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PERCEPTIONS OF FIVE LOW-INCOME PARENTS ON SCHOOL READINESS

by

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ABSTRACT

This small-scale qualitative study explored the perceptions of five low-income mothers regarding their child's readiness for kindergarten. The study has the potential to help early childhood advocates and other stakeholders (a) understand how low-income environments influence school readiness, (b) understand the aspirations low-income parents have for their children, (c) discover ways to improve the transition to school for economically disadvantaged children, and (d) engage parents in a more equitable manner—ultimately helping all children start kindergarten with success.

Parents selected for this study had a child age 4-5 who was the oldest child in the family, on a Head Start waiting list, and eligible to start kindergarten. Parents participated in a two-phase individual interview process. Each phase of interviews involved the participants responding to a predetermined list of six questions related to school readiness. The second phase involved participants reviewing a kindergarten assessment and talking about how they developed the skills and knowledge with their own child.

Emerging theory from this research reflects the differences between parents' perceptions and the schools' views regarding school readiness. The theory supports a new definition of kindergarten readiness comprised of ready schools, ready parents, and ready children. The new definition has the potential to be recognized by early childhood advocates at a local, state, and national level and serve as a resource to clarify the meaning of kindergarten readiness, thereby enhancing early childhood programs.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Ready or not, here they come! Children begin kindergarten whether they are ready or not, but what does “ready” really mean? How do children become ready and who determines the criteria for readiness—national policy, teachers and administrators in the school system, or the parents? Should children know how to write their name, count to 10, and identify letters of the alphabet before starting kindergarten? The topic of school readiness has been surrounded by controversy for several years (Pyle, 2002) and by defining readiness, it is presumed that children need to know and be able to do certain things before they start kindergarten (Aiona, 2005). This presumption can negatively impact children with limited learning experiences prior to school entry.

Interest in this research evolved from my former kindergarten teaching experience and expectation for all my kindergarten students to be ready for school—meaning they had early literacy and numeracy skills as well as the emotional maturity to follow directions and get along with others. The children with fewer academic skills and social experiences seemed to have more difficulty with learning and behavior. As a parent, I had the same expectations of my own son and daughter that I had for my students. In a study conducted by Pinata and LaParo (2003) approximately 3,500 kindergarten teachers reported one third of their students experienced difficulties with academic skills, social and emotional skills, working with others, and following directions.

When it comes to school readiness, limited research exists on parents' perceptions and experiences, especially those living in low-income environments (McAllister, Wilson, Green, & Baldwin, 2005; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999). If parents are a child's first and most effective teachers (Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 2004; National Educational Goals Panel, 1995), what can they tell us about their child's school readiness and their experiences leading up to kindergarten?

The National Education Goals Panel of 1997 identified five domains of children's early learning and development important to school readiness and success including (a) language and literacy development, (b) cognition and general knowledge, (c) social and emotional development, (d) physical well-being and motor development, and (e) approaches to learning (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995). For this study, the critical definition of kindergarten readiness is the state of children as they enter school based on the five domains outlined above as well as the schools' capacity to effectively serve all kindergarteners that walk through their doors (SERVE Institute, 2000). How can we ensure all children are prepared for the start of kindergarten or is the real question, "How can we ensure schools and teachers are prepared for all children that start kindergarten?"

Statement of Problem

Children attain a wide range of learning experiences during their first five years of life (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005; Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2005). Some children acquire the cognitive, physical, and social-emotional skills necessary for kindergarten readiness while some do not. Consequently, this variance in learning causes a learning gap in kindergarten placing the low performers at risk for school failure. Children from low-income families enter school less prepared

than their more advantaged peers (Haskins & Rouse, 2005; Stipek & Ryan, 1997; Zill & Collins, 1995) and are more likely to have academic and social difficulties as they proceed through school (Lee & Burkham, 2002). The transition from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten represents a critical time in a child's development and yet economically disadvantaged children may lack the experiences that promote school readiness (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Haskins & Rouse, 2005). The literature reveals several interpretations of readiness, and yet, limited research exists on what parents think it means for their child to be ready for kindergarten (McAllister et al., 2005; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999). Interpretations of school readiness will be shared in Chapter II.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this small-scale qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of five low-income parents regarding their child's readiness for kindergarten. This study has the potential to help early childhood advocates and other stakeholders (a) understand how low-income influences school readiness, (b) understand the aspirations low-income parents have for their children, (c) discover ways to improve the transition to school for economically disadvantaged children, (d) prepare to receive children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and (e) engage parents in a more equitable manner—ultimately helping all children have a positive start in kindergarten.

The rationale for selecting low-income parents for this study was threefold. First, the perceptions of low-income parents regarding kindergarten readiness will offer insight into the beginning of the learning gap that is pervasive in so many schools (Haskins & Rouse, 2005). Second, it is the economically disadvantaged children who are most at risk of school failure (Piotrkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2000). Evidence shows

economically disadvantaged children who do not have early positive transitions to school have significant delays in language and basic academic skills. These children are likely to start kindergarten 2 to 3 years behind their peers, causing challenges for teachers, school districts, and the children themselves (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). Third, it is the parents who often make the determination of whether or not their child is ready for kindergarten—their perceptions of kindergarten readiness were important, relevant, and timely for the purpose of this study.

Parents' perceptions regarding education and school readiness may shape the way they prepare their child for kindergarten—these perceptions may inform educational practice, policy, and research as well as help to decrease the learning gap in kindergarten. If schools are to communicate effectively with all parents regarding their child's transition to school, it is essential their voices be heard (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999). Information collected from this study adds to the existing research on school readiness as a means to improve education for young children.

Emerging theory from this research reflects the differences between parents' perceptions and the schools' views regarding school readiness. The theory supports a new definition of kindergarten readiness comprised of ready schools, ready parents, and ready children. The new definition has the potential to be recognized by early childhood advocates at a local, state, and national level and serve as a resource to clarify the meaning of kindergarten readiness, thereby enhancing early childhood programs.

Assumptions

For the purpose of this study, I assumed the parents interviewed perceived education as important and desirable for their child's success in life. A second

assumption was parents viewed kindergarten as a positive introduction to formal schooling rather than an expectation for their child when age eligible. A third assumption was kindergarten readiness is determined by the experiences a child has from birth to the start of kindergarten. A fourth assumption was parents' interview responses reflected their true beliefs and behaviors regarding their child's school readiness.

Research Questions

This study focused on the perceptions of low-income parents regarding kindergarten readiness. The questions guiding this study are:

1. What are low-income parents' perceptions of readiness for school?
2. What home experiences do low-income parents perceive as contributing to school readiness?
3. To what extent do low-income parents perceive their influence on their child's school readiness?
4. What do low-income parents perceive as barriers to their child's school readiness or transition to kindergarten?

Conceptual Framework

In order to understand how low-income parents perceive kindergarten readiness for their child, a conceptual framework was utilized to ground the review of literature and research outcomes. I found the National Education Goals Panel's five domains of children's early learning and development aligned well with this study because the domains identify the main concepts of kindergarten readiness: language and literacy, cognition and general knowledge, social and emotional, physical well-being and motor

skills, and approaches to learning. The literature and research outcomes support these five domains.

Researcher's Perspective

I have intimate knowledge of curriculum standards and expectations for a kindergarten classroom. I taught preschool and kindergarten and had expectations of my own kindergarten students to start school with basic literacy and numeracy skills. Currently, as an elementary school principal, I hold the responsibility of ensuring all students in my school reach a level of proficiency in the areas of reading and mathematics by the year of 2014. Although I was raised in a low-income household, I do not claim to fully understand the culture of living in extreme poverty, including family values, strengths, and struggles. I raised my son and daughter in a middle-class home environment expecting both to have basic literacy and numeracy skills before starting kindergarten.

Lichtman (2010) explained that the main purpose of qualitative research is to describe and understand human experience and notes, "all information is filtered through the researcher's eyes and ears and is included by his or her experience, knowledge, skill and background" (p. 16). Theoretical judgments are based on what one knows, either from their own experience or from the literature. During the process of data collection and analysis, Strauss and Corbin (1998) recommend researchers set aside their knowledge and experience in order to form new interpretations about the phenomena. The participants brought to this study their own biases, beliefs, and assumptions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I acknowledge my personal beliefs and professional experiences may have impacted the study, however, I made a conscious effort to minimize the impact of

this bias on the outcomes of the research. I allowed parents to say what they wanted to say and reported their views. I listened carefully and did not share my views on how to prepare a child for kindergarten.

Delimitations

For this small-scale study five low-income parents were selected from a list provided by the Head Start director in a single rural school district. Each parent had a child age 4-5 who was the oldest child in the family, on a Head Start waiting list, and eligible to start kindergarten. Parents of children attending the school where I served as a principal were excluded from the study. This study did not include the perceptions of parents with a moderate to high-income status, preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, or administrators within the selected community. The perceptions of parents in this study may reflect those in other environments however do not imply the views of all economically disadvantaged parents.

Terms and Definitions

The following terms are used throughout this study. The definitions of these terms clarify the meanings within the context of the study.

Low-income and economically disadvantaged: These terms are used interchangeably to describe the parents and their children in this study. Families are considered low-income if their yearly income falls below the 200% level of the federal poverty threshold (Capizzano & Adams, 2003; Halle et al., 2009). Poverty thresholds are used for calculating poverty population statistics on the number of Americans living in poverty and are updated each year by the Census Bureau (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). For instance, during the year of 2011, a family of

four with an income of \$22,350 was considered to be low-income (see Figure 1). Four of the five parents in this study live on an income below the 100% of the poverty threshold and struggle to make ends meet, however, are referred to as low-income rather than impoverished. Poverty guidelines are a simplification of poverty thresholds and are used to determine financial eligibility for certain federal programs such as Head Start, Medicare, Children’s Health Insurance, and Community Food and Nutrition (Federal Register, 2011; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

Figure 1. 2011 Federal Poverty Level.

| Family Size | % Gross Yearly Income | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------|-----------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| | 25% | 50% | 75% | 81% | 100% | 133% | 175% | 200% | 250% | 300% |
| 1 | 2,723 | 5,445 | 8,168 | 8,821 | 10,890 | 14,484 | 19,058 | 21,780 | 27,225 | 32,670 |
| 2 | 3,678 | 7,355 | 11,033 | 11,915 | 14,710 | 19,564 | 25,743 | 29,420 | 36,775 | 44,130 |
| 3 | 4,633 | 9,265 | 13,898 | 15,009 | 18,530 | 24,645 | 32,428 | 37,060 | 46,325 | 55,590 |
| 4 | 5,588 | 11,175 | 16,763 | 18,104 | 22,350 | 29,327 | 39,113 | 44,700 | 55,875 | 67,050 |
| 5 | 6,543 | 13,085 | 19,628 | 21,198 | 26,170 | 34,806 | 45,798 | 52,340 | 65,425 | 78,510 |
| 6 | 7,498 | 14,995 | 22,493 | 24,292 | 29,990 | 39,887 | 52,483 | 59,980 | 74,975 | 89,970 |
| 7 | 8,453 | 16,905 | 25,358 | 27,386 | 33,810 | 44,967 | 59,168 | 67,620 | 84,525 | 101,430 |
| 8 | 9,408 | 18,815 | 28,228 | 30,480 | 37,630 | 50,048 | 65,853 | 75,260 | 94,075 | 112,890 |

(Federal Register, 2011)

The state where this study took place has approximately 75,000 families with 140,000 children and 30% of these children lived in low-income environments (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2010). In the school district, children in a family of four who live with a yearly income of \$40,793 are eligible to receive reduced priced school meals. Approximately 39% of the district’s student population received free or reduced-price meals. This information was based on the 2009-2011 Federal Eligibility Income Chart, which was included in the school district’s information and application for free and reduced priced meals (North Dakota Public Instruction, 2010).

For the purpose of this study, low-income signifies financial poverty and not social or political poverty. Although the terms low-income and economically

disadvantaged may have a negative connotation and imply that people with a lower-income status are less valued or less respected by society, I did not presume this implication. Less than favorable descriptors found in the research included poor, impoverished, deprived, and underprivileged—words that are not used in the study.

Parent: The term parent refers to the child’s guardian or other primary caregiver with shared parental responsibilities. For this study, only mothers participated in the interview process.

Parent involvement and family engagement: These terms are used interchangeably and portray the parent’s role in their child’s school readiness. “The concept of family engagement (versus parent involvement) recognizes all members of a child’s family (not just parents) and emphasizes the importance of the reciprocal relationship between families and schools” (Halgunseth & Peterson, 2009, p. 6).

Readiness: The terms kindergarten readiness and school readiness are used interchangeably as both imply what it means for a child to be “ready” or prepared for the start of formal schooling—typically kindergarten. Readiness is the condition of children as they enter school based on five domains of early learning and development including (a) language and literacy development, (b) cognition and general knowledge, (c) social and emotional development, (d) physical well-being and motor development, and (e) approaches to learning (Kagan et al., 1995). Additionally, readiness is the schools’ capacity to effectively serve all kindergarteners (SERVE Institute, 2000).

In order to better understand the five domains of learning and development, each area is explained further. Language and literacy development includes listening, speaking, vocabulary, and print awareness. Cognition and general knowledge includes

knowledge about properties of objects and knowledge about characteristics of people and events. Social and emotional development includes children's feelings about themselves and others as well as the ability to get along with others. Physical well-being and motor development includes health status, rate of growth, and small and gross motor skills. Approaches to learning include children's inclination to use skills, knowledge, and abilities to learn—key elements include curiosity, enthusiasm, and persistence on tasks (Halle, Zaff, Calkins, & Margie, 2000).

Transition: Transition describes the process that occurs from a child's birth to the start of kindergarten incorporating a variety of experiences including maternal care and access to high quality early childcare (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Graue, 2006). A child's transition to school is understood in terms of the influence of contexts and connections among the family, school, and community over a given time (Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, & Cox, 1999). A transition may also refer to a specific program that takes place before or after a child begins kindergarten (Dockett & Perry, 2001). The transition programs offered in the community where this study took place are Kindergarten Round-up, Introduction-to-Kindergarten, and a Back-to-School Open House.

Organization of the Study

Chapter II includes a historical perspective and overview of the existing literature relevant to kindergarten readiness. The overview is organized by seven sections including (a) early child development, (b) effects of parent involvement, (c) the transition to school, (d) interpretations of kindergarten readiness, (e) the kindergarten learning gap and low-income status, (f) early childcare and education, and (g) characteristics of a "ready school."

Chapter III includes an explanation of the methods adopted for this qualitative study. The chapter includes a description of the research design, research procedures, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis.

Chapter IV includes the data obtained from the five individual parent interviews. Parents' responses are summarized in narrative form according to the four themes identified in the coding and analysis process.

Chapter V includes a discussion and summary of findings followed by conclusions, limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research. The chapter concludes with recommendations for early childhood stakeholders including a new definition of kindergarten readiness.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

When it comes to getting children ready for kindergarten, what really matters to families living in low-income environments? Children enter kindergarten with various backgrounds and experiences, which has a significant impact on their early school education (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005; Magnuson et al., 2005). Children who start kindergarten with fewer readiness skills than their peers are likely to fall further behind as they proceed through school (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Entwisle & Alexander, 1999; Lee & Burkham, 2002). Children who experience failure early in school are more likely to become disruptive, inattentive, and withdrawn, therefore increasing their chance of dropping out of school (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Furthermore, children lacking readiness skills for kindergarten are more likely to become teen parents, engage in crime, suffer from depression, and become unemployed as adults (Haskins & Rouse, 2005).

Children's school readiness is associated with future school achievement and positive life-long outcomes (Bergeson, Daybell, Riggers, Mueller, Williams-Appleton, 2005; Entwisle & Alexander, 1999). The attention paid to school readiness may be influenced by the increased emphasis on skills and accountability in public schools and

early childhood settings. High stakes testing in the upper grades has contributed to more formal curriculum expectations in kindergarten (Garber, Timko, & Bunkley, 2007).

This chapter begins with a historical perspective sharing views on readiness from Pestalozzi over 100 years ago to current views from President Barack Obama. The literature explores the following areas related to kindergarten readiness: (a) how children develop from birth to age 5 and the impact this development has on learning, emergent literacy, and school success; (b) the effects of parent involvement, communication between the home and school, computers and television in the home, and parent education; (c) factors that contribute to a successful transition to school; (d) interpretations of kindergarten readiness including the perceptions of parents and teachers, assessment, the age factor, and retention; (e) the learning gap in kindergarten and how it relates to low-income status including poverty; (f) pre-kindergarten experiences; and (g) the characteristics of a “ready school” including “ready teachers.”

Historical Perspective

Theorist Pestalozzi first discussed the concept of readiness in 1898 (Kagan & Rigby, 2003) and has defined readiness as two very different ideas—ready to learn and ready for school (Kagan, 1990; Lewitt & Baker, 1995). “Ready to learn” is generally viewed as a level of development where children at any age are able to learn specific skills and concepts the same age group achieves (Good, 1973). In other words, a child’s readiness to learn is conceptualized as a developmental progression and the degree to which the child is “ready” and able to learn specific concepts (Kagan, 1990). This idea of readiness replicates that of theorist Vygotsky who claims all children are ready to learn when the “what” and “how” something is taught is developmentally appropriate for the

child (Berk & Winsler, 1995). By contrast, “ready for school” is associated with the child having a prerequisite set of skills expected for starting kindergarten (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Kagan, 1990; Kagen & Rigby, 2003). For instance, the child is able to identify letters of the alphabet and write his/her name.

The idea of school readiness gained greater attention in 1989 when President H. W. Bush announced six national education goals (Kagan & Rigby, 2003), the first stating, “By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn” (United States Department of Education, 1995, p. 1). This goal precedes the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002, which requires students to achieve academic proficiency by the end of the 2013-2014 school year (Hansen, 2008). Accordingly, NCLB has paved the way for Obama and Biden’s (2010) national “Plan for Lifelong Success through Education.” Within this plan are two goals that relate to kindergarten readiness. The first goal is to ensure access to high-quality early childhood education programs and childcare opportunities so children enter kindergarten ready to learn. The second goal is to empower parents to raise healthy and successful children by taking a greater role in their child’s education at home and at school.

Early Child Development

The brain is without doubt our most fascinating organ. Parents, educators, and society as a whole have a tremendous power to shape the wrinkly universe inside each child’s head, and, with it, the kind of person he or she will turn to be. We owe it to our children to help them grow the best brains possible. (Eliot, 1999, p. 10)

A child’s first few years of life are the most critical in terms of physical brain development (Call & Featherstone, 2010; Edwards, Sheridan, & Knoch, 2008) as well as success in school and later in life (Bates et al., 2006; Kagen & Rigby, 2003). From birth to age 5, a child’s learning and brain development are interdependent and have a major

impact on future learning and intellectual growth and development (Bates et al., 2006; Call & Featherstone, 2010; Edwards et al., 2008; Ramey & Ramey, 2004). In fact, soon after birth, different areas of the human brain establish new pathways and connections as the child engages in discovery, exploration, and everyday experiences (Hill, 2010; Sousa, 2006; Talay-Ongan, 2000).

