents appeared as subtle variances or in small degrees of difference, rather than polarized views clustered at either end of a continuum. Most parents expressed strong interest in their children’s education, showed a willingness to prepare their children for kindergarten in the best way they knew how, and expressed concerns about school expectations for academic readiness. Concerns about school requirements and child struggles with those expectations were common, and parents frequently mentioned the difficulties they believed children would have sitting still, paying attention for long periods of time, and following teacher directions. Some parents described feelings of frustration, anxiety, and sadness, contrasted with those who shared feelings of indifference, confidence, dislike, or confusion about kindergarten readiness. While there was little variation among views, one notable difference appeared regarding the kindergarten entry process. Some parents expressed confusion, while others expressed confidence. This variation in levels of prior knowledge and confidence may have been due to whether parents themselves were teachers, had friends or family members who taught, had knowledgeable friends, or simply had been through the kindergarten entry process before with another child.

Kindergarten Readiness	
Concerned	Unconcerned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I thought my job was to make sure he was as prepared academically as he could be</li> <li>• I didn't have any idea about what they were expected to know</li> <li>• my daughter can't even recite her ABCs yet</li> <li>• I'm kind of worried if she's not on the same level</li> <li>• it's definitely something I want to think about</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• kindergarten isn't even required so why not keep her home for another year</li> <li>• I don't want that anywhere near this developing brain</li> <li>• I just want it to be an exploratory time of life</li> <li>• they focus too early on the academics</li> <li>• I think I was pretty indifferent</li> </ul>
Arts-Based Education	
Not very important	Very important
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I wouldn't call it a very academically based program</li> <li>• they learn a lot of how to ask questions and be self-directed</li> <li>• he had to learn letters like everybody else</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• it's very creative and active learning</li> <li>• more concerned about making their art and playing with the other kids</li> <li>• we like the idea that the focus here is on play</li> </ul>
Socialization	
Not integral to school	Integral to school
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• there are two distinct sets of skills, the social and the academic</li> <li>• when my daughter first started school, she was very focused on the social aspect of it</li> <li>• we actually chose to home school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the first year our focus was on somewhere creative and with good socializing opportunities</li> <li>• it's good to have a classroom where she can negotiate being with a group of kids</li> </ul>
Goals of Education	
Focus on others	Focus on self
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• we really wanted to focus on an area that was going to be a little more diverse with other students, so my daughter could get an understanding of different types of cultures</li> <li>• my job is to make sure that our kids come to kindergarten and they know that when someone's speaking that it's important for them to listen</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• learning is something that should be fun</li> <li>• know how to ask for help or how to be independent</li> <li>• it's important to think about how to do something because you're going to be allowed to do it by yourself</li> </ul>

*Figure 5.* Interview excerpts illustrating parents' differences of opinion. Organized by topic and sub-grouped to highlight the range of expressed views on each topic.

### Research Question 3

The third research question, “What concerns do parents have about kindergarten readiness expectations?” was intended to discover conceptual themes found in parent beliefs, attitudes, and values related to their concerns about kindergarten readiness expectations. This research question applied a bioecological lens to interview responses to explore parents’ perceived incongruities between school readiness expectations and their children’s capabilities.



*Figure 6.* Parents’ concerns about readiness viewed through a bioecological lens. Concerns are filtered through contextual considerations of individual child, family, school, and community. Parents expressed concerns about their ability to understand kindergarten readiness expectations, advocate for appropriate expectations, and prepare their child for school success.

**Results of research question 3.** Results from this analysis revealed parents were most concerned with their role in helping children adjust to school expectations and how they could advocate for their child, but also fulfill those expectations. Parents expressed somewhat less concern over whether schools would be able to provide an appropriate environment for their child, given the incongruity of expectations relative to child abilities.

## Summary of the Findings

A qualitative coding analysis of data revealed patterns of similarity among participants' expressed hopes and frustrations regarding kindergarten readiness and shed light on their perceptions of its impacts on their children and on themselves. Exploration of responses showed an alignment with recent research suggesting considerable interest in the topic of kindergarten readiness and pointed to parents' strong inclinations to help children successfully navigate new school environments. These conceptual themes, derived from a bioecological interpretation of the data, suggested that parent notions of kindergarten readiness found in this study align with literature-based predictions regarding parent 'ownership' of their children's education, and their perceptions that school readiness expectations do not appropriately conform to child capabilities.