“Research shows that early experiences shape whether a child’s brain develops strong skills for future learning, behavior and success. Without a strong base on which to build, children, particularly disadvantaged children, will be behind long before they reach kindergarten” (Obama & Biden, 2010, p. 2). The research on brain development may help determine what aspects of early childhood experiences help or hinder academic development, therefore helping to close the learning gap that exists in kindergarten classrooms.

The environment in which a young child lives has a powerful impact on how the child develops and what the child learns (National Research Council, 2001). According to Eliot (1999), environment is every physical, sensory, motor, social-emotional, and intellectual interaction that a growing child encounters since the beginning stages of life. The way parents and children interact with one another influences children’s cognitive, and social-emotional development (Halle et al., 2000). When the brain is emotionally stimulated, what is learned will be marked for memory and these emotions affect how well children learn. In other words, the more positive emotions are, the more likely children will learn. Similarly, the brain’s plasticity means there are times when negative experiences or the absence of appropriate stimulation are more likely to have serious and long-term effects. Consequently, children who are abused, neglected, or traumatized, are

more likely to experience long-term adverse developmental delays than children who spend their preschool years in nurturing environments (Shore, 2003).

Learning can occur at anytime and anywhere, and for a child's first few years of life, learning begins in the home. Parents have complete control over their child's early care and education prior to starting kindergarten (Bowman, 2003). Unfortunately, the pre-kindergarten environments of children living in low-income environments may be deficient in providing the experiences that promote school readiness (Haskins & Rouse, 2005). The disparity in social class affects children's exposure to experiences that support early learning. For instance, the literacy knowledge and skills children acquire from home and pre-kindergarten environments are critical determinants of how well they will learn to read and perform in school (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Storch & Whitehurst, 2001; Zill, 1998).

According to Eliot (1999), one of the most compelling predictors of a child's intelligence is socioeconomic status (SES), which is comprised of the parents' education level and family income. Children who live in lower SES environments tend to have lower IQs than children who live in higher SES environments. Other aspects affecting a child's intellectual development include birth order, only child, working mothers, quality childcare, prenatal experiences, child nutrition, and stimulating activities. Eliot further stated that children living in higher SES environments tend to have greater opportunity, better health, more educational resources, better parenting, higher-quality childcare, better schooling, and a greater emphasis on education.

According to Newberger (1997), three aspects that make a difference in children's development for a lifetime include (a) good prenatal care, (b) nurturing relationships with

adults, and (c) positive, age-appropriate stimulation beginning at birth. Newberger further noted the kind of nourishment a child receives prior to birth affects the wiring of the brain as well as the qualities of experiences beyond the first few years of life. Unfortunately, expectant mothers living in poverty or low-income environments may be poorly nourished affecting their child's brain development and school readiness.

According to the Carnegie Task Force (1994), the type of care and stimulation a child receives at home and in other settings influences the development of the brain. Ramey and Ramey (2004) identified seven types of experiences essential for a young child's brain development and school readiness including (a) encourage exploration, (b) teach basic skills, (c) celebrate developmental progress, (d) practice new skills, (e) protect from disapproval and punishment, (f) communicate responsively, and (g) establish behavior expectations. These experiences do not require time, money, or skill and reflect what caregivers in all cultures can provide for children.

Ramey and Ramey (2004) conducted a longitudinal study in North Carolina to learn how the seven essential experiences outlined above influenced school readiness for children from birth to kindergarten entry. The study is known as the Abecedarian, which is Latin for "one who learns the basics, such as the alphabet." The study involved 111 children (98% African American) from low-income homes and whose parents were mostly single, unemployed, had an average IQ of 80 and maternal education of approximately 10 years. The findings indicated children who received systematic enriched experiences from birth to age 5 scored higher on reading and math readiness assessments than those who did not receive rich experiences. Almost 70% of the students who received systematic rich experiences prior to kindergarten obtained skilled jobs or

enrolled in higher education as opposed to only 40% of students without the pre-kindergarten experiences. Another positive result from the Abecedarian study was only 12% of the children in the treatment group were placed in special education as compared to 48% of children who were not in the treatment group.

Children are ready to learn at birth and the experiences provided for them will affect their brain structure (Lazarus & Ortega, 2007; Sprenger, 2008). “Parental behavior during a child’s first 5 years of life is critical for the development of important social and cognitive outcomes in children” (Edwards et al., 2008, p. 3) and yet not all children receive the same quality of cognitive experiences during these early years (Lazarus & Ortega, 2007). Parents who structure their children’s learning experiences and support their learning attempts also encourage and support their children’s curiosity and persistence (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Activities that have a positive effect on a children’s early development and associated with higher intellectual and social scores include reading, teaching songs and nursery rhymes, drawing and painting, teaching the alphabet and numbers, visiting the library, and creating opportunities for them to play with friends at home (Department for Education and Skills, 2007).

According to Fielding (2009), children ages 4 to 5 are able to focus on a task for approximately 5 minutes with distractions and work independently for 10-15 minutes. At this same age, children are able to share and play cooperatively with peers; follow rules and three- to four-step directions; and, talk about their feelings, the feelings of others, and show empathy to others. Schmitt (1999) claimed the average 5-year-old has an attention span of approximately 15-20 minutes given the task is not self-directed.

The Importance of Early Literacy

In order for people to function successfully in society, being literate is thought to be a significant factor and perhaps the most important skill for children to learn (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). According to Christie and Roskos (2006), early literacy, language, and number skills have been characterized as the new pre-kindergarten basics. In support of this notion, pre-reading and language programs such as Good Start, Grow Smart, and Early Reading First have been promoted by federal policy (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006). Conversely, some educators have cautioned against placing too much emphasis on early literacy instruction at the expense of other important areas such as social and emotional development (Shonkoff, 2000).

Children's literacy and language learning begins at home before they start kindergarten and is the foundation for long-term academic success (Atlas, 2008; Gettinger & Stoiber, 2008; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2002). In fact, the ideal time for parents to begin sharing books with their children is during the first few months of their life (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999; National Research Council, 1999). Researchers have identified four essential skills children develop progressively during their pre-kindergarten years that are highly predictive of success in learning to read. These skills include print awareness, phonological awareness, letter knowledge, and oral language (Burns et al., 1999; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2002).

Reading aloud to children beginning at birth is invaluable to the development of the four essential pre-literacy skills mentioned above. However, children living in low-income environments are less likely to have access to reading material in their home

(Constantino, 2005) and be read to every day than children living in higher-income environments (Barton & Coley, 2007; Lee & Burkham, 2002). The National Survey of Children's Health conducted in 2003 and 2004 found that only 41% of low-income families read to their children about six times each week as compared to 61% of higher income families. Low-income parents may have poor reading skills themselves and not much experience with books—and therefore, may not know how to engage their children in reading (Valladares & Moore, 2009). Furthermore, low-income parents may not understand the importance of reading to their children on a daily basis beginning at birth and throughout early school years (National Research Council, 1999). Conversely, it is not implausible low-income parents are good at creating a home atmosphere that fosters learning (White, 1982).

The early literacy knowledge and skills children bring to kindergarten from prior home and preschool experiences are crucial determinants of how well they will learn to read in elementary school (Storch & Whitehurst, 2001). According to the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study sponsored by the United States Department of Education, “Children who are read to at least three times a week by a family member, are almost twice as likely to score in the top 25% in reading as children who are read to less” (Hamilton, 2009, p. 29). Furthermore, reading aloud to children at least 20 minutes every day beginning at birth increases the child's language, grammar, and vocabulary skills as well as their eagerness to become good readers (Fielding et al., 2004). Evidence suggests children's literacy-related skills remain stable from the preschool years until high school (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2002).

In addition to emergent literacy, oral language is developed during a child's early years. A child's language and cognitive development is dependent on parental language stimulation and teaching. In fact, by age 2, children whose mothers talk to them often and responsively have vocabularies that are eight times greater than children whose mothers speak less often (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). In a study of literacy development and home-school experiences, Dickenson and Tabors (1991) found that talking during mealtime was positively associated with children's vocabulary development and other literacy-related competencies. Furthermore, when parents ask open-ended questions and make comments during conversations and reading activities, their children develop more advanced vocabulary and language skills (Hart & Risley, 1995; Pan, Rowe, Singer, & Snow, 2005).

According to Riley (1998), it is common to find a 5-year range in children's literacy-related skills and functioning within a kindergarten classroom. In other words, some kindergarteners have skills characteristic of a typical 3-year-old and some may be functioning at the level of an 8 year old. Early studies on emergent literacy found that qualities such as the number of picture books in the home, library visits, the frequency of parents reading with their children, and the frequency a child asks to be read to were related to children's oral language and vocabulary development (Payne, Whitehurst, & Angell, 1994; Senechal, LeFevre, Hudson, & Lawson, 1996). Fielding et al., (2004) stated:

From birth to 5, a child's brain is wiring itself to hear the distinct sounds and syllables within words and absorbing the grammatical patterns of language. This is a critical stage. Reading aloud exposes children to a richer vocabulary as well. The average child enters kindergarten familiar with approximately 5,000 words. Most parents and teachers don't realize that the normal child's book has 17% more 'rare' words than the conversation of a college graduate. (p. 129)

Early literacy experiences have a significant impact on children's readiness for kindergarten. First, learning to read relates strongly to children's early language development and school success (Ramey & Ramey, 2004; Storch & Whitehurst, 2001). Second, exposure to books and the understanding of print concepts often determines kindergarten readiness. Third, children who live in a highly interactive language environment develop strong oral language skills (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). A child's language development and cognitive development improve through experiences within the home and community environment. Such experiences may include participating in meal preparation, doing laundry, visiting a doctor's office, and playing outdoors (Otto, 2002). According to the Department of Education and Skills (2007), activities that have a positive effect on a child's development and associated with higher intellectual and social scores include reading with the child and visiting the library.

In summary, a child's capacity to learn is critical during the first few years of life and the environment is a vital factor in a child's early brain development. The parent has more influence on what and how children learn than any practitioner, no matter what setting (Call & Featherstone, 2010). Important factors contributing to school readiness for children prior to school entry include prenatal care, good nutrition, a positive and nurturing environment, emotionally stimulating experiences, and early literacy learning. It may benefit educators to understand the importance of early brain development as well as high-quality interventions to decrease the learning gap between low-income and affluent children (Atlas, 2008; Kagen & Rigby, 2003).

Effects of Parent Involvement

The pronouncement, “Ready or not, here they come!” may suggest whether or not parents are ready for preparing their child for kindergarten. Parents are a child’s first and most effective teachers (Fielding et al., 2004; Olsen & Fuller, 2012) and parents’ involvement in their child’s early learning influences their success in school. Olsen and Fuller noted, “it is through families that children learn how to live in their worlds” (p. 4). Boyer (1995) referred to the home as the child’s first classroom in which the greatest milestones in learning occur. For this study, five low-income parents had the opportunity to talk about the experiences they believed to help prepare their child for kindergarten—their perceptions were invaluable to this study.

According to Maxwell and Clifford (2004), “children are not innately ready or not ready for school . . . their skills and development are strongly influenced by their families and through their interactions with other people and environments before coming to school” (p. 1). Meaningful and effective family involvement includes the parents’, caregivers’, and teachers’ behaviors, practices, attitudes, and involvement with the organizations where children learn as well as the expectations, outreach, and family interactions within these organizations (Weiss, Bouffard, Bridglall, & Gordon, 2009).

Family engagement is synonymous with parent involvement and may include helping with homework, communicating with teachers and other parents, visiting the classroom, and attending school events (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Otto, 2002). Family engagement (versus parent involvement) recognizes all members of a child’s family and emphasizes the importance of the reciprocal relationship between families and schools (Halgunseth & Peterson, 2009). Wakefield (2011) compares family

engagement with life partnerships and reports children greatly benefit from families and educators who commit themselves to developing and sustaining meaningful partnerships just as people benefit from committed life partnerships. In other words, there are challenges to involve parents in their child's education just as there are challenges in marriages.

Family engagement represents the interactionist approach to kindergarten readiness, which views readiness as an interaction between the child's developmental status and home to school transitions and partnerships (Andrews & Slate, 2001; Bronfenbrenner, 2004; Graue, 2006; Keating, 2007; Meisels, 1999; Snow, 2006; Xu & Filler, 2008). Regardless of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, when families and schools work together, children have increased academic motivation, grade promotion, and social-emotional skills (Christenson, 2000; Mantzicopoulos, 2003; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004).

Low-income parents are less likely to attend school events because of time constraints due to working long hours and having limited means of transportation (Lareau, 2003; Newman & Chin, 2003). Otto (2002) explained the wider the range of opportunities provided for parent involvement, the greater the number of parents would participate. Providing transportation, on-site childcare, and refreshments for school events may also increase family participation (Halgunseth & Peterson, 2009). Positive interactions between the home and preschool programs may promote parent involvement as well as children's social and cognitive development (Bronfenbrenner, 2004; Xu & Filler, 2008). Dearing et al. (2006) conducted a longitudinal study to examine the associations of educational parent involvement and children's literacy development from

kindergarten through fifth grade. Approximately 200 low-income families participated in the study in which the children attended schools that, on average, were low-income and ethnically diverse. The findings of this study revealed increased family involvement in school was strongly associated with the literacy achievement of children from low-income families and whose mothers had low levels of education. Furthermore, increased family involvement in school had greater implications for children's literacy than did family income, maternal level of education, or child's ethnicity.

Family involvement has proven to have a positive effect on children's cognition, social-emotional development, and overall achievement from birth through adolescence (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Edwards et al., 2008; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Weiss et al., 2009). Children from low-income families whose parents are involved in their education have higher literacy levels than children whose families are not involved—this holds true for parents with low levels of education but nevertheless pursuing an active part in their child's literacy development (Dearing et al., 2006).

Weiss et al. (2009) provided an integrative model of family involvement that encompasses three categories including (a) parenting, (b) home-school relationships, and (c) responsibility for learning outcomes. First, parenting involves the values, attitudes, and practices that parents use in raising their children. Second, home-school relationships pertain to formal and informal communications between families and children's teachers. Parents' involvement in their child's education is associated with student success, especially when it includes a two-way exchange of information between home and school (Cox, 2005). Third, responsibility for learning outcomes is about how parents can support

their child's literacy and language development through activities such as reading aloud and engaging in rich conversations.

Communication between Home and School

Communication between home and school is associated with children's increased academic functioning. Teachers can establish positive relationships with their students' parents by making them feel welcome and encouraging two-way communication (Olsen & Fuller, 2012). Children who know their parents and teachers are working together as a team tend to be more emotionally secure in the learning environment and are more likely to reach their full potential (Call, 2010). Throughout the school year, teachers may communicate with their students' parents through E-mail, telephone, newsletters, school events, formal parent/teacher conferences, and informal visits before and after school. In addition to communication between the home and school, Kreider (2002) encourages peer networking among parents—opportunities for parents to meet others who have same-age children attending the same school.

Effects of Computers and Television

Early literacy and language experiences enhance a child's school readiness, but what about technology? Computer usage has rapidly increased in popularity among preschool-age children (Mendoza, Zimmerman, & Christakis, 2007). A series of studies by the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that 4-27% of United States children less than 6 years of age used a computer for an average of 1 hour each day (Vandewater et al., 2007).

In 2003, the United States Department of Education surveyed approximately 56,000 families regarding the computer and Internet use in their household (DeBell &

Chapman, 2006). Results indicated children ages 5 through 17 used computers to communicate, search information, play games, and do schoolwork. It was found 75% of all 5-year olds used computers and the Internet on a regular basis in 2001. It was also found the use of both technologies was greater among children living in higher-income households than those living in lower-income households. Li and Atkins (2004) explored the relationship between computer accessibility and use with cognitive and psychomotor development among 122 economically disadvantaged preschool age children. The findings indicated more than 50% of the preschoolers had a computer in their home and used them more often than children from higher-income families. With technology growing at a rapid pace, the percentage of computers in homes is likely to be much higher today. In the same study, it was also found access to computers increased the children's school readiness as well as their cognitive development. The study did not include information on what children did on the computers, how much time they spent on the computers, and guidance and involvement of adults. Both studies indicated boys and girls used computers and the Internet with equal frequency (DeBell & Chapman, 2006; Li & Atkins, 2004).

Researchers Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut, and Gross (2001) conducted a study examining the impact of home computer use on the development of young children and adolescents. It was found many computer and action video games helped develop three important cognitive skills including spatial skills (Greenfield, 1996; Okagaki & Frensch, 1994), iconic representation, and visual attention. Spatial skills include information-processing mental rotation, spatial visualization, and the ability to work with two- and three-dimensional images. Iconic representation involves the ability to read

images such as pictures and diagrams. Visual attention is the ability of keeping track of many different things at the same time.

Earlier studies indicated educational television programs such as Sesame Street contributed to young children's letter and number recognition, vocabulary, and positive attitudes toward school (Wright & Huston, 1995). The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends children 2 years and older watch no more than 2 hours of television a day and children younger than 2 years do not watch television at all. A study conducted by Certain and Kahn (2002) examined the prevalence and correlation of television viewing that exceeds the AAP guidelines for children ages 0 to 2. The results indicated greater television viewing during preschool years is associated with greater viewing at school age. A study conducted by Clarke and Kurtz-Costes (1997) indicated children who watched more television are less prepared for school than their peers who watched less. Lee and Burkham (2002) found children living in lower-income environments watched more television than their higher income counterparts. Furthermore, television viewing and computer use may lead to decreased time spent being physically active, which may predispose to excess weight gain (Mendoza et al., 2007). Parents can facilitate language development by encouraging a more interactive approach to television viewing and computer use (Otto, 2002). Although the research revealed increased computer use among preschoolers, there is limited research on the impact this usage has on kindergarten readiness.

Parent Education

Although parents are a child's first and most effective teachers (Fielding et al., 2004; National Educational Goals Panel, 1995), many parents need and welcome support

in preparing their child for school success. Economically disadvantaged children whose parents participate in programs that support children ages 0 to 5, make greater progress in their learning and exhibit higher self-esteem than children whose parents do not participate (Barbarin et al., 2006; Landry, Smith, Swank, Assel, & Vellet, 2001). A study conducted in a Washington school district examined the relation between parents' participation in a parent education program and their children's academic achievement. Over a 3-year period parents attended a 90-minute session three times a year to receive information on core skills and competencies that determined their child's readiness for kindergarten. It was found the more parents participated in parenting sessions the better their child performed on reading and math assessments (Strand, 2009).

A similar study was conducted in North Dakota schools in which pre-school age children participated in learning activities and their parents participated in educational opportunities that focused on child development, school readiness, and healthy parenting. It was found parents and children who participated in this program showed significant gains in 12 of 13 measures of parenting practices and child school readiness as compared with non-participants (NDSU Extension Service, 2010).

In summary, it is clear that the home environment influences a child's readiness for school and the role parents play in their child's development is critical to their school success. Young children develop language and literacy skills from birth to age 5 through experiences such as conversation, reading books, computers, and other everyday activities. Furthermore, young children are better prepared for school when their parents participate in parent education experiences that address children's health, development, and well-being (Halle et al., 2009).

The Transition to School

The transition to school is the process that occurs over time incorporating a variety of experiences, including maternal care and access to high quality early childcare (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Graue, 2006). A child's transition to school is understood in terms of the influence of contexts and connections among the family, school, and community over a given time (Pianta et al., 1999). A transition may also refer to a specific program that takes place before and/or after a child begins kindergarten (Dockett & Perry, 2001).

The transition to school is a landmark event for millions of children, families, and teachers (Pianta & Cox, 1999) as it sets the tone for a child's future academic success or failure (Pianta & Kraft-Sayer, 1999; Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005). The optimal transitions for children are practices that are individualized and engage the child, family, and preschool teachers prior to the first day of kindergarten (Early, Pianta, Taylor, & Cox, 2001). Several schools in the United States employ some type of transition practice to help ease children's transition to kindergarten (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000; Schulting et al., 2005). In fact, both The National Education Goals Panel (1998) and High/Scope Educational Research Foundation (2006) included the importance of transitions in their guidelines for a "ready school." Characteristics of a ready school will be shared later in this chapter.

The district where this study took place provides three opportunities for families to transition to kindergarten. The first transition event is Kindergarten Round-up, which takes place in the spring prior to the start of the school year. Parents can register their child for kindergarten, learn about the kindergarten program and learning expectations,

learn ways to help their child get ready for kindergarten, and meet the kindergarten teachers. Parents attend an information session while their child joins the kindergarten teachers for a classroom activity. According to Otto (2002) when parents are invited and encouraged to visit their child's school or classroom, they become more familiar with their child's teachers and learning expectations, thereby strengthening the home-school connection. The second transition event is Introduction-to-Kindergarten, which is a 4-hour day/4-week program occurring in the early summer prior to the start of kindergarten. This program provides opportunities for children to experience large and small group activities, practice following directions, and become familiar with school routines. The third transition event is a Back-to-School Open House, which takes place in the fall or start of the school year allowing families to meet their child's teacher and other school staff. Although these transition opportunities are provided at no cost to families, not all families attend due to scheduling conflicts, inadequate communication from schools, lack of transportation, or other reasons. Studies from North Carolina schools proposed the more transition activities children and their families experience prior to kindergarten, the better prepared they are for school (Praxis Research, 2007).

“Kindergarten, the first step on the academic ladder, represents an almost universal challenge for American children” (Pianta & Cox, 1999, p. 281). Transitions involve change and are usually stressful for young children and their families (Pianta & Cox, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Transitioning into kindergarten requires children to adjust to peers, new teachers, and new expectations (Maxwell & Eller, 1994; Pianta & Cox, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Children who experience a positive transition into kindergarten are likely to experience academic success and social

competence throughout school. Children who experience difficulties with the transition to school are more likely to struggle with “catching up” to their peers (LaParo, Kraft-Sayre, & Pianta, 2003). The psychological well-being of family members and organization of the home may be disrupted due to the stresses of economic hardship (Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010) and, therefore, the transition into kindergarten for economically disadvantaged children may be less than positive.

Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (1999) conducted a study in which approximately 90 parents shared their observations regarding their child’s transition to kindergarten. More than 50% of the parents viewed their child’s transition to school fairly smooth and about 38% mentioned a disruption to family life because of having to adjust to a new schedule and losing a playmate for a sibling. Some parents reported their child experienced emotional and/or behavioral difficulties during the transition and refused or were reluctant to attend school. Other parents mentioned poor communication with the school and expectations that were either too high or too low for their child. For instance, parents did not feel teachers were receptive or sympathetic to their child who experienced difficulties with behavior, academics, sleep, anxiety, and other home stressors the first several weeks of school. Approximately 53% of the parents responded positively about their child’s ability to transition and adjust to school. These parents were pleased with the benefits of their child’s pre-kindergarten experiences and the communication between the school and home. In a similar study, Pianta and LaParo (2003) surveyed more than 3,400 kindergarten teachers who reported that one-third of their students had difficulties adjusting to kindergarten—specifically with academic skills, following directions, maturity, social skills, and working in a group.

A more recent study conducted by Schulting et al. (2005) examined the relations between school transition practices and student outcomes in kindergarten. This study used the assessment data in the areas of reading, mathematics, and general knowledge from children who participated in the 1998-1999 Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten (ECLS-K). Parents of the participants reported their involvement in a range of activities and events over the course of the kindergarten years including a back-to-school open house, parent-teacher organization meetings, volunteerism, and classroom or school events. Two primary findings regarding transition policies and practices in schools were revealed from this study. First, kindergarten transition policies indeed have a positive effect on children’s academic achievement and parent involvement in the school. Second, economic status moderated the relation between transition practices and student achievement. In other words, the effect of transition practices on academic achievement was greater for children from low-income or middle-income families than for children from higher-income families. Children from more affluent backgrounds were more likely to demonstrate high academic achievement in kindergarten regardless of the transition practices at their school.

According to Kraft-Sayre and Pianta (2000), the interactionist approach is about developing social connections to support children and their families during the transition to school. These social connections include interactions between children and their teachers, children and their peers, parents and their children’s teachers, and preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers. Kraft-Sayre and Pianta offer a menu of activities that can be used as a tool when developing a transition plan for families (see Appendix A).

According to Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003), a successful transition to kindergarten is a key component for school readiness. Dockett and Perry (2002) identified eight components that positively affect a child's transition into kindergarten. These components are related to the five domains of early learning and development for school readiness and include (a) the ability to identify letters and numbers, (b) the ability to interact with other children and respond to the teacher, (c) the ability to perform skills such as tying shoes and holding a pencil, (d) a positive attitude toward school, (e) the ability to behave and follow rules, (f) is age eligible and in good physical health, (g) family engagement with the school, and (h) what actually takes place at school.

In summary, the research clearly reveals relationships between families, schools, and agencies within the community have a positive influence on how well children transition and adjust to school (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). In order to ensure the smoothest possible transition for young children starting kindergarten, specifically economically disadvantaged children, early childhood advocates may consider providing quality preschool programs and health services, improving connections between early childhood programs and elementary schools, and increasing communication between the home and school. Transition programs such as Kindergarten Round-up, Introduction-to-Kindergarten, and a Back-to-School Open House are valuable opportunities for parents to visit their child's school, meet their child's teachers, and share information about their child. Understanding parents' concerns and addressing them is a positive way to engage parents and establish strong home-school relationships from the very start (Reschly, 2008).

Interpretations of Kindergarten Readiness

What is the meaning of readiness and who determines the criteria for readiness—national policy, teachers and administrators in the school system, or the parents? The literature provides various interpretations of kindergarten readiness, most of which focuses on children's skills in reading, math, language, and general knowledge (Brooks-Gunn, Rouse, & McLanahan, 2005; Garber et al., 2007; Snow, 2006). For the purpose of this study, the critical definition of school readiness is the state of children as they enter school based on five domains of early learning and development including (a) language and literacy development, (b) cognition and general knowledge, (c) social and emotional development, (d) physical well-being and motor development, and (e) approaches to learning (Kagan et al., 1995). Additionally, readiness is the schools' capacity to effectively serve all kindergarteners (SERVE Institute, 2000).

Readiness may be determined by children's skills, behaviors, or characteristics in relation to the expectations of the teachers or schools (Ackerman & Barnett, 2006; Carlton & Winsler, 1999) such as following directions, completing tasks, managing their emotions, and getting along with peers (Ackerman & Barnett, 2006). However, because different schools have different expectations for readiness, a child with similar skills and needs may be considered ready in one school and not in another (Graue, 1993; Maxwell & Clifford, 2004). This idea of readiness aligns with the environmental theory, which focuses on the external evidence of learning and behaving appropriately—the skills children learn through the teaching environment (Pianta & Cox, 1999).

Lewitt and Baker (1995) defined readiness as the developmental level at which a child of any age is ready to assume the learning of specific skills and concepts. This notion

is supported by idealist theory meaning children are ready to learn when they are ready (Pianta & Cox, 1999). In other words, children have innate qualities that determine their maturity and level of development for school success or failure (Ilg, Ames, Haines, & Gillespie, 1978).

School readiness may be described as a product of experiences and interactions with people and environments prior to the start of school (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004; Pianta & LaParo, 2003). Children enter kindergarten with a wide range of prior knowledge and experiences including social skills, communication skills, parental influences, and early childhood programs (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Barnett & Yarosz, 2004; Maxwell & Eller, 1994; Pianta & Cox, 1999). This idea of readiness aligns with social constructivist theory meaning children are influenced by contextual factors rather than their individual characteristics (Pianta & Cox, 1999).

Weiss et al. (2009) attributed readiness and school success to rich early childhood experiences, effective schools, out-of-school programs, and nurturing families. Concurrently, school readiness may be described as a shared responsibility among parents, schools, and communities—a variety of stakeholders who bring their own values, beliefs, and perspectives regarding the educational process (Aiona, 2005; Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Harris, 2005). This notion is supported by the ecological view, which emphasizes the importance of positive relationships among the home, school, community, and peer group (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). According to Kagan (1992), the context where children live and interact within their families, schools, neighborhoods, and early childhood settings affects a their school readiness. Although parents, schools, and the community support

readiness and student learning, there is currently no rigorous research connecting these indicators to long-term outcomes (REL, 2010).

*Perceptions of Parents and Teachers
Regarding Kindergarten Readiness*

While school readiness has been defined or interpreted in many different ways, few studies have investigated the perceptions of parents regarding this topic (McAllister et al., 2005; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999). McAllister et al. conducted a qualitative study to explore the perceptions and experiences of 150 low-income families regarding their children's school readiness. Primary caregivers with incomes below the federal poverty income level and predominantly African American were interviewed and asked to discuss (a) how they think children learn, (b) what they think school readiness means, (c) how they think starting school would be for their child, (d) what their role as a parent is to help their child transition into kindergarten, and (e) how the community and policies affect school readiness. It was found that parents talked more about their role at home regarding their child's education and rarely about their involvement in their child's school. Parents viewed social skills and emotional health as important factors for their child transitioning into kindergarten. Many parents believed it was important to talk with their child about school. Parents felt overburdened and expressed a need for their own social and emotional support—often mentioning the support they received from friends and relatives, especially when helping their child with homework and other school-related activities. In addition to extended family, parents relied on programs such as Head Start and other support systems to help prepare their child for kindergarten.

Pyle, Bates, Greif, and Furlong (2005) surveyed parents on their perceptions of their child's school readiness, their knowledge of the educational system, and their own

comfort level of interacting with school personnel and accessing school services. The findings of this study indicated children experienced greater success in school when positive relationships were established between the parent and the school and when parents were involved in their child's education.

According to Seligman (2000), parents' attitudes about their own school experiences influenced their child's attitudes about school. In other words, parents who share their negative feelings about teachers or school can affect their child's success in school—however, the mindset of these parents may be adjusted as their child has positive experiences in school (Olsen & Fuller, 2012).

A study conducted by the PNC Financial Services Group, Inc. (2007) confirmed the differing perceptions parents and teachers had regarding readiness skill development upon kindergarten entry. From a population of 1,001 parents with children age 8 or younger and 516 teachers, pre-kindergarten through Grade 3, close to 80% of the parents believed their own children were socially prepared for kindergarten while only 15% of the kindergarten teachers agreed. Furthermore, about 70% of the parents believed their own children were academically prepared for kindergarten and about 20% of the teachers agreed. Academic skills included identifying and sorting objects, recognizing common words or signs, recognizing numbers and basic counting, and, reading and writing letters of the alphabet. Overall, only 25% of the parents portrayed children as prepared for kindergarten as compared to 7% of the teachers.

Piotrowski et al. (2000) compared the beliefs of preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, and low-income parents regarding school readiness, specifically what children should know and be able to do before starting kindergarten. The overall findings

indicated parents placed more emphasis on academic readiness skills such as knowing letters and numbers while teachers placed a greater emphasis on behavioral skills such as listening and sitting still. It was also found parents and teachers agreed children should be healthy, socially competent, and able to follow directions before starting kindergarten. Concurrently, in a longitudinal study conducted by Lin, Lawrence, and Gorrell (2003), a group of 3,305 kindergarten teachers who taught during the 1998-1999 school year shared their perceptions of school readiness. The results revealed those teachers' valued children's social aspects of learning more than the academic skills and the readiness expectations were influenced by the child's age, gender, and geographic region.

Overall, parents viewed their child as academically and socially prepared for kindergarten based on their role at home or their child's participation in a preschool program. Teachers viewed students as less prepared academically and socially when they started kindergarten and valued behavior skills over academics skills. Perhaps the variance in parent and teacher perceptions is due to the parents' unawareness of the kindergarten curriculum and expectations.

Assessing Kindergarten Readiness

Although kindergarten readiness is viewed as critical for a child's academic success, the definitions of readiness are inconsistent (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005). By providing a definition of readiness, it may be assumed that children need to have specific skills before entering kindergarten (Aiona, 2005; Piotrkowski et al., 2000; REL, 2010) and yet the research does not provide clear answers about the competencies necessary for school readiness (REL, 2010). Aiona (2005) noted in a society and profession driven by

assessments and results, stakeholders need to articulate an agreed upon definition of readiness and develop assessments accordingly.

It is common for educators to formally assess children's skills and knowledge to determine their readiness status prior to the start of kindergarten (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Msyzak & Conn-Powers, 2008). As a result of the early education movement in the United States, researchers were concerned that the increased emphasis on students entering school needing a certain set of skills and knowledge would result in assessments that determined kindergarten entry (Kagan et al., 1995; Meisels, 1999; Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz, 1998; Shore, 1998). Some may argue that 4-year old children should not be subjected to high stakes assessments (Lazarus & Ortega, 2007). According to Bodrova, Leong, and Shore (2004), children ages 3 and 4 are just beginning to make sense of their worlds and have not yet developed the strategies for processing, remembering, and problem solving. Preschool screenings, however, are typically brief and merely used to guide instruction (Phaneuf & Silbergitt, 2003).

The National Education Goals Panel identified four purposes for assessing children's school readiness including (a) promoting children's learning and development to guide instruction (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Aiona, 2005; Maxwell & Clifford, 2004), (b) identifying children who may need health or other special services, (c) evaluating programs and services, and (d) assessing academic growth (Emig, 2000). Even though young children develop at different rates and enter kindergarten with various backgrounds and early experiences (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005), universal assessment procedures should be used for all children (Snow, 2006). Furthermore, assessments should be age appropriate (Emig, 2000), based on multiple

sources of information to determine readiness such as parent and teacher information (Halle et al., 2000; Pyle, 2002; SERVE Institute, 2000), used to identify a child's strengths and areas of weaknesses (Lazarus & Ortega, 2007), and administered by several people rather than just one person (Pyle, 2002). Unfortunately, readiness assessments can be misused (Shepard, Taylor, & Kagen, 1996) by labeling a child prematurely or inaccurately (Halle et al., 2000). Within the district where this study took place, screenings are held to identify children between the ages of 3 and 5 who have a disability that may affect their school performance when they enter kindergarten. Screenings are based on referrals due to concerns about a child's development in speech, language, cognition, social-emotional, general development, fine/gross motor skills, vision, and hearing. Screenings used to identify disabilities should not be used to determine a child's readiness for school (Meisels, 1986).

Pianta and La Para (2003) conducted a longitudinal study of more than 3,000 children to determine how well assessments predicted their social and academic competence during the transition from preschool to kindergarten and from kindergarten to first and second grade. The overall findings revealed readiness assessments predicted only about 20% of the variability in children's academic performance in school and 10% of their social performance. Pianta and La Para concluded assessment results offer little support for testing preschool age children to predict school readiness and success.

According to Pianta and Cox (1999), the most common preschool assessments include the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills, California Achievement Test, and the Stanford Early Achievement Test. The assessment used by the school district where this study takes place is comprised of the knowledge and skills expected by the end of

kindergarten (see Appendix B). Kindergarten teachers used this assessment at the beginning of the school year to obtain baseline data for guiding their instruction. The same assessment is used to check children's progress at the middle and end of the kindergarten year.

The Age Factor

For some parents, their child's chronological age may determine readiness for kindergarten. In fact, most state laws require children to reach the age of 5 before enrolling in kindergarten—the most common dates falling in September (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005). This study takes place in a state that requires children to reach their fifth birthday on or before midnight of July 31. Children who do not meet this age requirement for kindergarten can apply for early entrance.

In earlier studies, it was found the entry age does not matter for children's academic progress and well-being. Younger children make just as much progress as their older classmates in earlier grades (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Fertig & Kluve, 2005; Gredler, 1980) and, therefore, age is a weak predictor of readiness (Aiona, 2005). Regardless of the age factor, children develop at different rates and a wide range of abilities is represented in every kindergarten classroom (Aiona, 2005; Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Stipek, 2003). Children's experiences prior to the start of school influence their school readiness at the start of school and their academic performance and progress in school. For the purpose of this study, five low-income parents talked about the experiences that helped prepare their child for kindergarten. Parents may have presumed their child was ready for kindergarten based solely on the age factor rather than their child's experiences.

Retention

In 1925, Arnold Gesell coined the idea of giving children the “gift of time” to develop before they started kindergarten (Kagen & Rigby, 2003). In earlier studies, teachers reported the child’s developmental age determined school readiness and the “unready” child needed more time to develop before participating in structured learning (Smith & Shepard, 1988).

Despite the age eligibility for school entry parents may decide to keep their child home or in preschool an extra year to ensure kindergarten readiness. Children may also repeat kindergarten or other grades if they have not met grade-level expectations (David, 2008). However, grade retention as an intervention has proven to be ineffective as well as harmful to low performing students (Lazarus & Ortega, 2007). Children retained are at greater risk of struggling socially, having poor attendance, having a negative attitude toward school (Bowman, 2003), and dropping out of school (Bowman, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Evidence shows children recommended for retention but promoted anyway score just as well on achievement tests as their classmates (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Jimerson, 2001; Stipek, 2002).

For the purpose of this study, it is important to learn how to improve young children’s readiness for kindergarten so there is less chance for grade retention and school failure. If a child is retained, the school must offer specific interventions and additional support for the child rather than provide the same instructional program the child has already experienced (MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010). To avoid retention or school failure, educators must understand why students are falling behind and provide intensive interventions and extra support to help them to reach a level of proficiency

(David, 2008; Fielding et al., 2004). Educators may consider remedial programs such as summer school and before and after school programming.

In summary, there is not just one but several interpretations of school readiness. Readiness is a broad concept comprised of schools, families, children, and their experiences prior to kindergarten. Despite the various views of readiness, there is consensus the skills children have when entering kindergarten are highly correlated with later skills relating to school success (Snow, 2006). Although children are required to meet specific age criteria upon entering kindergarten, age and retention does not determine a child's school readiness or school success. Because each child is unique and develops at different rates and because each school has different expectations for kindergarten, no assessment can effectively measure a child's school readiness. Early childhood stakeholders may consider constructing a definition of readiness and develop assessments accordingly.

The Kindergarten Learning Gap and Low-Income Status

Several young children enter school with low skill levels and motivation and are at risk for academic difficulties. There seems to be little doubt there is a significant mismatch between what many children bring to their first school experience and what schools expect of them in order to succeed.