A bioecological framework lens was used to consider children in a broad societal context, including their connection to family values and culture, and not just in relationship to school readiness expectations. Based on expressed knowledge of their children's limitations, needs and interests, parent responses suggested a preference for the constructivist view of child learning and for curriculum that adjusts to individual children's developmental characteristics. Participants revealed that they perceived and struggled with the incongruities between school expectations and child capabilities. Overall, parents said they considered kindergarten readiness expectations to be an often challenging but expected part of the educational process.

Parents expressed concern about readiness pressures producing stress for children and doubted whether kindergarten curriculum and classroom expectations were appropriately aligned with children's maturational limitations. Some surprise findings included that there were very few mentions of children's health, safety, physical fitness, outdoor play time, or concerns about technology use at an early age. One notable finding was that there were relatively few mentions of the word 'play' across transcripts (17 total), a concept central to all major theories of child development. The topic of arts-based education was addressed frequently (16 instances) but was

as not central to the findings as expected, given the arts-based school setting. Many parents said they liked the arts-based approach, but few elaborated on this aspect of the school experience.

Data analysis found similar viewpoints among parents regarding the type of readiness experience they considered best for their children, and in some instances, findings coincided with researcher assumptions about parent notions of kindergarten readiness. Data analysis showed that most parents felt confident that their child would make a successful transition to kindergarten, with few indicating strong concerns about the process. Of those parents who identified concerns, most indicated that their concerns were primarily related to children's socio-emotional and behavioral challenges, rather than to cognitive struggles (Figure 2). For example, responses indicated that parents believed children getting along was important, and social skills were essential. However, their concerns about children adjusting were focused on the difficulties children would face with sitting still and following directions, behavioral issues they believed were related to normal maturational limits, and not related to cognitive development concerns.

This finding suggested that parents contextualized kindergarten readiness expectations within a framework of developmentally-based understandings of children, and that they valued children's social development at least as much as their intellectual growth. Such a perspective is consistent with Wildenger and McIntyre's (2011) findings on parent views of the process of kindergarten transition, in which they report "although the majority of parents expressed few concerns regarding their child's kindergarten transition, a subset (i.e., 27.9%) reported significant concerns...most often cited by families in this sample were socio-behavioral in nature" (p. 387). Seen through a bioecological theoretical lens, findings reveal parent awareness of and concern about the developmental appropriateness of kindergarten readiness pedagogy, curriculum, and teaching practices. Many responses focused on the different ways parents were helping children adjust to kindergarten readiness expectations, but only to a point. That point seemed to be where parents thought that the expectations were unreasonable, harmful, produced stress, or put undue

pressure on children. Overall, parents were more concerned about the appropriateness of the expectations themselves, not primarily about their child's ability to adjust.

This case study underscored that participants thought often about kindergarten readiness and held notions consistent with the literature review suggesting that parents want children to make a successful transition to kindergarten and will work cooperatively with schools to help ensure that result, even if they don't agree with the readiness expectations themselves. This study revealed a variety of opinions, concerns, frustrations, and adaptative strategies with similar themes, all related to how parents would help their children adapt to the expectations that schools created for kindergarten readiness. As they shared their perspectives and values, parents indicated that they were also aware of school readiness expectations relative to the challenges that teachers would face early in the transition process. Parents by and large said they believed that they were making appropriate efforts to successfully guide their children in the transition to kindergarten. Parents' collective wisdom regarding the issue of kindergarten readiness centered on meeting children's current needs first and addressing academic expectations at a more developmentally appropriate time. Many parents indicated that they had weighed the potential risks of not meeting school expectations, and determined it was still best overall for their children to delay academic preparation in favor of more time to develop, even if it meant they were not fully kindergarten 'ready' on the first day of school. Many parents expressed confidence that in the end, despite any minor hurdles along the way, their children would catch up academically, and it would all work out. Parents' responses suggested that they were not solely concerned with their child's current need for play-based learning. They also set their sights set on a long-term educational trajectory, and believed that time spent in unstructured, nonacademic learning environments *now* would actually help children be more academically successful in the future. While parents did express some concerns and anxiety about the adjustment period that would take place immediately following kindergarten entry, most generally they considered this