Some children are not ready for school and some schools are not ready for children, consequently causing a learning gap and placing the low performers at risk of school failure. Some children make only 4 years of growth in their first 5 years of life, starting kindergarten a year behind; others make 3 years of growth, starting kindergarten 2 years behind; and others make 2 years of pre-literacy and language growth and start

kindergarten 3 years behind (Fielding, 2006). To determine this learning gap, four measures of ability predicted whether children entering kindergarten would read at or above grade level by the end of third grade—including alphabet letter and sound recognition, phonemic awareness, and the ability to print their first name (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

According to McCall, Hauser, Cronin, Kingsbury, and Houser (2006), the achievement gap is commonly defined as the difference between the academic performance of low-income and minority students and their wealthier and non-minority peers. McCall et al. reported efforts to close the achievement gap may relate to the civil rights movement for which equal access to education played a significant role. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act consists of specific goals and timelines for all students to reach a level of proficiency. This law has caused districts and schools to focus their services on low-income and minority students and yet NCLB has not decreased the gap (Lee, 2006). Findings from the Northwest Evaluation Association indicated that, “virtually the entire gap in language achievement and almost 70% of the gap in math are created before the beginning of second grade and most likely between birth and kindergarten” (Fielding, 2006, p. 32).

Evidence shows economically disadvantaged children who do not have early and positive transitions to school have significant delays in language and basic academic skills. These children are likely to start kindergarten 2 to 3 years behind their peers, causing challenges for teachers, school districts, and the children themselves (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). Ramey and Ramey further noted that although children from low-income families are ready to learn and able to progress at a normal rate, the time it takes for

catch-up growth may not be sufficient in closing the achievement gap. In concurrence, Whitehurst and Lonigan (2002) acknowledged children who enter kindergarten with limited literacy and language skills rarely catch up to grade level expectations and are at risk for special education services.

Researchers Zill and Collins (1995) identified five risk factors associated with children's school readiness including (a) the family lives in poverty, (b) the mother did not graduate from high school, (c) English is not the mother's primary language, (d) the mother is a single parent, and (e) only one parent lives in the home. Haskins and Rouse (2005) identified two additional factors that contribute to the learning gap among low-income children. First, the preschool environments of the low-income population may be deficient in providing the types of experiences that promote school readiness. Second, there are few programs for parents to learn how to promote child development and teach school readiness skills in the home, both intellectual and behavioral.

Families living in low-income environments face other obstacles that result in children being less prepared for kindergarten and at risk for school failure (Leseman, 2002). These obstacles include atypical work schedules, lack of childcare, time restraints, overwhelming family responsibilities, transportation issues, ethnicity, race, and language (Lott, 2001). Additionally, low-income families are less able to afford stable housing and move more often causing their children to change schools and miss school (Rothstein, 2004). Low-income parents may be negatively characterized as lazy, irresponsible or uninterested in their children's education when, in fact; they may be challenged to meet their basic needs on limited resources (Seccombe, 1999).

Although low-income families might face several barriers that inhibit learning, they are like affluent families in several ways. Low-income parents hold the same attitudes about education as wealthy parents (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Davies, 1993; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Results from the 2003 National Survey of Children's Health found that families, regardless of socioeconomic status, valued parent-child relationships, took their children on outings such as the park, church, and restaurants, and felt their child was safe at home or at school. The only slight difference was low-income families were more likely to eat meals together than higher-income families (Valladares & Moore, 2009).

Payne (1996) described the unspoken cues and habits of a group as “hidden rules”—rules that arise from the environment or culture in which a person lives. For example, for people living in poverty, money is to be spent; for people living in middle-class, money is to be managed; and, for wealthy people, money is to be conserved or invested. Although schools represent a predominantly middle-class culture, Payne noted educators need to understand the hidden rules of their low-income students and recognize the value of relationships. In 2008, Fass and Cauthen (2008) reported over 13 million American children lived in families with incomes below the federal poverty level and this number increased by 15% between 2000 and 2007. According to a report by the Congressional Budget Office, the gap between the working and middle class Americans and wealthiest Americans has more than tripled in the past three decades (Sherman & Stone, 2010). Consequently, there are more young children living in poverty today than 30 years ago. According to Payne (1996), people of all races and in all countries are living in poverty—and, education and relationships are the two things that move people out of poverty.

The Early Childhood Education Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K) cohort sampled approximately 21,000 predominantly African American and Hispanic kindergarteners and found that economically disadvantaged children scored significantly lower on an IQ test than their more advantaged peers at the beginning of kindergarten (Halle et al., 2009; Haskins & Rouse, 2005). As a result, low-income status is highly correlated with race and ethnic minority status (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005). Halle et al. (2009) examined multiple socio-demographic characteristics that may be associated with developmental disparities in achievement among children within their first 2 years of life. The disparities in cognitive development, health, and social-emotional development of children living in poverty were compared to the same areas of development of children living in higher income environments. It was found low-income and low maternal education were the more common risk factors for young children than race and ethnicity; however, no explanation for these identified characteristics were provided in the study. One may infer that children living in low-income environments and whose mothers have limited education are less likely to receive high quality experiences and interventions prior to the start of kindergarten.

The NIEER report revealed a significant school readiness gap between low-income families and higher income families and therefore, socioeconomic status determines the readiness of children entering kindergarten (Barnett et al., 2010). The results of this report indicated fewer children from low-income families were enrolled in pre-kindergarten programs than their more advantaged counterparts. Schulting et al. (2005) examined the effects of kindergarten transition and practices on student outcomes. This study involved 17,212 children from 992 schools in the Early Childhood

Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K) cohort. Prior to kindergarten entry, it was found children from high-income families scored 60% higher on cognitive assessments than children from low-income families. It was also found economically disadvantaged children who attended a preschool program performed higher achievement levels than their peers who did not attend preschool. Additionally, children from low-income families scored below average in reading, math, and general knowledge as well as lower levels of social competence.

Kober (2001) claimed the achievement gap is a result of the school rather than the differences in children's innate ability to learn. School factors contributing to the learning gap include limited participation of minority students in rigorous courses, watered down instruction, teachers with lower expectations and fewer qualifications, a school climate that is less than conducive to learning, student performance anxiety, negative peer pressure, and disparities in high quality preschool experiences. Kober further noted societal, community, and home factors also contribute to the learning gap, including effects of poverty, discrimination, limited learning supports in homes and communities, and access to parent education.

Closing the Kindergarten Learning Gap

Research shows that a child's early nurturing and learning experiences prior to entering kindergarten lay the foundation for success in school and in life (Pavelchek, 2005). Pavelchek noted that closing the preparation gap that exists before children enter kindergarten is key to eliminating the academic achievement gap in schools. In concurrence, Ramey and Ramey (2004) claimed in order to prevent children from failing in school, it is imperative they are provided effective learning opportunities before they

begin kindergarten. Haskins and Rouse (2005) proposed that high-quality preschool programs are provided for all low-income families—programs comprised of well-qualified teachers and systematic readiness activities that develop reading, math, and social-emotional skills. Not all children receive the same quality of preschool experiences from birth through age 5 (Dowker, Schweinhart, & Daniel-Echols, 2007; Meisels, 1992; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1990; Shepard & Smith, 1986). Therefore, policy makers should consider quality pre-kindergarten programs for all children to develop the pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills necessary for school success (Lazarus & Ortega, 2007; Obama & Biden, 2010).

The ideal approach to closing the learning gap in kindergarten is to have all children participate in quality preschool programs prior to kindergarten entry; however, even if preschool programs are available some parents choose not to participate. Because many children begin kindergarten without participating in a pre-kindergarten program, it is the school's responsibility to meet their learning needs (Aiona, 2005; Lee & Burkham, 2002; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995). Teachers are responsible for providing high-quality instruction and interventions that align with their students' needs, monitoring their progress frequently, and using the student response data to make instructional and educational decisions—this is known as Response-to-Intervention (RTI) (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009). RTI has gained greater attention as an intervention model that provides students learning experiences at various levels of intensity through whole group, small group, and individual instruction (VanDerHeyden, Snyder, Broussard, & Ramsdell, 2007). The RTI model allows teachers the opportunity to help students reach a level of proficiency and therefore, help to close the academic

achievement gap. RTI is a means to help identify and support preschool age children who may be at risk for developing learning difficulties and yet the model has not been widely implemented in early education settings (VanDerHeyden & Snyder, 2006).

In summary, economic status contributes to the student achievement or learning gap found in kindergarten as low-income families face various obstacles. School readiness must account for children's individual differences, rate of learning, and varied pre-kindergarten experiences (Dowker et al., 2007; Rafoth, Buchenauer, Crissman, & Halko, 2004). In order to address the learning gap that may emerge during the preschool period of ages 0 to 5, early childhood initiatives need to address the potential disparities at the youngest age and provide effective interventions (Halle et al., 2009).

Early Childcare and Education

School readiness may be reliant on a child's participation in an early childhood setting such as preschool or home daycare. Children who attend pre-kindergarten programs may be more comfortable and better prepared to handle school than their peers who did not have the same experiences. Quality early childcare and preschool programs have proven to enhance children's cognitive, and social-emotional development, particularly for low-income and minority children (Brown & Scott-Little, 2003; Kagan & Neuman, 1997; Lee, Brooks-Gunn, Schnur, & Liaw, 1991). Unfortunately, the children least likely to attend preschool programs are those whose parents have the lowest income, the least education, and do not work outside the home (Barnett & Yarosz, 2004).

The 2002 National Survey of America's Families examined the differences of primary care among children of working mothers in low-income and high-income environments (Capizzano & Adams, 2003). It was found children ages 3 to 4 living in

low-income environments are more likely to be cared for by relatives, whereas children in high-income families are more likely to be placed in center-based programs including preschool, nursery school, and childcare centers. These findings are relevant as well as important to this study for two reasons. First, evidence supports the fact quality center-based programs improve kindergarten readiness. Second, it is likely low-income families choose care from relatives because it is free or inexpensive (Capizzano & Adams, 2003). A more recent study found there was a greater emphasis on play, independent activities, small group activities, and hands-on activities in home-based programs than in public and private programs (Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Daugherty, Howes, & Karoly, 2009).

According to Poppe and Clothier (2005), there is a significant gap between children who have attended preschool prior to kindergarten and those who have not. According to The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), 40 states provided pre-kindergarten programs during the 2009-2010 school year (Barnett et al., 2010) as compared to only 10 states in 1980 (Poppe & Clothier, 2005). With a few exceptions, the state-funded pre-kindergarten programs served mostly children 4 years of age. All state programs share the goals of improving children's learning and development but learning standards may vary. The state in which this study takes place currently has no state funded preschool program other than Head Start, which serves approximately 3,000 children statewide (North Dakota Head Start Association, 2011).

Children who participate in high-quality preschool programs and receive early, well-designed child-focused interventions are more cognitively advanced than children who do not participate (Bates et al., 2006; Bridges, Fuller, Rumberger, & Tran, 2004; Haskins & Rouse, 2005; McLanahan, 2005; Stebbins & Knitzer, 2007). However, high-

quality learning experiences during preschool years may not ensure children's academic success in school if not followed up with high-quality instruction in the primary grades (National Research Council, 1999). The National Research Council stated, "enriched preschool environments and excellent primary grade instruction can be a deciding factor between success or failure" (p. 14) that follows the most at-risk children all their lives. Although teachers with an early childhood bachelor's degree provide higher quality-learning experiences for children (Howes, 1997; Poppe & Clothier, 2005) the credential requirements for pre-kindergarten teachers vary among states (Poppe & Clothier, 2005).

Quality preschool programs include (a) health and safety practices, (b) caregivers that provide developmentally appropriate and stimulating curriculum and experiences, (c) appropriate staff-child ratios, (d) services that support families (Poppe & Clothier, 2005; Vandell, & Wolfe, 2000), (e) professional staff training, and (f) compensation of caregivers (Vandell, & Wolfe, 2000). Research substantiates the idea that children who attend high-quality preschool programs have greater academic success upon entry into kindergarten, are more committed to school, and are more likely to graduate from high school than children who do not attend (Frede, Jung, Barnett, Lamy, & Figueras, 2007; Gormly, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2005). In a study conducted by Lazarus and Ortega (2007), children who participated in state funded pre-kindergarten programs made an 85% growth in print awareness and 44% gain in math scores when compared to children who did not participate. Furthermore, attending preschool decreases the likelihood of children being retained or referred to special education (Campbell & Ramey, 1995).

According to Ramey and Ramey (2004), children who are economically disadvantaged benefit from developmentally appropriate learning experiences in order to

gain the cognitive and linguistic skills needed for kindergarten. Unfortunately, children from low-income families, especially those living in poverty and whose parents have the least education, are less likely to be placed in center-based programs such as preschool, and childcare centers where basic readiness skills are enhanced (Barnett & Yarosz, 2004). Furthermore, not all preschool environments of low-income children are high quality and provide children with the experiences that promote school readiness (Haskins & Rouse, 2005; Ramey & Ramey, 2004) such as the five domains of early learning and development. Some preschool programs may not provide the professional development needed for their teachers to ensure high-quality learning for all students and support needed for parents to help their children.

Providing opportunities for children to receive readiness skills in high quality settings is one way to better prepare children for kindergarten (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson (2002), which has proven to be a cost-effective approach by producing far greater gains for society (Barnet, 1985). Investing in quality early childhood education is justified by evidence preschool programs can improve school readiness, improve graduation rates, increase adult earnings, and lower crime rates (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001). The need to invest in early learning programs for children is recognized by the Obama administration as only 40% of 4-year-olds in the United States are currently enrolled in preschool programs. Federal grants are available for states to develop early learning programs for low-income and disadvantaged children (United States Health and Human Services, 2011). However, state-funded preschool programs do not require all preschool age children to attend. The state where this study takes place does not provided state-funded preschool.

Head Start

Head Start is a government funded program that prepares economically disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-old children for kindergarten through the provision of educational, social, nutritional, health, and other family services (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Unfortunately, many families are unable to enroll their child in Head Start due to limited space as eligibility is based on income and a first-come first-served basis until slots are filled.

In summary, children who enter school less prepared due to a lack of preschool experience may develop long-lasting negative self-esteem; may not receive the extra help they need during kindergarten; may experience negative relationships with peers; and, take valuable teacher time away from the children who are ready (Gulino, 2008).

By providing all children quality pre-kindergarten programs with developmentally appropriate instruction, schools can ensure greater levels of kindergarten readiness (Lazarus & Ortega, 2007; Obama & Biden, 2010). However, preschool is not an option for some families—parents may not have the interest or financial means to place their child in a preschool program; their child may not participate in Head Start due to limited space; or, state-funded preschool may not exist. Regardless of socioeconomic status and whether or not children attend a preschool program prior to kindergarten entry, some will be ready and some will not.

Characteristics of a “Ready School”

The pronouncement “Ready or not, here they come!” may suggest whether or not the school is ready for all children. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (1995) stated that it is the “responsibility of schools to meet the needs of

children as they enter school and to provide whatever services are needed in the least restrictive environment to help each child reach his or her fullest potential” (p. 1). In concurrence, rather than placing the responsibility of readiness on the child and the parents, it is the schools that should be prepared to receive all children (Aiona, 2005; Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Kagen & Rigby, 2003; Lee & Burkham, 2002; Reschly, 2008; Stipek, 2002) including those with diverse backgrounds, learning styles, and readiness levels (Dowker et al., 2007; Grace & Brandt, 2005).

A child’s academic success is influenced by the school’s readiness to educate the child (Rafoth et al., 2004) and the schools should receive support from society (Lewitt & Baker, 1995). A ready school has a curriculum that addresses the five critical areas of development and learning including approaches to learning, health and physical development, social and emotional development, cognition and general knowledge, and communication and language development (SERVE Institute, 2000).

According to the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation (2006), “the concept of school readiness must align with the best of early childhood practices and elementary education in ways that build upon the strengths of each and focus equally on child outcomes, adult behaviors, and institutional characteristics” (p. 1). The High/School Educational Research Foundation identified the following eight key dimensions of a “ready school”:

1. *Leadership*: The principal and teachers communicate a clear vision for the school—one that is committed to the success of every child. Teachers participate in professional development and implement effective strategies for a ready school.

2. *Transitions:* Teachers, staff and parent groups work with incoming children and their families as well as preschool teachers and caregivers to ease the transition to school.
3. *Teacher supports:* Teachers from feeder early childhood programs collaborate work with the K-3 staff to maximize the support for children during the school day. The communication between preschool programs and elementary schools is one way to ensure a smooth transition for children entering kindergarten (McGann & Clark, 2007).
4. *Engaging environments:* The school's environment is warm, nurturing, and inviting. Children are actively engaged in a variety of learning activities that address the five domains of early learning and development including (a) language and literacy development, (b) cognition and general knowledge, (c) social and emotional development, (d) physical well-being and motor development, and (e) approaches to learning (Kagan et al., 1995).
5. *Effective curriculum:* Teachers employ effective educational materials and methods that help all children achieve academic success.
6. *Assessment:* Teachers and staff engage in school improvement strategies that evolve from classroom assessments and children's progress.
7. *Family, school, and community partnerships:* Teachers provide opportunities for families to foster their children's learning both at home and at school.
8. *Respect for diversity:* Classroom activities provide accurate and respectful information regarding cultural backgrounds and experiences. Teachers have

high expectations for each child's ability to learn regardless of socioeconomic or cultural background.

The National Education Goals Panel (1998) identified similar characteristics of a "ready school" with two additional elements to support the learning and development of young children. One element is to strive for continuity between early childcare and elementary school programs. The second element is to ensure families have access to services and supports within the community (e.g., health care, nutrition, family services).

"Ready Teachers"

Within a ready school, there are "ready teachers." Ready teachers have the knowledge of children's growth and development; the knowledge of each child's strengths, interests, and needs; and, the knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which each child and family lives (SERVE Institute, 2000). Ready teachers use differentiated instruction to meet the academic needs of all students (Condrón, 2009). Condrón further noted that ready teachers inspire their students to learn through curiosity, exploration, and enthusiasm.

One of the most critical variables of a high-quality preschool is teacher education and training (Espinosa, 2002). According to Fuller (1994), education in American schools is designed for middle class children. Teacher preparation programs and professional development opportunities are crucial in the education of low-income and culturally diverse students (Landry, Swank, Smith, Assel, & Gunnewig, 2006).

Teacher education students may benefit from opportunities to tutor children within cultural contexts that are not primarily White and middle-class so they develop an increased awareness of culture, knowledge of a context different from their own, and

awareness of their own stereotypes (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000). Supporting this notion, Xu and Hong (2000) reported the more knowledgeable teachers are about their students' cultures the less threatened and acceptable they become of these cultural differences.

In summary, ready schools influence school readiness. A ready school is comprised of ready teachers, a ready curriculum, ready administrators, ready families, a ready school environment, and a ready community (SERVE Institute, 2000). "A ready school is a comprehensive vision of what a school can do to ensure that all children who enter its doors will fulfill their potential as learners . . ." (Dowker et al., 2007, p. 1).

Description of the Next Chapter

Chapter III includes an explanation of the methods for this qualitative study. The chapter includes a description of the research design, research procedures, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODS

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this small-scale qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of five low-income parents regarding their child's readiness for kindergarten. This study has the potential to help early childhood advocates and other stakeholders (a) understand how low-income influences school readiness, (b) understand the aspirations low-income parents have for their children, (c) discover ways to improve the transition to school for economically disadvantaged children, (d) prepare to receive children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and (e) engage parents in a more equitable manner—ultimately helping all children have a positive start in kindergarten.