situation manageable, and stated a willingness to recognize, prepare for, and mitigate any undue stress that resulted from future kindergarten readiness expectations. Parents in their remarks did not share specific criticism of teachers but indicated some frustration with schools' inability to accommodate children's need for individualized instruction and personal attention. Despite varying perspectives among participants about the specific meaning and importance of kindergarten readiness, overall findings emphasized parents' common approach to do what they believed was best for their children, adjusting where necessary to help them succeed in school.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Parent notions of kindergarten readiness reflect their priorities, values, and held beliefs. Findings in this study were consistent with researcher predictions regarding parents' notions of kindergarten readiness and how their perspectives would likely differ from the more commonly held views that emphasize early academic expectations. Results of data analysis indicated that many parents felt able to discern whether kindergarten expectations were developmentally appropriate, but also revealed that a key parent focus was on helping their children adjust socially and emotionally to a new school environment and less on the expectations themselves. The most common finding, revealed across all interviews, was the predominant desire parents expressed for their children to be happy and socially successful in school, above and beyond the need for academic achievement. As one parent explained,

In terms of the kindergarten readiness, we were far less concerned about the skills like alphabet recognition, or tying your laces, or whatever; that's easier for her to learn, you know. But it's really good for her to have a classroom where she can negotiate being with a group of kids, sorting out their little squabbles between them or not, how to ask for help, or how to be independent.

This excerpt pointed to a pragmatic approach that characterized the view of many participants, one which did not focus primarily on the adult's feelings about the issues, but which instead addressed the issues as practical problem-solving opportunities. The goal for many parents appeared to be framed as a desire to help children be both happy now and successful long-term.

One striking finding was that overall, most parents did not seem to consider kindergarten readiness expectations to be very important if those expectations did not coincide with their own expectations for their children or were inconsistent with their held views of typical child development. For example, one mother described how the potential dilemma of having a child

who was academically behind would be reconciled, stating her preference to ensure the child's immediate developmental needs were attended to, even at the expense of preparation. She explained how she viewed academic expectations "because we feel like, especially with support at home, there's ways we can catch up with that. It's important she's feeling good in the environment". This example illustrated how a parent confidently sidestepped school notions of kindergarten readiness when they conflicted with her own beliefs about what was best for her child. The study limitations discussed in Chapter Four may shed light on this finding, since the parents in this study were all college-educated, white adults, whose particular demographic characteristics have previously been shown to be meaningful predictors of future student success. It is possible that the participants in this study were less concerned about their children's future success because they had successfully navigated their own educational journey, and because their position of relative privilege in society afforded them the confidence to predict that their children would also be successful (Davoudzadeh, McTernan, & Grimm, 2015).

The phenomenon of parents valuing and independently acting upon their own definitions of kindergarten readiness or school success was apparent in the interviews and was consistent with observed changes in our society's cultural norms. According to Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project (2015) this fluidity in society is likewise apparent in the observed changes in family structure stating, "parents today are raising their children against a backdrop of increasingly diverse and, for many, constantly evolving family forms" (p. 15). Despite their participation in mainstream institutional systems, many families today choose to ignore more traditional societal scripts, and parents do not necessarily de facto follow the popular cultural lead. More commonly, parents appear to prefer weighing their options before deciding what is best for themselves and their children, educationally and otherwise (Lee & Bowen, 2016; Kimelberg, 2014). Studies of contemporary American family life reveal unconventional and fluid member roles, invented daily routines and reframed family traditions,

e.g., fathers' groups who meet to braid their daughters' hair and parent-led home school cooperatives who implement values-based curriculum (Bulman, 2004; Family Circle, n.d.). Frustrated with various inflexible aspects of public education, many families seek personalized alternatives. Parents may band together to influence school policy, opt-out of testing requirements, or craft specific educational experiences for their children, reflecting values as varied as respect for diversity, love of nature or a desire for technology-free learning environments (Kleitz, Weiher, Tevin, & Matland, 2000). The findings of this case study revealed a dynamic social landscape for young families, but also highlighted the commitment to long-held traditions of supporting neighborhood public schools, forging friendly parent-teacher partnerships as the basis for participation, and encouraging children to successfully adapt to new environments and expectations.

## **Review of Research Questions and Summary of Responses**

### **Review of Research Question 1**

*How do parents view the topic of kindergarten readiness?* Parents discussed feelings of stress, and pressure to accommodate school expectations, but remained focused on and committed to addressing their children's more immediate need for play, exploration, and time to simply develop at their own pace. They discussed what they saw as a mismatch of kindergarten readiness expectations with children's abilities. Parents focused on helping children adjust using a long-term view of school success and academic achievement.

### **Review of Research Question 2**

*In what ways do parents agree or differ in their perceptions of kindergarten readiness?* Most parents had thought about, investigated, and strategized about kindergarten readiness. Most also considered school expectations to be an important part, but not the only part of the readiness equation. Socialization was also generally considered important among parents, along with the idea of giving children adequate time to develop and learn at own pace Arts-based education was

seen as one way, if not a superior means, to provide adequate playtime, exploration, and active learning. Some parents spent more time addressing the unique qualities of arts-based education, and many believed that the experiences that their children had at the arts-based school provided superior preparation for future academic success. Academic preparation prior to or during kindergarten was for most parents considered largely unsuitable and even ineffective for promoting children's school success, and most discussed their disagreement with readiness expectations in general. Some parents expressed more confidence about the upcoming kindergarten entry process than others, which may have been reflective of their prior experiences with or personal connections to school environments, including those who were teachers or had older children and therefore had experienced this process before.

### **Review of Research Question 3**

*What concerns do parents have about kindergarten readiness expectations?* Parent concerns were focused in large part on a perceived mismatch of schools' readiness expectations and children's abilities, and on what they thought might be the stressful effects of pressure on children from this mismatch. Parents also expressed particular concerns about the social anxiety children might experience as they tried to fit into the new environment and discussed their sense of the social pressure children would face to meet classroom and teacher expectations. Parents also noted their concerns that kindergarten readiness expectations might not allow children adequate time to play, grow, and develop according to known maturational timetables. Feelings expressed by parents on the topic of kindergarten readiness varied widely, and ranged from confident, hopeful, or indifferent, to anxious, sad, or frustrated. Expressions of anger or anxiety did not appear prominently in the interview transcripts, but a combination of frustration, anxiety, and hopeful confidence about the topic of kindergarten readiness seemed to be something shared by most parents. This last finding was the most surprising, given the participants' perception of a mismatch of school expectations and child abilities, and the challenges it can create for schools

and families, a result which might have reflected the parents' own high levels of prior educational achievement, and their previously established positions on the topic.

### **Interpretation and Alignment of Findings with Literature**

#### **Parents Were Aware of and Concerned About Kindergarten Readiness**

This study revealed that on the whole, most parents were clearly aware of, concerned about, and thought extensively about the topic of kindergarten readiness. This finding aligned with research indicating that well-educated, middle-class parents are likely to consider and plan in advance for their children's kindergarten transition (Lareau, 2002, 2006, 2011; Lee and Bowen, 2016). However, parents' concerns were not limited to or exclusively focused on whether or not their children would meet school expectations. Instead, many said that the development of their children's social skills was a more important consideration than securing academic readiness, since specific content knowledge and acquisition of skills related to normal maturation processes would come more easily at a later time. This finding is consistent with research indicating that parents and teachers share concerns that kindergarten readiness expectations are often unsuited to children, and that it is not necessarily a sign of future difficulty if kindergarteners lack readiness skills at the time of school entry, as long as they acquire the prerequisite social skills (Harradine & Clifford, 1996). Grace and Brandt echo this finding, stating that among both parents and teachers, "it appears to be the generally held belief that once these other characteristics and behaviors are in place, academic learning will follow" (2006, p. 226). The importance of adjusting the timing of instruction to student ability is demonstrated in the case of teaching children to tie their shoes: a procedural learning task which requires waiting until maturation renders a child physically capable of this level of hand-eye coordination.