The rationale for selecting low-income parents for this study was threefold. First, the perceptions of low-income parents regarding kindergarten readiness will offer insight into the beginning of the learning gap that is pervasive in so many schools (Haskins & Rouse, 2005). Second, it is the economically disadvantaged children who are most at risk of school failure (Piotrkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2000). Evidence shows economically disadvantaged children who do not have early positive transitions to school have significant delays in language and basic academic skills. These children are likely to start kindergarten 2 to 3 years behind their peers, causing challenges for teachers, school districts, and the children themselves (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). Third, it is the parents who often make the determination of whether or not their child is ready for

kindergarten—their perceptions of kindergarten readiness were important, relevant, and timely for the purpose of this study.

Parents' perceptions regarding education and school readiness may shape the way they prepare their child for kindergarten—these perceptions may inform educational practice, policy, and research as well as help to decrease the learning gap in kindergarten. If schools are to communicate effectively with all parents regarding their children's transition to school, it is essential their voices be heard (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999). Information collected from this study adds to the existing research on school readiness as a means to improve education for young children.

Emerging theory from this research reflects the differences between parents' perceptions and the schools' views regarding school readiness. The theory supports a new definition of kindergarten readiness comprised of ready schools, ready parents, and ready children. The new definition has the potential to be recognized by early childhood advocates at a local, state, and national level and serve as a resource to clarify the meaning of kindergarten readiness, thereby enhancing early childhood programs.

Research Questions

This study focused on the perceptions of low-income parents regarding kindergarten readiness. The questions guiding this study are:

1. What are low-income parents' perceptions of readiness for school?
2. What home experiences do low-income parents perceive as contributing to school readiness?
3. To what extent do low-income parents perceive their influence on their child's school readiness?

4. What do low-income parents perceive as barriers to their child's school readiness or transition to kindergarten?

Research Design

For this study, I gathered data through semi-structured individual interviews with five low-income parents regarding their perceptions of kindergarten readiness. In order to understand the research and subsequent findings I used grounded theory data analysis. The goal of the grounded theory approach is to generate theory that explains, at a broad conceptual level, a process, an action, or interaction about a topic (Creswell, 2008)—and, for this study the goal was to generate theory that explains the perception of low-income parents regarding school readiness.

Qualitative research uncovers the views of participants in the study, involves the collection of data consisting mostly of words, and is conducted in a subjective manner (Creswell, 2008). One advantage of qualitative interviews is that they give the interviewer [me] considerable latitude to address a range of topics and allow the participants an opportunity to shape the content of the interview (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). A disadvantage of one-on-one interviews is some participants may not feel comfortable sharing information about themselves in my presence (Creswell, 2008). For this study, I made every attempt to make the parents feel comfortable about sharing their perspectives by engaging them in a conversation prior to their interview. I introduced myself as a graduate student conducting research and made the effort to dress in a casual attire so as not to cause feelings of intimidation or reveal differences in social status.

This study lent itself well to qualitative methods because the purpose was to understand the meaning of kindergarten readiness from the perspective of parents living

in low-income environments. Furthermore, a qualitative approach suited my experiences and abilities as well as my creative nature.

Research Procedures

I prepared an advertisement flyer that included a brief explanation of the study along with information and a time line for contacting me (see Appendix C). The flyer was simple in design and devoid of intimidating and unnecessary jargon. For instance, the word “project” was used in place of research study; the word “talk” in place of interview; and the words “getting ready for kindergarten” in place of kindergarten readiness.

Four months prior to the start of kindergarten, the advertisement flyers were mailed to all parents whose oldest child was on the Head Start waiting list and eligible to start kindergarten (Appendix C). Permission to interview these subjects was granted by the Head Start Director and Assistant Superintendent of schools where the study took place. A copy of the request to conduct research was included with the flyer (Appendix D). The Head Start director provided me with a list of parents whose oldest child was age 4-5, on the Head Start waiting list, and starting kindergarten the upcoming school year. Parents of children attending the school where I served as the principal were excluded from the study.

Parents interested in participating in the study were asked to contact me by phone or email within the time period indicated on the flyer. Within this time frame, only one of the 18 parents contacted me so I scheduled an interview with this parent. To obtain the proposed number of participants for the study [five or six], I recruited four additional parents for individual interviews. From a numbered list of the remaining parents’ names, I randomly selected four parents by drawing numbers from a container. The numbers

drawn corresponded with the numbers on the list and identified the participants. As each name was drawn, I made a phone contact. If a parent's phone was disconnected or the parent was not interested in participating in the study, another parent was called. If the selected parents were interested in participating in the study, an interview was scheduled at a time and place of the participant's choosing. The recruiting process continued until four additional parents were scheduled for an individual interview. All five participants were mothers. Although I was open to interviewing fathers, no fathers requested to participate in the study or were randomly selected for recruitment. Perhaps mothers worked with their children on readiness skills more than fathers. Or, perhaps more single mothers of children were on the Head Start waiting list than single fathers. In relation to school readiness, the literature focused more on mothers than fathers.

In order to avoid interruptions during the interviews, I offered to make childcare arrangements; however, the selected participants did not request this assistance. I called each participant to confirm the time and place of their scheduled interview and gave them the opportunity to ask questions about the study. Following the interview process, I gave each participant a collection of learning tools for their preschooler and a \$25.00 stipend as a token of appreciation for their time.

Participants

Parents

The parents' perceptions were part of the reality I was trying to understand (Maxwell, 1992; Menzel, 1978). In efforts to better understand the perceptions of low-income parents regarding school readiness, I conducted semi-structured individual interviews with five low-income parents. These parents had a child age 4-5 who was the

oldest child in the family, on the Head Start waiting list, and eligible to start kindergarten. To clarify, the parents' children did not attend Head Start due to limited space and, therefore, had no Head Start or other formal preschool experience before attending kindergarten. Children of two parents participated in a home daycare setting for an average of 1 year. Participants were single mothers whose annual income ranged from \$0 to \$19,200 falling below the 200% level of the federal poverty threshold (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). One parent worked full time, another worked part-time, and the other three did not work outside the home.

The rationale for selecting low-income parents for study was threefold. First, the perceptions of low-income parents regarding kindergarten readiness will offer insight into the beginning of the learning gap that is pervasive in so many schools (Haskins & Rouse, 2005). Second, it is the economically disadvantaged children who are most at risk for school failure (Piotrkowski et al., 2000). Third, it is the parents who often make the determination of whether or not their child is "ready" for kindergarten and their perceptions on kindergarten readiness were important, relevant, and timely for the purpose of this study.

The participants for this study lived in a Midwest rural community comprised of 1 Head Start program, 11 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, and 2 high schools. Approximately 3,100 students, Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 5, were enrolled in the school district and demographically included 81% Caucasian, 7.8% Native American, 4.7% Hispanic, 4.7% African American, 1.6% Asian, and .2% Pacific Islander. More information about the parent participants is outlined below (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Parent Participant Information.

| Participant | Gender | Marital Status | Family Size | Income | Race | Interview Location |
|-------------|--------|----------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Parent A | Female | Single | 3 | \$0.00 | Native American | Home |
| Parent B | Female | Single | 2 | \$21,840.00 | Caucasian | Home |
| Parent C | Female | Single | 4 | \$19,200.00 | Caucasian | Home |
| Parent D | Female | Single | 3 | \$27,655.00 | Caucasian | Workplace |
| Parent E | Female | Single | 2 | \$7,644.00 | Caucasian | Phone Interview |

This study provided parents the opportunity to talk about what it means to get their child ready for kindergarten. The parents’ perceptions provided insights as to how educators can help make the transition to school a smooth and more successful process for all families regardless of economic status. Although the research reveals a correlation between lower economic status with struggles in school and in life (Payne, 1996), I did not assume the participants faced such challenges. Economically disadvantaged parents may have provided insights about how they are more “advantaged” than families with a higher economic status. For instance, low-income parents may be able to manage everyday needs with fewer resources.

Data Collection

For this study, I used individual interviews with five low-income parents as the main source of data. I also used observations or field notes to point out possible areas to either verify or refute what was said during the interviews. For instance, the home environment might provide evidence to support a parent’s comment about their child having access to several books in the home.

Interviews

Individual Parent Interviews: Phase I

For this study data was derived from individual interviews with five low-income parents. Three interviews took place in the participants' homes, one interview took place at the participant's workplace, and one mother was deaf so the interview took place over the telephone through an interpreter. Both Phase I and Phase II interviews were held in the same place either the same or following day. The first phase of each interview took approximately 50 minutes and the second phase approximately 30 minutes.

Qualitative interviewing seeks to understand the meaning of what participants have to say (Kvale, 1996; Lichtman, 2010). The parents selected for this study participated in a two-phase interview process. The first phase involved the participants responding to a predetermined list of six open-ended questions or "guiding questions" that related to school readiness. Strauss and Corbin (1998) referred to guiding questions as questions that begin open-ended and become more specific to the particular research and refined as the research progresses. In collaboration with my advisor we discussed what information was needed to understand the parents' perceptions in relation to the domains of school readiness and developed the following Phase I interview questions:

1. Describe your child who is starting kindergarten this fall.

Probe: What does your child say about starting kindergarten?

Probe: What kinds of things does your child like to do?

Probe: Tell me about the places your child likes to visit.

Probe: What is your child's favorite book, television show, and game to play?

Probe: Tell me about the things you and your child enjoy doing together.

2. How do you help your child get ready for kindergarten?

Probe: Talk about what other family members do to help your child get ready for kindergarten.

Probe: Tell me about a time your child has played with other children.

Probe: Is there anything you need help with to get your child ready for kindergarten?

Probe: What ideas or suggestions do you have for schools to help children get ready for kindergarten?

3. How do you think *your child* will respond to the start of kindergarten?
4. How do you think *you* will respond when your child starts kindergarten?
5. Describe what school was like for you.
6. When your child starts kindergarten, describe your hopes? What are your fears or concerns?

Probe: Who will help your child? How will you help your child?

In order to ensure the validity of the interview data, I made a conscious effort to allow parents to say what they wanted to say about preparing their child for kindergarten—in their own words and in their own voice. I used probes to elicit more information, clarify points, or expand on their ideas (Creswell, 2008) and reported their views verbatim. I listened with understanding and took precautions not to disclose my personal beliefs and experiences during the interview process. In other words, I did not share my views on how to prepare a child for kindergarten. The parents' interview responses represented their understanding and experiences in relation to the topic of study.

Prior to each interview I spent approximately 10 to 15 minutes establishing rapport with the participant (Lichtman, 2010) by engaging in small talk and searching for common ground to build a relationship (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I then reviewed the informed consent form (see Appendix D), which included the purpose of the study, length of the interview, potential risks and benefits, and measures taken to ensure confidentiality. Each participant had the right to participate voluntarily, ask questions about the study, and withdraw from the study at any time. The privacy and confidentiality of each parent participant was ensured, as no identifying information was revealed in the study. With permission from the participants the first phase of the interview was recorded using a digital recorder.

Individual Parent Interviews: Phase II

The second phase of the interview process involved the same five parents responding to a second set of six predetermined open-ended questions that related to school readiness. As with the first phase of interviews I used probes to elicit more information, clarify points, or expand on their ideas (Creswell, 2008). In collaboration with my advisor we developed the following Phase II interview questions relating to the five domains of early learning and development and survey questions used in the study conducted by McAllister (2005):

1. What does school readiness mean to you (McAllister, 2005)?
2. How do you think your child learns (McAllister, 2005)?
3. What is your role to prepare your child for kindergarten (McAllister, 2005)?
4. Take a look at the kindergarten assessment and share your comments (see Appendix B).

Probe: Describe what you do at home to help your child build knowledge in the following areas: prints own name, cuts with a scissors, identifies letters, identifies numbers, counts objects, and social development (cooperates with others, follows rules, listens to others, follows oral directions, works independently, has appropriate attention span).

5. What barriers, if any, do you feel make it difficult for getting your child ready for kindergarten?
6. Do you have anything you would like to add or possible suggestions to help your child get ready for kindergarten?

During the second phase of interviews parents were asked to look at the kindergarten assessment used by the district of the community where the study took place (see Appendix B). This kindergarten assessment was used to provide teachers with baseline data and information to plan their instruction. Parents were asked to share their comments about the assessment and talk about how they developed some of the skills and knowledge with their own child (e.g., writes name, identifies letters, and cooperates with others). With permission from the participants, the second phase of the interview was recorded using a digital recorder.

Observations

The main source of data collection for this study was individual interviews with five low-income parents. During the interviews I noted my observations of the home environment, the parents' body language and tone of voice, and other impressions. Immediately following each interview, I typed these observations or field notes into a Word document. The data derived from the interviews and observations contributed to

the analysis process and emerging theory. According to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), all ideas that can be linked to or generated from field notes should be treated as of possible interest and should be expressed as clearly as possible.

At the beginning of each interview, I spent time getting to know the parent on a personal level. I made positive comments about their home or what they were wearing and I asked them questions about their family, their hobbies, places they like to visit, and so on. All parents seemed comfortable during their interviews as they would laugh and smile when answering questions. One parent was deaf and so the interview took place over the telephone through an interpreter. Conducting the interview by telephone made it difficult for me to make a personal connection with the parent, read her body language, hear the inflection in her voice, and observe the home environment. This parent's responses were brief making it difficult for me to utilize probing questions.

With each interview I was uncertain about how I would be greeted and whether or not I would feel welcome. For one interview, a man and then the mother for whom I was going to interview greeted me at the door with a smile and pleasant tone in her voice. I felt very welcome. Near the doorway were two young boys playing with Legos and coloring in a notebook. After the parent introduced me to her boyfriend and children she had the boys clean up their things and go with her boyfriend to the park. The apartment was small, smelled clean with a fragrant scent, and decorated in deep reds and purples with black accents. I noticed a basket of books next to the sofa in the living room and a bucket of crayons on the kitchen table. During the interview this parent seemed comfortable—her voice was calm and posture relaxed.

For another interview, I met the parent at her work place and she seemed very excited about talking with me. When I arrived at her office, she smiled, shook my hand, directed me to a comfortable chair, and asked me if I wanted coffee or water. I felt very welcome. During the interview this parent spoke very quickly, often redundant in her responses. For example, if she started her reply with saying her daughter was excited to start school, this was said a few times throughout her response. This mother said she loved her job and goes right home after work to be with her kids. At the end of this parent's Phase II interview I handed her the learning kit that consisted of a book, an alphabet puzzle, and other miscellaneous items for her child. She gasped with excitement and said her daughter loves books and loves to read. This mother also declined to accept the stipend of \$25.00 and said she was happy to meet with me. I insisted she take the money and encouraged her to take her kids out to eat. She seemed very grateful.

For another interview, the parent greeted me with a, "Hello" while yawning. She said her children have been sick and home from daycare so she just woke up. I asked her if she wanted to reschedule but she yawned and said she wanted to proceed with the interview. According to Payne (1996) the hidden rule of "time" for people living in poverty is decisions are made in the present based on their feelings or survival. We entered a tidy living room with bare walls, a sofa, a chair, and a television that was turned on high volume. Next to the living room was a tidy kitchen with a table and 4 chairs. I did not observe books or early learning materials in the living room or kitchen areas. This parent claimed to read to her children about 3 times a week and said it was difficult getting to the library on the other side of town. The parent sat on the sofa and I sat next to her to begin the interview. I asked the parent if it was okay if we turned off the television

during the interview and she turned the volume down. During the interview this parent yawned several times during the interview and after each question usually responded with an “Um” and a brief pause before answering.

Another parent greeted me at the door while talking on her cell phone. After the call, she explained that her mother had a doctor’s appointment and her sister was going to pick her up. Her mother was ill and was living with her for a few weeks while doctoring in the city. We walked through an untidy living room where I observed several items on the floor and furniture—items such as toys, books, clothes, and magazines. I found this interesting because I tidy up my house when expecting guests. From the hallway entered a little girl who greeted me with a smile. I asked the parent if we were able to meet without interruptions and she said her daughter was going with her sister to take her mother to the doctor. The parent led me to the dining and kitchen area, which was filled with various pieces of furniture and several items on the table and counter. Also in the kitchen area was a card table with coloring books, writing tools, books, fabric, glue, a box of crackers, mixing bowls, and a basket of mail and miscellaneous items. The parent described this area as her daughter’s workspace as she prepared family meals but to me, looked like additional counter space. During the interview this parent spoke in a loud voice and mentioned a few times that her mother was a teacher so she knew what to do to get her child ready for kindergarten.

Data Analysis

Immediately after each interview I typed my field notes into a Word document and printed a hard copy for analysis. Within 2 days of each individual interview, I transcribed the interview questions and responses verbatim into a Word document and

printed a hard copy for analysis. I used grounded theory data analysis to make sense of the data by noting implications and possible theories. I used both open coding and axial coding to identify common themes within my field notes and interview transcriptions. As noted by Strauss and Corbin (1998), developing theories entails the following behaviors throughout the research process: (a) carefully examine the data, (b) explore ideas thoroughly, (c) consider ideas from various angles and perspectives, and (d) ask questions and make decisions about the data. Through this process, emergent theory explains the perceptions of low-income parents regarding school readiness and contributes to the new definition of kindergarten readiness proposed in Chapter V. The new definition can serve as a resource to clarify the meaning of kindergarten readiness, thereby enhancing preschool and kindergarten programs.

Open Coding

I carefully read through each transcript and used the analytical process called “open coding” to identify common concepts and themes found in the data (Creswell, 2008; Straus & Corbin, 1998). According to Allen (2003), it is the common themes or concepts that lead to the emergence of theory. Creswell described the coding process as the segmenting and labeling of text to form description and broad themes or categories in the data. I divided the data into sentences and paragraphs of information while noting broad themes and codes that emerged from the data. The codes were essentially key words, statements, or quotes representing my observations and the participants’ views and experiences relevant to the topic of study. Upon completion of the coding process, I typed all codes and themes into a table created in a Word document—grouping codes with similar meanings and overlapping codes to avoid redundancy (see Figure 3). Codes

with similar meanings were color-coded and from these colored codes, emerged four broader categories/themes and subsequent categories/themes. I refined the categories until data sources were exhausted and categories reached saturation to the point no new categories were evident. Strauss and Corbin (1998) emphasized the importance of having fairly abstract categories in addition to very concrete ideas, as the abstract ideas help to generate general theory.

The open coding process resulted in four broad themes or categories that summarized the data including (a) the parents' perceptions of school readiness, (b) the parents' influence on their child's school readiness, (c) experiences that contribute to the child's school readiness, and (d) factors that influence school readiness. These themes correlate with the five domains of children's early learning and development including literacy and language development, cognition and general knowledge, social and emotional development, physical well-being and motor development, and approaches to learning. For instance, codes relating to the domain, approaches to learning, include hands-on, visual, auditory, and through example and exploration. Codes relating to the literacy and language development include reads books and writes letters of the alphabet.

Figure 3. Coding Process for Data Analysis.