#### **Parents Said Developmentally Appropriate Practices Promoted Readiness**

Parent responses to interview questions about kindergarten readiness revealed an overall belief in the effectiveness of using developmentally appropriate practice as a model for achieving

school readiness and expressed a belief that that schools' kindergarten expectations were not generally aligned with this approach. Parents indicated concerns that the mismatch of readiness expectations and children's developmental capabilities posed a challenge for everyone: children, parents, and teachers alike. Parents also expressed a favorable view of the arts-based curriculum at their child's school, and of teaching methods which created a developmentally appropriate environment. While this finding coincides with earlier studies on parent and teacher perceptions of readiness (Harradine & Clifford, 1996), it contradicts recent investigations which found that parents are more likely than teachers to focus on whether or not children attained skills such as correctly knowing the letters of the alphabet, identifying shapes and numbers, or using scissors (Grace & Brandt, 2006). However, it is possible that parent anxiety about children fitting in and meeting kindergarten expectations explains this focus, rather than parents' belief in the need for children to acquire such skills before kindergarten.

### **Parents Believed School Policies Did Not Address Children's Needs**

Parents discussed their belief that school policies were misaligned with children's abilities and expressed frustration that kindergarten readiness expectations in particular ignored child needs. Even so, parents indicated a willingness to help their children adjust to expectations that they could successfully sit still, focus for long periods of time on one task, and consistently follow teacher directions. Research devoted to exploring school policies and their alignment to children's needs does exist (Hatch, 2002; Yoon, 2015), but findings are often overshadowed by literature focused on successfully implementing school readiness efforts, not on investigating the appropriateness of school expectations (Belfield & Garcia, 2014; Cameron et al., 2012).

## **Implications and Recommendations for Action**

### **Parents, Teachers, and Schools**

Implications of this case study's findings may be best summarized by the idea that all parents have tremendous influence over their children's academic lives, and schools' efforts to

promote kindergarten readiness would be better served if they were informed by parent voices. The assumption that all parents are eager for their children to join the race toward early academic preparation was not supported by the results of this case study. One parent in the study openly expressed both frustration and sadness about what she considered unnecessary intrusion of school expectations at a time when children have better things to do. She described her thoughts about pressure for kindergarten readiness in this way,

So, I guess I was thinking about what I wanted in the early childhood years getting ready for kindergarten, but I think that the phrase ‘kindergarten readiness’ at the age of three and four feels just like, *“Leave us alone, we’re like trying to be kids, we’re trying to have a childhood, we’re trying to build fairy houses!”*

The systematic exclusion of parent concerns, preferences, and beliefs on topics of great personal concern such as kindergarten readiness suggests a tendency to assume that school policy creation and implementation can be effective as a strictly top-down process. While it is true that parents do carry weight in policy adoption via their representation and leadership on local school boards, parent associations and advisory committees, such positions do not guarantee adequate or broad representation. Additionally, school compliance with long-standing national-level policy mandates typically tied to funding shapes priorities and poses a challenge to maintaining an inclusive process, however well-intentioned. Despite marginalizing parent perspectives in their policy development, schools nationwide are actively courting parent engagement and touting the benefits of family partnerships (Heckman, 2011). The common practice of ignoring research on parent perspectives when designing and implementing school initiatives might simply appear as an oversight; however, parent notions of kindergarten readiness remain an infrequently explored, poorly understood area of study, and this literature is narrowly defined to focus on school interests. Recommendations for action include a call for additional research to explore parent perspectives of school policies in many different types of early childhood settings, as well as a



recommendation for the active inclusion of parent stakeholders at all levels of educational policymaking and school governance, not just in the final implementation process.

The findings of this study suggest that parent-teacher partnerships may be the most effective context for addressing the well-being and best interests of young students. Teachers may find that encouraging family partnerships helps them promote policies that reflect the mutually agreed upon goals of schools and families. This study further suggests that schools should continue to pay close attention to what parents have to say, and to consider parent perspectives as an influential source of expertise in shaping education policies.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

It is a truism that schools should strive for academic excellence that is evidence-based, but few schools operate as if inclusion of parent voices is necessary to well-informed practice. Given the controversial nature of kindergarten readiness policies and practices, and the lack of evidence of their effectiveness, further investigation of more effective readiness policies and practices is warranted and should focus more attention on inclusion of parent voices that have been consistently and systematically ignored in the past. Minority and low-income families are particularly important stakeholders who merit inclusion, since kindergarten readiness-focused reform efforts are primarily intended to offset achievement-gap concerns.

### **Conclusion**

Traditionally, the purpose of kindergarten has been to provide a transition between informal, play-centered early learning and the stricter, formal requirements of an academic classroom. In a testament to its role as a precursor to formal education, kindergarten is still considered optional. Although a majority of age-eligible children in the United States attend kindergarten, state-governed compulsory education laws do not require school attendance prior to first grade. Readiness expectations are a relatively new phenomenon, rooted in public policy hopes of erasing academic performance gaps between children in minority and low-income

families and those in wealthier, higher-educated, non-minority populations. Kindergarten readiness curriculum often appears in preschools and child care centers, but there are no uniform standards for defining or measuring readiness, and the various approaches to helping children gain readiness lack solid evidence of any merit.

Without a clear, agreed-upon definition to serve as a reference point, individual parent notions of kindergarten readiness are based on information obtained from a wide variety of sources, including personal research, digital media sources and traditional media outlets, friends, family, other kindergarten parents, schools, teachers, and health care providers. Individual schools and school districts often define their own kindergarten readiness expectations, but ultimately parents must also decide what serves the educational best interests of their children, including whether, how and when to prepare them for kindergarten (Warnick, 2014). This investigation of parent notions of kindergarten readiness sought to gain meaningful insights into parent beliefs, attitudes and values on the topic, and to explore parent concerns about readiness expectations and the incongruities between school expectations and children's needs and abilities. The findings indicated that parents may be less eager to promote academic readiness if they believe that their children require time to mature, not early preparation to succeed. Individually held notions of kindergarten readiness influence how parents respond to school expectations, but policymakers and school administrators do not often take parent perspectives into account, and these views are seldom researched and are not well understood. Further investigation of parent notions of kindergarten readiness is needed to better appreciate how parents and schools can partner to meet the full spectrum of immediate developmental needs of young children, and to help them fulfill their potential as successful students.

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## Appendix A

## Letter of Introduction

April 23, 2018

Dear [REDACTED] Preschool and Kindergarten Parents:

[REDACTED] has graciously allowed me to send you this letter of introduction. My name is Isabel Johnson, and I am a volunteer member of the [REDACTED] Board. I met [REDACTED] last summer and got involved with the school. I am especially interested in arts-based education. This year I am finishing my doctorate in educational leadership with a focus on early childhood education, and I have requested to interview parents of preschool and kindergarten students here at the [REDACTED] as a part of my research on the topic of kindergarten readiness.

The interviews are 30 minutes long, and I will conduct them on-site during school hours. I have put together six questions that ask you your opinions on the topic but there are no right or wrong answers. I will tape the interviews, then type the recordings and save only the written transcripts, not the audio. Your identity will be protected during this process of data collection, analysis and publication, and your participation is completely voluntary. The data are kept confidential and all identifying information is removed.

As parents, I value your opinions about your child's education. It is my hope that this research will contribute to increased awareness and understanding of this topic. In the coming days, you will be given the opportunity to read and sign a participation consent form before proceeding. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to choose a time slot for the interview.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this request. I appreciate all the families who support and are connected to the [REDACTED]. Please don't hesitate to contact [REDACTED] if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Isabel Johnson



## Appendix B

### Study Invitation

April 2018

Dear Potential Study Participant:

As a doctoral student completing her dissertation study through the University of New England, I am inviting you to *participate in an interview where you can share your perspectives on the topic of kindergarten readiness*. As a parent of a preschool or kindergarten student, you have significant experience and knowledge of how the issue of kindergarten readiness has impacted you and your family. This study focuses primarily on how recent changes in kindergarten expectations are viewed by and may have impacted you as a parent of an arts-based preschool or kindergarten age student. By participating in this interview, you are providing a valuable contribution to the improvement of this school and to early childhood education.