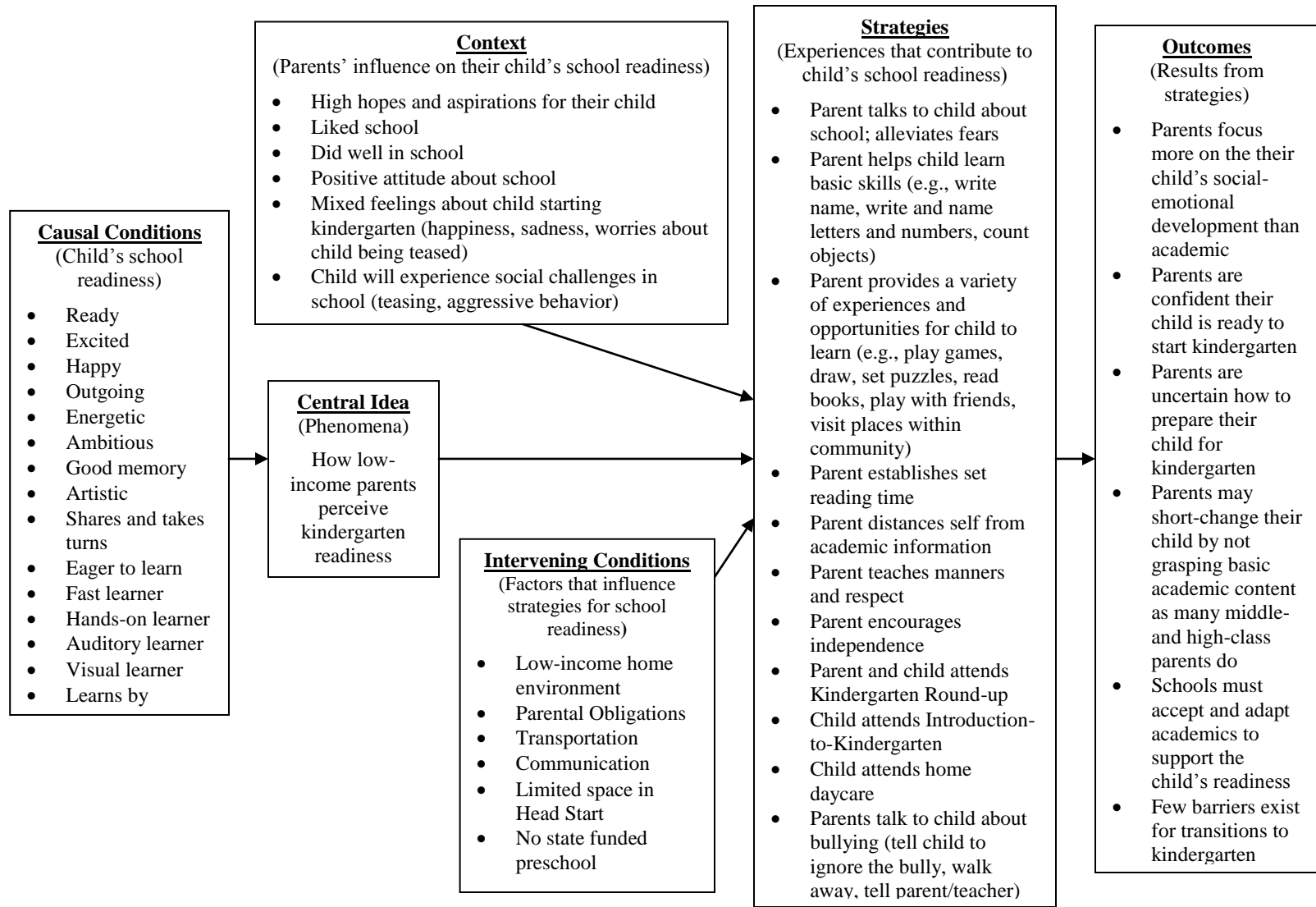
| CODES | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| <p>Ready Excited Happy Smart Outgoing Energetic Ambitious Good memory Artistic Shares and takes turns Wants to make friends Gets along with others Follows rules/directions Attention span Eager to learn Fast learner Hands-on learner Auditory learner Visual learner Learns by example Kindergarten Round-up Introduction-to-Kindergarten</p> | <p>Teaches manners and respect Teaches basic skills Buys books, paints, markers, etc. Provides workstation Reinforces skills taught at daycare Encourages early literacy Encourages independence Talks with the child about school Alleviates child's fears Talks to child about teasing/bullying Establishes set reading time Provides opportunities for child to play Has high hopes and expectations Happy/Sad Worried about child being teased Daycare provider thought child was ready Communication Transportation Busy with work One parent in home Wanted child in Head Start Parents are uncertain how to help prepare their child for kindergarten</p> | <p>Reads books Sets puzzles Draws and colors Plays with younger/older friends Writes name, letters and numbers Watches educational television and movies Plays educational games (e.g., computer, board, cards) Spell words (e.g., magnetic letters, sign language) Cuts with a scissors Sorts Counts Paints Plays house Rides bike Plays outside Visits mall, park, library, lake, and relatives Good grades Liked school Positive attitude about school Evidence/no evidence of books/learning materials in home Parents distanced themselves from academic information</p> | |
| CATEGORIES/THEMES | | | |
| Parents' perceptions of school readiness | Parents' influence on their child's school readiness | Experiences that contribute to the child's school readiness | Factors that influence school readiness |
| SUBCATEGORIES/SUB-THEMES | | | |
| <p>Parents' meaning of readiness Child's feelings about school Parents' feelings about child starting school Parents' hopes and aspirations Parents' concerns Child's approach to learning</p> | <p>Parents support and encourage learning Parents help child with teasing Parents talk to child about school Parents' attitude about personal school experience</p> | <p>Home experiences Community experiences Transition experiences</p> | <p>Head Start waiting list Communication Transportation Work schedules Single parenting Parents' distancing from academic information Observations/field notes</p> |

Due to the inductive nature of this qualitative study, I examined the categories and themes that emerged from the parent interviews and observations and determined whether or not concepts needed to be developed, clarified, disregarded, or added to the study. For instance, parents' comments about their child's attention span triggered more research on the subject.

Axial Coding

The process of open coding helped to develop four broad themes from this study: (a) the parents' perceptions of school readiness, (b) the parents' influence on their child's kindergarten readiness, (c) experiences that contribute to the child's school readiness, and (d) factors that influence school readiness. Although these themes effectively summarize the data, I used the process of axial coding for further analysis. Axial coding allowed me to organize themes into a model and examine the interrelations of these themes to form a theory (Creswell, 2012; Straus & Corbin, 1998). Through this process, I was able to analyze the data and identify a central idea or phenomenon, which was how low-income parents perceive school readiness. I developed a conceptual framework to illustrate the interrelationship of causal conditions (factors that influence the core phenomenon), contextual and intervening conditions (specific and general factors that influence strategies), and outcomes from using the strategies (see Figure 4). I like to think of this conceptual framework as a system of ideas that helped explain the parents' perceptions of school readiness.

Figure 4. Conceptual Framework: Grounded Theory Model.



In summary, open and axial coding were utilized to organize and analyze the observation and interview data from five low-income parents. This process generated theory that explains the perceptions of low-income parents regarding kindergarten readiness and enhanced the new definition of kindergarten readiness. An external reviewer examined and validated the coding and analysis process.

Description of the Next Chapter

Chapter IV includes data obtained from the five individual parent interviews and observations reflected in the conceptual framework presented in Chapter III. Parents' responses are summarized in narrative form according to the four themes identified in the coding process: (a) parents' perceptions of school readiness, (b) experiences that contribute to the child's school readiness, (c) parents influence on their child's school readiness, and (d) factors that influence school readiness.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this small-scale qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of five low-income parents regarding their child's readiness for kindergarten. This study has the potential to help early childhood advocates and other stakeholders (a) understand how low-income influences school readiness, (b) understand the aspirations low-income parents have for their children, (c) discover ways to improve the transition to school for economically disadvantaged children, (d) prepare to receive children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and (e) engage parents in a more equitable manner—ultimately helping all children have a positive start in kindergarten.

The rationale for selecting low-income parents for this study was threefold. First, the perceptions of low-income parents regarding kindergarten readiness will offer insight into the beginning of the learning gap that is pervasive in so many schools (Haskins & Rouse, 2005). Second, it is the economically disadvantaged children who are most at risk of school failure (Piotrkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2000). Evidence shows economically disadvantaged children who do not have early positive transitions to school have significant delays in language and basic academic skills. These children are likely to start kindergarten 2 to 3 years behind their peers, causing challenges for teachers, school districts, and the children themselves (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). Third, it is the parents who often make the determination of whether or not their child is ready for

kindergarten—their perceptions of kindergarten readiness were important, relevant, and timely for the purpose of this study.

Parents' perceptions regarding education and school readiness may shape the way they prepare their child for kindergarten—these perceptions may inform educational practice, policy, and research as well as help to decrease the learning gap in kindergarten. If schools are to communicate effectively with all parents regarding their children's transition to school, it is essential their voices be heard (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999). Information collected from this study adds to the existing research on school readiness as a means to improve education for young children.

Emergent theory from this research reflects the differences between parents' perceptions and the schools' views regarding school readiness. The theory supports a new definition of kindergarten readiness comprised of ready schools, ready parents, and ready children. The new definition has the potential to be recognized by early childhood advocates at a local, state, and national level and serve as a resource to clarify the meaning of kindergarten readiness, thereby enhancing early childhood programs.

Thematic Findings

For this study, I gathered data through observations and semi-structured individual interviews with five low-income parents regarding their perceptions of kindergarten readiness. It is important to point out that data collected from the interviews were not equal—for instance, two parents may have shared the same response to a specific question but the other three parents each responded differently. In order to understand the research and subsequent findings I used grounded theory data analysis. This section is organized by four broad themes and subsequent themes that emerged from

the analysis process: (a) parents' perceptions of school readiness, (b) parents' influence on their child's school readiness, (c) experiences that contribute to a child's school readiness, and (d) factors that influence school readiness.

Theme 1: Parents' Perceptions of School Readiness

The parent participants in this study were asked to describe their understanding of kindergarten readiness. Parents' responses are organized by six sub-themes including (a) the meaning of school readiness, (b) the child, (c) parents' feelings, (d) parents' hopes and aspirations, (e) parents' fears and concerns, and (f) additional concerns.

The Meaning of School Readiness

Overall, the parents connected their child's school readiness to the social-emotional and cognitive domains of early learning and development. One parent paused for a bit before saying readiness is about children knowing how to write their name, write the letters of the alphabet, and name colors. Another parent described readiness as her child's ability to listen to the teacher and follow directions. This mother expected her child to sit for long periods of time in school and to "be good." This parent yawned quite a bit during the interview. When she responded to questions she often said, "Um" followed by a 3-5 second pause. Perhaps this parent was not interested in the interview or was unsure how to respond. Another parent defined school readiness as a child's ability to perform the academic skills required before entering kindergarten—and, in her own words, "knowing the ABC's and 123's." The same mother believed children needed to be emotionally mature before starting kindergarten. When asked to explain she said the child should have a long attention span and be able to get along with other children. Another parent described school readiness as preparing a child for school. When asked how she

does this, she looked away and replied, “The things I wish my mom did with me—things like read to me and help me with numbers and the alphabet—‘all that I learned in kindergarten.’ ” This mother seemed to understand what she should do to help her own child prepare for kindergarten but may have some resentment toward her mother for not reading with her as a young child. One parent’s response to the question was, “I don’t know.” When the question was rephrased as, “Earlier, you said your child was ‘ready’ for kindergarten, what did you mean by ‘ready’?” The parent smiled and simply stated that her daughter was excited to start kindergarten and so this makes her ready.

The Child

In relation to the early learning domain, approaches to learning, parents’ views of how their child learned varied—learning styles included hands-on, auditory, and visual. Parents described their child as smart, outgoing, ready and eager to start kindergarten despite the fact they did not attend Head Start or other formal preschool program. Two parents described their child as a “sponge”. When asked to elaborate, one parent said, “She [daughter] soaks everything up” and the other said her daughter listens to everything and learns things easily. One parent said her child learned by example. When asked to explain, she said her daughter watches others and learns what to do from them.

Parents described their child as able to get along with other children—another connection to the social-emotional domain. Two mothers said their only child could be stubborn and bossy at times. One parent laughed and said her child was not used to sharing, which is why she wanted her to attend Head Start. All parents talked about their child playing with children either younger or older but not the same age. Just one parent said her child played with same age peers at various parks in the community. Otherwise,

playmates usually consisted of younger siblings and children in the neighborhood or at the park. One parent said she does not get to see her child interact with other children because she works full-time. This parent seemed sad when making this comment. She added that she loved her job and knew as a single parent it was important for her to work.

Parents' Feelings

When asked how they will respond when their child starts kindergarten, parents expressed three main feelings: happiness, excitement, and sadness. One mother smiled and said, "It makes me happy to see how excited she is about learning." This parent said her daughter was excited to meet her teacher and make friends. Another mother said when they go to daycare her child cries when she sees other kids get on the school bus. This mother was happy that her child would soon be riding the bus to kindergarten. Another mother expressed sadness because she remembered crying when her little brother got on the bus his first day of school. This memory was connected to the sadness she had for her own son starting kindergarten. She looked down and said she has been emotional a few times as she has begun to shop for school supplies and new school clothes. She then looked up and with a smile said she feels sad because her "little boy is growing up." This mother thought the first day of school might be difficult for her son but after that he would be fine. One parent expressed sadness because she would miss her child's laughter around the apartment. Another mother expressed sadness because her child starting kindergarten signaled a change in her life causing her to start looking for a job. She said, "I may be sad because my first little duckling is going off to school." "I think her first day is gonna be an adventure."

Parents' Hopes and Aspirations

When asked about hopes or aspirations for their child starting kindergarten, parents responded optimistically. One parent reflected on how quickly the preschool years had gone by and said, "I just want her to get the most of it [school]." Another mother said, "I want her to love school and I think if she's loving learning, you know she's gonna love school." Another parent paused for a moment and then responded, "I hope that kindergarten is everything she would expect it to be." Another mother said she hoped her child would improve her linguistic, math, and writing skills. This parent was deaf and I found it interesting that she used the word linguistic instead of the word language. All parents hoped their child would make friends and get along with other children. One mother hoped her child would do better in school than she did. One mother smirked and said she hoped her son would listen to the teacher and follow directions—perhaps he had difficulty following directions at home. She also hoped her son would grasp concepts quickly and makes friends instead of becoming a bully. She may have anticipated her son becoming a bully in school—perhaps he teased his younger brother or the parent viewed boys as bullies more than girls. Another parent hoped her child would continue to be excited about learning and always be proud of herself. She smiled.

Parents' Fears and Concerns

When asked about fears or concerns for their child starting kindergarten, parents were mostly concerned about their child's relationships and vulnerabilities in school. More specifically, they were concerned about their child being teased and getting their feelings hurt. One mother worried that if her child was bullied, the teacher would not do anything about it and her daughter would not have an advocate. This parent's worry may

have implied her low expectations of the school. Parents were asked how they would help their child with the issue of being teased and their responses varied. One mother said she would tell her child to ignore the bully and tell him to stop. From my experiences as an educator, children who are bullied tend to keep this to themselves thinking they will be accused of “tattling” and/or get into more trouble if they tell someone. Another parent told her child if she had any fears she would be there to talk to, listen, and be there for her—“someone to answer all her questions.” One mother shared a story about her child being teased by an older child for having “golden teeth” and said this meant her teeth were rotten or decayed. This mother’s daughter indeed had decayed teeth that were repaired and told her daughter,

If she says anything about your teeth, ignore her . . . you know you’re beautiful and you’re smart. Don’t let people tell you you’re not. Don’t let people say mean things to you. It’s only cuz they’re hurting and something’s bothering them. She’s saying that because she wants to have pretty golden teeth like you . . . and just remember you have pretty golden teeth.

I felt the response above was a positive way to respond to the child and wondered if the mother was given the same advice at one time.

All parents claimed they taught their child about respecting others. One mother said her job was to, “Keep her manners straight” referencing her daughter. Another mother who remembered her younger brother being teased in school said she did not want her child to be a bully. Another parent said she was very quiet in school and did not really speak up for herself. She hoped her daughter would speak up for herself. Another parent remembered being teased about her race and for wearing glasses. This mother’s son would have glasses before school starts and she worried about him getting teased. She told her son, “People might say something but stick up for yourself.” She worried

that she might not know about her son being teased and would not be able to help or talk with the teacher. Perhaps this parent also had low expectations of the school. Another parent said her other oldest child [now age 23] was teased in school. She said, “The teasing is going to happen wherever you go—so I guess we’ll have to deal with it better.” I interpreted this statement as having to understand teasing is simply a part of life. When asked how she would deal with the teasing better, she said, “Just ignore the kid and just keep doing what you’re doing.” This mother’s fear seemed to be connected to negative experiences with an older child. One mother expressed her fear that her child may not like school or won’t want to go. When asked how she would help her child deal with this, she said, “I would get her to understand that it’s just one of those things that we have to do whether we like it or not.” This parent would also try to build some type of incentive such as a family dinner or movie to encourage her child. I found it interesting this mother made reference to a behavior plan if her daughter didn’t want to go to school. Perhaps she wanted to impress me with what she knew about incentives or maybe she was anticipating her daughter would not like school. In relation to the early learning domains, parents’ overall fears and concerns were connected to their child’s social-emotional development rather than their child’s cognitive development.

One parent remembered having trouble with reading in first grade but her mother did not recall this being an issue. This memory may have caused this mother to read with her child on a regular basis. I noticed a basket of books in the living room. The same mother did not remember much about kindergarten and commented on how kindergarteners today seemed to need to know what she learned in first grade 30 years ago. When asked to explain further, she replied,

I know the things that I was learning as a first grader are things that they already need to know going into kindergarten and I don't know how I feel about that. I certainly want all our population to learn as much as they can and be educated and have all the opportunities. However, it is a short period of time and now I'm really feeling the weight of the words of . . . it goes so fast and you're only young once. I think kindergarten should be a fun experience. You want your child to do their best and have the best experience in everything.

Additional Concerns

In addition to the concern about potential bullying in school, one mother shared a concern about her child learning a 5-digit lunch code before the start of school. This parent attended Kindergarten Round-up and learned she would receive her child's lunch number about 2 weeks before the first day of school. The mother worried about her child learning this number in such a short period of time and suggested assigning children's lunch numbers sooner [maybe at Kindergarten Round-up] so that children had more time to practice at home before the start of school. Another parent was concerned about how she was going to get her child to and from Introduction-to-Kindergarten with her work schedule. She suggested the school provide bussing or some type of carpool system with other parents. This mother also wondered if her child would be getting breakfast or lunch during this program and said one or the other would be nice so her child has a good start to her day. She was unclear about certain aspects of the Introduction-to-Kindergarten program. One mother said it would be nice if schools could provide backpacks and school supplies for children. Another parent wanted more books for her child to read.

Theme 2: Experiences that Contribute to the Child's School Readiness

In response to the question about experiences contributing to school readiness, parents shared experiences within the home as well as within the community. Parents also

talked about their child participating in the transition programs Kindergarten Round-up and Introduction-to-Kindergarten. Parents' responses are organized by three sub-themes including (a) home experiences, (b) community experiences, and (c) transition programs.

Home Experiences

In relation to the early learning domain, language and literacy development, all parents claimed to read with their child about 3-5 times a week—mostly before bedtime or in the morning. During two interviews I noticed children's books in the home. One parent commented that her child did not know how to read yet but thinks she is getting close. She said, "I think she's realizing that all the pieces are starting to come together." The mother said her daughter liked her to read to her and knows that she would whenever asked. Another mother said her child pretended to read. All but one parent said their child had several books. One parent said books were expensive and it was difficult taking the bus to the library on the other side of town.

In relation to the cognition and general knowledge domain, parents claimed to involve their child in activities such as drawing, painting, writing alphabet letters and numbers, coloring, setting puzzles, spelling words, and playing educational games. All parents spoke about their child writing his/her name as well as numbers and the letters of the alphabet in an activity book or on paper. Two parents said they would present a model of their child's name for them to copy. One parent had a card table in her kitchen and called this her child's work station. This mother said while she cooked, her daughter oftentimes wrote, colored, or set a puzzle at this table. This is the same mother who said her mother used to be a teacher—she seemed proud of the fact that her mother taught school and that providing a workspace for her daughter was a good thing to do. Another

mother said her daughter is really artistic so buys her a lot of paints, markers, pencils, and paper. I did not see evidence of these materials or child's artwork in the home. In relation to the physical well-being and motor development, all parents claimed their child enjoyed playing with other children and riding bike.

When asked about television viewing, all parents reported their child spent an average of 2 hours each day watching shows such as *Dora*, *Diego*, the *Dr. Seuss* series, and the PBS learning channel. One parent said they watched television as a family. Two parents said their child spent about an hour each day playing educational computer and video games that taught shapes, colors, letters, and numbers (e.g., V Tech and Wii). One parent said she participated in the video game experience and the other said her child played on her own. Three parents spoke extensively about their child's interest in setting puzzles claiming their child was really good at puzzles and had a very good memory. I noticed puzzles and a variety of games in one home environment. One parent said her daughter liked to help her with the cooking especially mixing things, kneading bread dough, and retrieving ingredients from the refrigerator. One mother said her child's father helped their daughter with her learning when he was home. When asked to explain, she paused and said he has her count stairs as they go up and down and count things on the wall, items on the menu, and so on. This mother said,

It's really different with me and him . . . he's more of the educator and I'm like . . . the one who helps with feelings . . . and uh, he makes our little circle complete . . . he's giving them something that I'm probably missing.

Perhaps this parent was uncertain how to help her child learn basic academic skills, didn't understand the importance of early learning, and/or relied on others to academically prepare her child for kindergarten.

The mother who was deaf said she helped her daughter write her name and spell words using sign language. Another mother said spelling is one of the things she worked on with both her children and spoke extensively about a computerized game that was secured to her refrigerator. The game utilized magnetic letters to spell words. For instance, by adding one magnetic letter, a computerized voice named the letter, named the letter sound, and sang a little song about the letter. The mother said she has used this game since her child was born and has now expanded her daughter's learning to three-letter words. The same parent said she built on her child's math skills in a variety of ways. For example, she would ask her child to empty her piggy bank and select four quarters to buy books at a rummage sale. She also made up simple addition and subtraction problems, for instance, "If you have five teddy bears and I took two away, how many would you have left?"

Community Experiences

Parents were asked to talk about the places their child liked to visit. The mother who worked full-time said they didn't go to many places because she goes home straight from work and just wants to spend time with her family. She said she has very few friends and family in town so they spend a lot of time at home. All parents claimed to take their child to the library once or twice each month and some parents mentioned going to the arcade and playground at the mall, playing at a nearby park, visiting relatives, and eating at restaurants. One mother said she brought her children to her brother's restaurant about two times a month to have pizza. This seemed to be a happy experience for the family as the mother smiled while describing the kind of pizza her boys liked to eat.

Transition Experiences

Three parents said they attended Kindergarten Round-up at their child's school, which consisted of an informational session for parents and a classroom activity for children. One parent, of Native American ethnicity, was unable to attend Kindergarten Round-up because it was the week of her mother's 1-year memorial. Perhaps one of Payne's (1996) hidden rules applies here—and that is families living in poverty value people over things [school event]. Another parent attended "Kindergarten Registration" at her child's school rather than a Kindergarten Round-up. This parent said she went to her child's school during her work lunch break to register her child and pick up a packet of information to read. She said, "As old as I am I don't learn everything through reading and I don't even enjoy reading." This mother liked the fact that the registration worked into her schedule and was fortunate to have a flexible boss. However, she was hoping for a more formal session to learn about the kindergarten program and other school related information. During the Kindergarten Registration, teachers [presumed by the parent to be kindergarten teachers] were available to answer questions but the mother said she didn't know what to ask. This parent expressed frustration because she wanted to meet the kindergarten teachers and learn about the academic expectations in kindergarten.

Overall, parents in this study shared positive comments about their child's school. One parent said the schools provided adequate opportunities for their child to become acquainted with the school and meet their child's teachers through programs such as Kindergarten Round-up and Introduction-to-Kindergarten. Parents said their children enjoyed meeting their teacher at Kindergarten Round-up and had fun making a project or listening to a story. One parent said her daughter had fun and "looked at everything."

Three of the five participants said their child was going to attend the Introduction-to-Kindergarten program in the summer. The parents seemed to understand this was a time for their child to become familiar with the school, make friends, and learn their letters and numbers. These parents were happy their child would have this early transition experience to build upon all five domains of their child's early learning and development.

*Theme 3: Parents' Influence on
Their Child's School Readiness*

The home, community, and transition experiences mentioned earlier have an apparent impact on a child's school readiness as young children have the opportunity to interact and learn within various environments. Parents, however, have a greater influence on their child's school readiness. Parents were asked how they believed they influenced their child's school readiness. Parents' responses are organized by two sub-themes associated with two of the five early learning domains including (a) social-emotional development and (b) cognition and general knowledge.

Social and Emotional Development

When parents were asked to describe their child and how their child felt about starting kindergarten, they used the words ready, excited, happy, outgoing, energetic, and ambitious. One parent paused and said, "It is important to let our children be themselves and learn how they want to learn." I felt this was a genuine response because she took some time to think about it. One mother thought her main role was to assess and help nurture her child's emotional readiness and maturity level. When asked to further explain, she said it was her obligation to make sure her daughter was ready for kindergarten and yet relied on input from others. For instance, she asked her child's daycare provider if she thought her child was ready to start kindergarten. This parent was uncertain about her

child's readiness and needed the assurance from others. The mother commented, "People can be smart but not emotionally ready—or, they may be very social but not quite ready to grasp the skills." This parent believed her child was both socially and academically ready for kindergarten and her daycare provider agreed.

One parent said it was her job to teach her child as much as she could. This mother was glad she did not struggle with her decision to start her child in kindergarten and said, "I can see it's not an automatic just because you turn 5." Her child's birthday fell in the spring and she believed her daughter was a bit more mature than other children her age. I wondered if this mom viewed her child as ready for kindergarten simply because she met the age requirement and I wondered about the maturity level of her child's playmates. A few mothers talked about teaching their child to become more independent by having them take showers instead of baths, get themselves dressed, and use the bathroom without assistance. After attending Kindergarten Round-up, one mother learned her child would have a 25-minute lunch period at school and so was going to help her son to focus on eating during meals, as he tended to talk a lot during mealtime. Another parent started to wean her child from taking naps even though a rest time is typically a part the kindergarten experience.

With the exception of one, all parents said they liked school as a child—they got good grades and overall had a positive experience. One mother thought it helped her child to know how much she enjoyed school so she too would have a positive attitude about school. This notion has been supported by research.

Cognition and General Knowledge

All parents made a reference to helping their child learn basic academic skills such as learning numbers and the letters of the alphabet. When I presented the six-page kindergarten assessment to parents, I received various reactions. I asked parents to look at the assessment and describe what they do to help their child build on some of the skills. One parent looked at the first page of the assessment and did not flip through the pages so I asked questions about a few items on the first page. The mother paused for a moment and then said, “This is what their father does with them when he’s at home”. When asked to explain what the father does, she shared a few examples such as counting stairs and items on the walls. I then pointed out a few skills and asked the mother how the child’s father helped to build on these skills. She said the he helped her daughter write her name, pointed out things for her to count in the environment, and asked her to name colors. The mother said, “I got her one of those things with a big *A* and small *a* and those dotted lines and I gave her a black marker and tried to help her but she got kinda frustrated with it.” Perhaps this parent did not understand how to discern between using an activity book or other product and make an informed decision how to help her child write the letters of the alphabet or learn other basic skills. This mother commented on how the children’s father was more of the educator and she was the nurturer. When asked to explain, she said, “I’m the one who helps with feelings.”

One parent looked at the each assessment item and commented on whether or not her daughter achieved the skill. For example, she said, “Write her name? Definitely.” “Using a model? Copy it? Yep.” Another parent looked at the assessment and asked with a surprised tone, “She’s supposed to know all this for kindergarten?” I explained to this

mother the kindergarten teachers use this assessment at the beginning of the school year to see what children know and then plan their lessons accordingly. I also explained the skills in the assessment are what children are expected to know and be able to do by the end of their kindergarten year. The parent seemed relieved, read a few assessment items and said, “Cutting with a scissors? We’re just starting that.” “Sorting and classifying? She sorts good.” “Patterns? Uh, not really.” “Countin? Yah, . . . objects like um we usually do dice or Monopoly houses.”

One mother said she helped her daughter with her pencil grasp and writing her name by providing a model to copy. She said her child was not reading sight words yet but recognized her name, her brother’s name, and the word, mom. As far as cutting with a scissors, the mother occasionally allowed her child to use the “big scissors” with supervision but mostly wanted her to use a rounded edge scissors. As a school principal, I have heard kindergarten teachers point out many children start kindergarten without knowing how to use a scissors. This mother also provided activity books for her child to work on the alphabet—books to practice tracing capital and lower case letters. She said her daughter really enjoyed working in these books. The mother said, “When I see her write, I understand what it is if she spelled it the way it should be or close to it.” As far as rhyming goes, her daughter made up stories and songs that sometimes rhymed. The mother said her child learned the names of shapes by playing a card game and she learned how to count because they do a lot of counting throughout the day. This mother taught the days of the week by referencing a calendar and calling Monday through Friday “work days” and Saturday and Sunday “stay home days.” Her daughter often asked, “How many days until stay home days” and then together they counted the days on the calendar. The

mother pointed to the calendar on the kitchen wall. This parent thought her daughter had an appropriate attention span for kindergarten and responded, “With certain subjects, if you’re not interested in something it’s pretty hard to pay attention and if you’re interested, you have my full attention . . .”

One parent said she tried to reinforce the skills her child picked up at daycare but was concerned about going out of order. When asked to explain, she said she did not want to introduce a skill if her daughter wasn’t ready for it. Perhaps this mother lacked the knowledge or ability to help her daughter learn basic concepts and skills. This mother reflected on her own school experiences and recalled using blocks and teddy bears for math activities, taking a nap, and coloring—and in kindergarten today, she understood children work with money and learn how to read.

One parent believed both her children benefited from her teaching as well as what they learned in daycare and other environments. This parent said she felt bad because her daycare provider is doing the majority of the teaching of kindergarten skills but believed she laid the foundation by reading to her children every night. I wasn’t able to see evidence of books in the home because this interview took place at the parent’s workplace. When asked to explain her feelings further the mother wished she was able to spend more time with her daughter during the day instead of her being taught by other people. She also stated, “I am a firm believer that I can’t do it all myself.” Although this mother expressed some resentment for not being with her child during the day, she seemed to recognize and appreciate the skills her daughter was learning at daycare.

All mothers mentioned reading books to their child and one said, “Reading every day is going to help him out with maybe not just kindergarten but overall throughout

school.” One mother thought her child should know the ABC’s and 123’s before starting kindergarten and called the school principal to find out. The principal told this mother children starting kindergarten do not need to know everything but it did help. This mother felt confident in what she did at home to get her child ready for school. The call to the principal affirms the notion parents are uncertain about how to prepare their child for kindergarten. When asked if other family members were involved in building on the skills in the assessment, parents mentioned a boyfriend, the child’s father, an aunt, and a grandmother.

Overall, parents seemed to distance themselves from the academic information on the kindergarten assessment. Many of the assessment items such as rhyming, patterning, and classifying seemed to be new material for the parents. I wondered how middle class parents would respond to the kindergarten assessment—perhaps, they expect their child to achieve these skills prior to kindergarten entry. Parents in this study did not ask questions or show much interest in the assessment thereby affirming the little emphasis they place on their child’s academic readiness.

Theme 4: Factors That Influence School Readiness

When parents were asked to describe barriers that influenced their child’s readiness, four major factors emerged from the data. These factors affect a child’s early learning and development in all five domains and include (a) limited space in Head Start, (b) communication, (c) transportation, and (d) parental obligations.

Limited Space in Head Start

The participants’ children met the criteria for Head Start but were unable to attend due to limited space. Two parents said they wanted their child to attend Head Start—one

said, “It would have been a big help.” She suggested there be more Head Start programs or other preschool opportunities available for children to learn the basic skills needed for kindergarten. I infer from this comment parents rely on others to prepare their child for academic school readiness.

Communication

Not all participants in this study received information about the transition programs held at their child’s school. Some parents were unaware of Kindergarten Round-up and some schools provided a Kindergarten Registration instead. This parent said schools could improve how they inform new parents about kindergarten transition programs. With a disappointed tone, she said she found out about Kindergarten Round-up from her daughter who heard other children talking about it at her daycare. This mother wondered if she missed the Kindergarten Round-up event when in fact, Kindergarten Round-up was not offered at her child’s school. I explained that four of the eleven elementary schools in the district offered Kindergarten Registration instead of Kindergarten Round-up. As a working single mother and new parent to an elementary school, this mother wanted Kindergarten Round-up instead of Kindergarten Registration. She suggested that schools hold two sessions to give parents more than one opportunity to fit this important event into their schedule. She also suggested the schools mail a flyer to all households in the community or at least to all daycare programs so parents receive the information. One mother thought the schools did a good job offering transition opportunities for children starting kindergarten and thought Kindergarten Round-up and Introduction-to-Kindergarten was sufficient. This parent suggested all schools offer Kindergarten Round-up rather than just a day for parents to register their child.

Transportation

Transportation may be a factor that influences school readiness for economically disadvantaged children. One parent said her child would not attend the Introduction-to-Kindergarten program because transportation was an issue. One parent said she would like her child to have more books but it was too difficult to take a bus to the library located on the other side of town. Another parent said it was a challenge for her to get her child to and from the Introduction-to-Kindergarten program with her full time job.

Parental Obligations

In addition to transportation issues factors such as single parenting, work schedules, and other responsibilities may affect a child's school readiness. One parent said she was busy taking care of an ill parent and read with her daughter when she had time. This mother said her daughter liked to read by herself and reads a lot. Another parent said she wished she had more time to be with her two children and work on basic skills but needed to work full time to make ends meet. One parent said she was attending cosmetology school and said her boyfriend helps out with her children.

Description of the Next Chapter

Chapter V begins with conclusions and summary of findings followed by a discussion, limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research. The chapter concludes with recommendations for early childhood stakeholders including emergent theory and a new definition of kindergarten readiness.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions and Summary of Findings

The findings of this small-scale study of five low-income parents in a single mid-west rural district suggest the following: parents (a) have high hopes and aspirations for their child; (b) believe their child is ready for kindergarten based on their child's excitement to start school; (c) believe their child is ready for kindergarten based on their efforts to provide a wide range of learning opportunities at home—and yet, are uncertain what and how to ensure school readiness; (d) focus more on their child's social-emotional development than academic; (e) are concerned about their child being teased in school; and, (f) perceive limited space in Head Start, transportation, and communication between home and school as barriers to their child's school readiness. These findings are summarized in narrative form according to the research questions.

Research Question 1: What are low-income parents' perceptions of readiness for school?

The parents in this study had high hopes and aspirations for their child. Parents expressed positive feelings and attitudes about their own experiences in school and 100% said their child was excited about starting kindergarten. As noted by Seligman (2009), parents' attitudes about their own school experiences influence their child's attitudes about school. I infer low-income parents have the same hopes and aspirations as higher income parents. This notion has been supported by research.

The parents believed their child was ready for kindergarten based on their child's excitement to start kindergarten. When parents were asked to describe how they felt about their child starting kindergarten, they expressed happiness, excitement, and sadness. The parents were happy and excited for their child because their child was "excited" to start kindergarten. The words of one parent sparked an interesting perspective that may shed some light on school readiness. This mother said her child was "excited" to start kindergarten and, therefore, was considered "ready." I infer from this statement that ready for kindergarten simply requires the child's eagerness or willingness to start kindergarten—because a child's excitement for learning is invaluable! This finding is significant because if a child is eager and willing to start school, the child is likely to be eager, willing, and motivated to learn and, therefore, absorb the knowledge and skills presented in kindergarten. As noted by Halle et al. (2000), a child's inclination to use skills, knowledge, and abilities to learn is generated by enthusiasm. If schools were to channel children's excitement and enthusiasm into rich learning experiences, all children regardless of economic status may be more likely to achieve success thereby closing the learning gap in kindergarten.

Research Question 2: What home experiences do low-income parents perceive as contributing to school readiness?

The parents in this study believed their child is ready for kindergarten based on their efforts to provide a wide range of learning opportunities at home—and yet, are uncertain what and how to ensure school readiness. In relation to the cognition and general knowledge domain, low-income parents' perceptions of kindergarten readiness involved their child having knowledge of basic academic skills—they believed it was

important for their child to know how to write his/her name as well as identify numbers and letters of the alphabet. The parents claimed to provide a wide range of learning opportunities for their child within their home and community. Parents reported activities that required little time, money, or skills including reading, writing, puzzles, painting, games, drawing, educational television, and visiting the library. Providing activities such as these may not be typical of all low-income families. Overall, it seemed parents were doing what they knew best—maybe what they learned from their own parents and in at least one case pledged to improve on what they had experienced as a child.

The findings of this study suggested some parents wanted and needed guidance about how to introduce and reinforce readiness skills at home. For instance, one parent said she was unsure how and when to teach specific skills so her child would learn best. One parent had her child trace letters from an activity book. Another parent called the principal of her child's school to ask if her child needed to know his ABC's and 123's.

All parents claimed to read with their child and yet there was no evidence of books in any home environment. Children from low-income families are likely to have less access to reading material in the home than higher-income families Constantino (2005) and are less likely to be read to every day than children living in higher-income environments (Barton & Coley, 2007; Lee & Burkham, 2002).

The parents in this study focused more on their child's social-emotional development than academic. In relation to the social-emotional domain, parents believed their child should be socially and emotionally ready for kindergarten—meaning their child had an adequate attention span and was able to get along with their peers. Parents wanted their child to follow the rules, listen to the teacher and follow directions, respect

others, use good manners, and love school. Similar findings in a study conducted by Piotrowski et al. (2000) indicated parents place a greater emphasis on their child's ability to listen, sit still, and follow directions before starting kindergarten.