**Research Questions:** How do parents of preschool and kindergarten students view kindergarten readiness with regard to:

1. Expectations for student academic readiness prior to kindergarten?
2. View of academic kindergarten? Arts-based kindergarten? Traditional kindergarten?
3. Pressure from school, peers, self or family regarding kindergarten readiness?
4. Perspectives on how kindergarten readiness has impacted child, family, or self?

**Study's Purpose:** The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive study is to collect interview data from you and other current preschool and kindergarten student parents at the Lawrence Arts Center with specific emphasis on how parents view the topic of kindergarten readiness. The findings will inform and educate others regarding parent perspectives of kindergarten readiness.

**Procedures:** Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. The study involves an individual interview which I will record using a hand-held digital audio recording device and later hand transcribe to a written document. After I transcribe the data into written format, I will erase the data from the digital recorder. The interview is conducted by me one-on-one in a reserved room in your school. I will ask you six general questions about kindergarten readiness with no right or wrong answer. The study will run from May to June of 2018, with results/findings published by August 2018. Upon your request, I can send you a copy of your individual interview notes, as well as a copy of the completed dissertation. I do not foresee this study presenting any risks or hardship on you, other than the time to invest in it. However, your time invested will contribute to the anticipated benefits of collecting this data to share with parents, teachers, administrators and policymakers. Together, we can improve the quality of early education for all children.

**Confidentiality:** Your identity will be kept confidential and protected throughout the study and thereafter. Only I, the researcher, will have access to your information. Follow-up verbal/signed and written reports and discussions will identify you only as a number (e.g., Participant #2). Your name and school location will not be shared with anyone else. Your confidentiality will be protected in compliance with the University of New England's research with human participants policies and procedures.

**Compensation:** No monetary or non-monetary compensation will be provided for your input or time.

***Questions:*** If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and your participation, you may contact me, the researcher, via e-mail at [isabefjohnson@gmail.com](mailto:isabefjohnson@gmail.com) or [ijohnson@une.edu](mailto:ijohnson@une.edu), or via my cell phone at 719-588-0414. You also may contact Dr. Michelle Collay at the University of New England at [mcollay@une.edu](mailto:mcollay@une.edu) or by phone at 207-602-2010. For the IRB: Institutional Review Board at the University of New England, Liam Harrison, MA, JD, Director of Research Integrity University of New England, Pickus 106 11 Hills Beach Road, phone 207.602.2244.

If you choose to participate and sign a consent form, you will be assigned to a day and time for an interview. Thank you for your valuable insights and willingness to participate in this research study. Your contribution not only supports my dissertation, but also contributes to improving the quality of early childhood education through greater understanding of important issues and parent perspectives.

Sincerely,

Isabel Johnson, Doctoral Student  
University of New England's Transformative Leadership Program

Appendix C  
Informed Consent Form

April 2018  
Dear Participant:

This information is presented to you prior to your decision about participation in a study where I interview individual parents and ask six questions about kindergarten readiness over a thirty-minute period. You may choose to participate or to decline. You may stop participating and withdraw from the study at any time. Do not hesitate to ask questions or present concerns throughout the research study process. Your personal identifying information will not be reported with the findings. Only I, the researcher will know your identifying information. All data, including your audio recorded interview responses will remain confidential, with all personal identification removed from collected data. To protect data, only I will have access to the recordings and transcriptions. Audio will be transcribed and stored securely at all times in my locked office on a password protected computer hard drive. Audio recordings will be erased after written transcription. All original audio and transcribed interview data and collected study data will be destroyed at the end of the study and erased from the hard drive. At the conclusion of the study, you may request access to your own individual interview notes data, and in August 2018, you may request access to the study's results reported in a manner that protects the confidentiality of all participants.

The purpose of the interview and data collection is to collect information on **how parents view the topic of kindergarten readiness**. After completing the individual, thirty-minute digitally recorded interview, you may be contacted to provide more information and/or verify the accuracy of a part of the data collected during your interview. Not all participants will be asked to participate in the follow-up interview and data collection process. After all interviews are conducted, compiled and reviewed, they will be prepared into a summary report that protects the confidentiality of all participants. This study will not present any known risks throughout the process, other than inconveniencing you for your time to complete the interview involving six questions asking your opinion (approximately 30 minutes). The expected benefit of your participation is to consider in-depth how you regard the topic of kindergarten readiness.

Please sign this consent form with full knowledge of the purpose and procedures of the study and possible follow-up interview and data collection. A copy of the consent form will be emailed/given to you.

I, (participant's name), consent to participate in this study, titled  
*What Does It Mean to Be Ready? An Exploration of Parent Notions of Kindergarten Readiness*

Electronic or Handwritten Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

For information or to discuss questions or concerns you may contact:

Isabel Johnson, Doctoral Student	E-mail: <a href="mailto:ijohnson@une.edu">ijohnson@une.edu</a>
Faculty Mentor: Michelle Collay	E-mail: <a href="mailto:mcollay@une.edu">mcollay@une.edu</a> Phone Number: (207) 602-2010
Lliam Harrison, MA, JD	Director of Research Integrity University of New England
Pickus 106 11 Hills Beach Road	207.602.2244

Appendix D  
Parent Interview Participant Information

*What Does It Mean to Be Ready? Exploring Parent Notions of Kindergarten Readiness*

Your Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (will be kept confidential)

Child's Classroom: \_\_\_\_\_ (will be kept confidential)

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_ (not shared) Your Email: \_\_\_\_\_ (not shared)

Optional:

Age (check one):  under 20 years old,  20-29 years old,  30-39 years old,  40-49 years old,  
 50-59 years old,  60+ yrs. old

Number of Children *currently* enrolled at ████: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Children *ever* enrolled at ████ Current child: Gender (check one):  Female

Male; Child's current age in years and months \_\_\_\_\_ years \_\_\_\_\_ months

Race (check all that apply):  Caucasian/White,  African Am./Black,  Hispanic,  Asian,  
 Biracial,  Native Am.,  Other \_\_\_\_\_

Language (check one):  English,  Spanish,  ASL,  Bilingual,  Other (comment: \_\_\_\_\_)

Highest completed level of education:  High School,  GED,  Certificate (comment: \_\_\_\_\_),  
 Assoc. Degree,  BA/BS,  MA/MS,  PhD/Ed.D,  Post-Doctoral/Other (comment: \_\_\_\_\_)

## Appendix E

### Interview Protocol

*Introduction:* I am a doctoral student through the University of New England. I am investigating how kindergarten readiness is viewed by you and other parents of preschool and kindergarten students in your school. Your input will be valuable for improving early childhood education throughout the United States. I will ask you a series of six questions and then allow time for more comments and questions from you at the end. I will ask you general questions about kindergarten readiness with no right or wrong answer. This will involve an individual interview which I will record on a hand-held audio recording device and later hand transcribe. I am the only individual with access to the digital recorder. After I transcribe the data into written format, I will erase the data from the digital recorder. All data is protected in a secure locked office, and the digital recorder is not shared with anyone else. Your name and any identifiable information will be removed from the written transcribed interview data and all other data and replaced with a numeric identifier to protect your confidentiality throughout the study and after completion.

**Demographic information** (if not already collected; otherwise, verify responses to begin conversation.) (will be kept confidential)

What is your name? \_\_\_\_\_ What is your child's age \_\_\_\_\_ And gender? \_\_\_

What questions do you have for me?

Thank you for your time and for sharing with me about your program. This information contributes to the understanding of current practices and how we can improve them for the future. Feel free to contact me with any questions. You are welcome to review the dissertation after it has completed submission.

1. Are you familiar with the phrase "kindergarten readiness"? (If not, then restate phrase as "are you familiar with the process of preparing for kindergarten").
2. When did you first become aware of or start thinking about kindergarten readiness? In what context or situation?
3. What were your first thoughts about kindergarten readiness? Was it something that you wanted to think about? Was this a positive or negative topic for you?
4. Has the idea of kindergarten readiness been a factor in your choice of preschool or kindergarten? Or future school decision for your child? If yes, in what way(s)?
5. What are your thoughts about school expectations for children in general?
6. Have you thought about whether your child will be successful next year in school?

The interview is concluded now. Do I have your permission to contact you if I have a follow-up question? Would you please provide your contact information? Do you have any questions? Thank you for your participation. The results of this study will be available upon conclusion.