Overall, parents were hopeful their child would do well in school and yet all parents expressed their concern about their child being teased in school. Kindergarten is often a child's first formal school experience for which new social challenges such as teasing and aggressive behavior arise. The parents claimed to address the issue of bullying with their child by telling them to ignore the bully, walk away, and tell the teacher or them [the parent]. Parents' concerns about bullying were associated with past experiences of being teased or having a sibling who was teased. Two parents worried the teachers may not help their child if teased at school.

Research Question 3: To what extent do low-income parents perceive their influence on their child's school readiness?

The parents in this study seemed confident they had prepared their child for kindergarten by teaching them basic literacy, number, and social skills. Parents perceived their child as ready to start kindergarten based on their child's experiences at home and other early childhood settings. In fact, one parent asked her child's daycare provider whether or not she thought her daughter was ready for kindergarten. Parents believed their child was "ready" for kindergarten without having them "formally assessed" by their child's school. It might be detrimental if a screening tool or other readiness assessment determined children as "not ready" because they could not identify a specific number of letters and sounds or write their name. Overall, I felt the parents in this study

did not have a good understanding of what was taught in kindergarten and how to foster their child's early learning development.

Research Question 4: What do low-income parents perceive as barriers to their child's school readiness or transition to kindergarten?

Limited space in Head Start, transportation, and communication between home and school can be barriers to kindergarten readiness opportunities. Some parents in this study expressed their concerns about getting their child to and from the Introduction-to-Kindergarten program as well as the public library. One said her work schedule made it difficult for her to take her daughter to Introduction-to-Kindergarten. In connection to the research, low-income parents were less likely to attend school events due to limited means of transportation and time constraints with their jobs (Lareau, 2003; Newman & Chin, 2003). Another barrier to children's transition to kindergarten was the communication from the school to the parents regarding transition opportunities. Not all parents in this study were aware of the kindergarten transition opportunities provided for their child.

Discussion

Ready or not, here they come! Children are "ready for kindergarten" because they meet the age criteria and most importantly are naturally motivated to learn and excited to start school. The findings from this study revealed the parents helped their children develop the five domains of early learning and development in some way or another. Parents claimed to work on specific cognitive skills as well as social behaviors. I thereby infer these parents value education and their involvement in their child's learning—and, they want their child to have a positive start in kindergarten. However, the parents

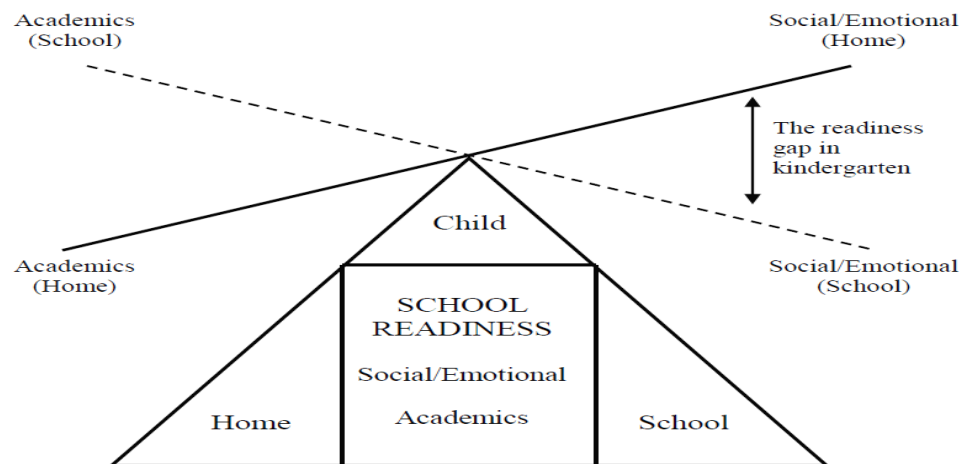
seemed uncertain as to “what” specific skills their child should know and be able to do before starting kindergarten. Additionally, parents were uncertain “how” to teach their child the basic skills. The research from this study supports the parents’ uncertainty: parents did not show interest in the skills on the kindergarten assessment, parents did not know what to ask about their child’s learning, there was little evidence of learning materials the home environment, parents were afraid to introduce new skills “out of order”, and parents relied on others for information (e.g., daycare provider, principal).

In addition to the uncertainty of what and how to teach basic skills at home, the extent to which parents provided learning experiences may vary. For instance, parents claimed to read to their child 3-5 times a week and yet, one parent may read to her child on a daily basis and another parent may read to her child once or twice a week. As a middle-class parent, I read to my children on a daily basis and knew other middle-class parents who read to their children less often. Or, one parent may teach simple math skills through everyday learning opportunities such as counting stairs and sorting socks and another parent may provide a structured learning activity once or twice a month by having her child trace letters and numbers from an activity book. In this study one parent provided a workstation in the kitchen for her daughter so she could color, write, and make art projects while she was cooking. Overall, I did not feel the parent participants had a good understanding of what was taught in kindergarten and how to foster their child’s early learning development. Parents’ concerns were connected to their child’s social-emotional development more than academic. One parent viewed her role was to help her child with feelings.

There is a difference between a child who is ready to learn and a child who is ready for school. I believe ready to learn implies the child is excited and motivated to learn whereas ready for school implies the child has met the age requirement to start kindergarten with the basic academic skills necessary for school success. Readiness to learn and readiness for school prompts the question, “Are children with fewer skills at the beginning of kindergarten able to reach the academic level of their more advanced peers?” While Piaget and Vygotsky believed all children are ready to learn (Berk & Winsler, 1995), I interpret readiness to learn as a developmental process for which children learn specific skills and concepts—and this process, of course, varies from child to child. There is no blueprint for school readiness as each child is unique and, therefore, schools need to welcome and accept all children regardless of skills and abilities and provide them with an education that leads to success. The new definition of kindergarten readiness reflects the school’s readiness for children’s individual differences.

Emerging Theory on School Readiness

Figure 5. Illustration of Emerging Theory.



The development of a conceptual framework helped to answer my research questions, enhance the new definition of kindergarten readiness, and identify emerging theory (see Figure 4). The central idea or phenomena that emerged from this analysis was how low-income parents perceive kindergarten readiness. After examining the interrelations of the codes, themes, and sub-themes within the conceptual framework, it became evident there were three assertions or claims for emergent theory. These assertions are conveyed in the illustration above (see Figure 5). The first assertion is low-income parents emphasize social and emotional readiness above academic readiness. The second assertion is schools stress the importance of academic readiness while also wanting children to be socially-emotionally ready when starting kindergarten. The third assertion is the difference between what low-income parents perceive as school readiness and what schools view as readiness causes a learning gap in kindergarten (see Figure 5).

To explain the illustration (see Figure 5) further, the home perspective is lower on the academic end of the fulcrum and higher on the social-emotional end. The school perspective is higher on the academic end of the fulcrum and lower on the social-emotional end. Therefore, what parents expect does not equal what the schools expect and this causes an imbalance on the fulcrum signifying a learning gap in kindergarten. Similarly, in the study conducted by McAllister et al. (2005), parents viewed social skills and emotional health as important factors for their child's school readiness. By contrast, the study conducted by Piotrowski et al. (2000) indicated parents placed more emphasis on academic readiness skills while teachers placed a greater emphasis on behavior skills such as listening and sitting still. In a study conducted by Lin et al. (2003), teachers also valued children's social aspects learning more than their academic skills.

The reason for the discrepancy in parents' views on readiness and the schools' view on readiness is twofold. First, parents may not know "what" the academic expectations are for kindergarten. In fact, one parent in this study said if she had the opportunity to talk to a kindergarten teacher she would not know what questions to ask. The parents in this study had vague ideas of what their child needed to know before starting kindergarten and "how" to prepare them for kindergarten. As noted by the National Research Council (1999), low-income parents may not understand the importance of reading to their children on a daily basis beginning at birth and throughout early school years. The parents in this study claimed to read with their child 3-5 times a week and books were present in three homes. In comparison to the study conducted by The National Survey of Children's Health in 2003 and 2004, low-income families read to their children fewer times than higher families.

Second, low-income parents may not know "how" to help their child learn basic literacy and numeracy skills. As noted by Valladares and Moore (2009), low-income parents may have poor reading skills and not much experience with books—and, therefore, may not know how to engage their children in reading. In this study, there was evidence that all but one participant could read—one parent responded to the written flyer, one parent had an office job at a local hospital, one parent was going to community college, and one parent read text on a computer translated by an interpreter.

Emergent theory from the three assertions illustrates the school as a powerful player with the ultimate responsibility for a child's readiness and school success. In other words, a hierarchy of power exists with the school at the top making decisions for parents at the bottom of the hierarchy. Schools and school districts are organized by state

legislatures and have [some] control over what occurs in classrooms, specifically, what children should know and be able to do. Although learning standards and accountability measures are established for kindergarten through 12th grade, teacher autonomy may affect the fidelity of what and how these standards are taught. Conversely, there are no learning expectations or accountability measures for what children learn in the home from birth to age 5. As an educator, I understand the increased focus on academics in schools is due to the accountability standards set by No Child Left Behind Act.

For the most part, schools have control over the “what” and “how” children are taught in kindergarten and the years to follow, but have little control over what and how children are taught at home. And so, the focus is not whether or not children arrive at school ready to learn—the focus should be whether or not the school is ready to receive all children and motivate them to learn. With the schools having the bottom responsibility to ensure academic success for every child, they must become “ready schools.”

Recommendations on how to establish a ready school are discussed later in this chapter.

There is no question poverty has a negative impact on school readiness—and, poverty is a reality for many children in our schools. The United States Census Bureau reported the number of Americans living in poverty in 2009 was 43.6 million, which equates to one in seven Americans or one in five children (Lendman, 2010). For this study, participants were single mothers with incomes ranging from \$0.00 to \$27,655.00. These income levels fell below the 200% level of the federal poverty threshold. As noted by Zill and Collins (1995), children are less likely to be ready for kindergarten if they lived in poverty and their mother was a single parent, did not graduate from high school, and spoke a language other than English. These risk factors weigh heavily on the mother

and yet, in comparison to middle-class mothers who are educated, working outside the home, and married are also typically responsible for preparing their child for kindergarten.

According to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), child poverty is on the rise (Lendman, 2010). With America currently in economic crisis families with low economic status may become the new norm in our society. It is now more important than ever (a) schools become ready schools, (b) teachers understand how poverty and low-income status influences children's school readiness and respond to their individual needs so they achieve success, and (c) low-income parents know how to help their child get ready for kindergarten—both socially-emotionally and academically ready.

Although low-income parents are described as having limited resources and education, it is plausible they are capable of creating a positive home learning environment for their child (White, 1982). Some parents lack the skills and understanding that everyday learning opportunities cost little to nothing. For instance counting stairs, visiting the library, cooking, writing, and pointing out letters and sounds of objects and places in the environment. For this study parents placed a greater emphasis on social and emotional aspects than academics. As revealed in the study conducted Valladares and Moore (2009), low-income families were more likely to eat meals together than higher income families. I found this research interesting because as a middle-class educator and parent, engaging children in family conversations is highly valued.

The parents in this study reported positive learning experiences for their child. They believed they contributed to their child's readiness and preparation for kindergarten and were hopeful for their child's success in school. However, based on the interviews

and observation data, these parents seemed to lack the understanding of how to help their child acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills necessary for school readiness. This data affirmed what I already knew. The parents in this study seemed more concerned about their child being teased in school than having basic academic skills. During my experiences as a teacher and principal, I had more contacts from parents regarding their child's behavior in school than their academic progress. For instance, parents typically called the school if they believed their child was being bullied and typically did not contact the school if their child was struggling with reading.

Limitations of the Study

The research shows children from low-income families are less prepared for kindergarten and the findings from this study indicated the children of participants lacked the basic academic skills necessary for school readiness. The parents claimed to help their child write his/her name and learn about letters and numbers and yet, the purpose of this study was not to follow these children into kindergarten and determine whether or not they met the school's expectations.

Although only five parents were interviewed, this study was unique in giving low-income parents a voice regarding school readiness. Increasing the number of low-income participants and asking more questions about the kindergarten assessment may have provided additional data and insight into school readiness as well as enhanced the study. Interviewing a deaf parent through an interpreter was a limitation because I was unable to build a rapport with this mother, interpret her body language and voice intonation, and observe the home environment.

My overall perception was participants responded positively during their interview—which was limitation of the study. Perhaps parents answered questions in a way that pleased me because they wanted me to believe they read to their child on a regular basis and taught their child the skills needed for kindergarten. Although parents expressed confidence in their ability to prepare their child for kindergarten, their child's abilities may have affected their perceptions of readiness. For instance, if the child was struggling with writing his name or did not enjoy books, the parent may have felt she had not adequately prepared her child for kindergarten. Additionally, parents may have been motivated to respond positively to interview questions because of the monetary stipend and learning kit for their child. Utilizing more probing questions during the interviews might have provided additional information about the parents' perceptions.

Another limitation of the study is the lack of information on the physical well-being and motor development of children—one of the five domains of early childhood development. The research questions and parent responses focused more on the child's academic and social experiences rather than their health, rate of growth, and motor skills.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Further Study

The purpose of this small-scale qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of five low-income parents regarding their child's readiness for kindergarten. During the research process, four areas were identified for further investigation.

The first opportunity for further research may be to conduct the same study and increase the number of participants including fathers and parents from more than one

school district or community and from all socioeconomic levels. A larger-scale study may either affirm or disconfirm the findings that emerged from this study.

A second opportunity for further study may compare the views of low-income parents to middle- and high-income parents regarding school readiness. Or, the study might compare the perceptions of preschool and kindergarten teachers regarding their expectations for school readiness with the perceptions of parents of all income levels.

The third opportunity for further research may be to replicate the study conducted by Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (1999), which involved parents discussing their child's transition to kindergarten. This study may include observations of parents bringing their child to school on the first day and observations of their children interacting with peers. Action research may be considered to study Kindergarten Round-up and discover ways to make this transition program more beneficial to children and their families.

A fourth opportunity for further study may be to explore the correlation between the home environment during a child's early years and academic achievement in early grades. Researchers may explore the impact computer usage among preschoolers has on kindergarten readiness or the early literacy development of children beginning at birth through age 5. As noted by the National Research Council (2001), the environment in which a child lives has a positive impact on how the child develops and what the child learns. Or, this study might explore early literacy and oral language development of children beginning at birth through age 5.

Recommendations for Early Childhood Stakeholders

For this study, the critical definition of kindergarten readiness is the state of children as they enter school based on the five domains of children's early learning and

development identified by The National Education Goals Panel of 1997. These domains are important to school readiness and success and include (a) language and literacy development, (b) cognition and general knowledge, (c) social and emotional development, (d) physical well-being and motor development, and (e) approaches to learning (Kagan et al., 1995). In addition to the above domains, it is the schools' capacity to effectively serve all kindergarteners that walk through their doors (SERVE Institute, 2000). The critical definition of readiness brings this study to a full circle, as emergent theory reflects the ultimate responsibility of helping all children succeed falls on the schools.

The overarching recommendation for early childhood stakeholders including early childhood educators, school administrators, teachers, school board members, and policy makers is to embrace the characteristics of a “ready school.” I view the ready school as the umbrella for all other recommendations to address kindergarten readiness. In this section, I present five recommendations to establish a ready school. These recommendations align with the five domains of children's early learning and development of The National Education Goals Panel of 1997 (Kagan et al., 1995), the eight key dimensions of a ready school identified by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation Institute (2000), and the 10 essential attributes identified by The National Education Goals Panel (1998). The five recommendations support the school, parents, and children as well as enhance the new definition of kindergarten readiness. These recommendations are: (a) strong leadership; (b) smooth transitions; (c) engaging environments; (d) effective curriculum, instruction, and assessments; (e) and, family, school, and community partnerships (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Five Recommendations to Establish a Ready School.

| Recommendations | Major Themes |
|--|--|
| Strong Leadership | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a clear vision • Provide professional development • Adopt a definition of school readiness |
| Smooth Transitions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide Kindergarten Round-up • Provide Introduction-to-Kindergarten • Provide opportunities for collaboration among early childhood educators |
| Engaging Environments | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a warm, nurturing, and safe environment • Adopt a policy on bullying • Incorporate the five domains of early learning and development |
| Effective Curriculum and Assessments | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employ effective educational materials and instruction • Align school improvement efforts with assessments and student progress • Provide activities that respect cultural backgrounds and experiences |
| Family, School, and Community Partnerships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities for family engagement • Support and empower parents • Make connections with the community |

Recommendation 1: Strong Leadership

Establish a clear vision. Ready schools have strong leaders who establish and communicate a clearly defined vision of a “ready school”—one that’s committed to the success of every child. In order to develop a common vision and understanding of school readiness all early childhood stakeholders including early childhood educators, school administrators, teachers, school board members, policy makers, and parents including parents should partake in the development of this vision. In ready schools leaders involve teachers, support staff, and parents in goal-setting and decision-making that benefits students.

Provide professional development. In ready schools leaders are committed to the success of every teacher and staff member who interacts with children during the school day. Teachers and support staff participate in high quality systematic professional development and implement effective strategies for a ready school. School leaders share the emergent theory of school readiness with all early childhood stakeholders so the

difference between parents' perceptions and the schools' views regarding school readiness is understood (Figure 5).

Adopt a definition of school readiness. In ready schools all early childhood stakeholders including parents collectively develop a definition of school readiness. As a result of this study, a simple definition of kindergarten readiness was constructed to reflect the various interpretations found in the research as well as the perspectives of the parents who participated in the study. The new definition is comprised of ready schools, ready parents, and ready children. The definition presumes children starting kindergarten meet the age requirement and reads as follows:

Kindergarten readiness is comprised of ready schools, ready parents, and ready children. **Schools** embrace the unique characteristics, diverse experiences, cultural backgrounds, and development of every child, thereby providing clear learning expectations and effective instruction to support individual differences. **Parents** are empowered to assume a supportive role in their child's learning by providing a nurturing home environment and learning experiences that encourage their child's language and literacy development, general knowledge, social and emotional growth, and physical well-being. In partnership with schools, parents are involved in decisions that affect their child's learning. **Children** enter kindergarten with the excitement and curiosity to learn through engaging learning opportunities so they enjoy school and experience success in life.

Recommendation 2: Smooth Transitions

In order to ensure the smoothest possible transition for children starting kindergarten, ready school leaders ensure effective communication between home and school. School leaders create a list serve of all childcare providers, daycare agencies, preschools, and other early childhood programs so information regarding kindergarten transition programs can be efficiently communicated. In order to reach lower-income families, communication may include the local newspaper, television, school website, and flyers distributed in neighborhoods.

Provide Kindergarten Round-up. In order to enhance young children's transition to kindergarten, ready school leaders offer Kindergarten Round-up for all incoming kindergarten students. As part of this event parents have the opportunity to ask questions, share ideas, and provide suggestions on how to make their child's transition to school a smooth and beneficial process. Kindergarten Round-up is an excellent opportunity for teachers to make a positive and supportive first contact with parents in hopes of establishing strong school partnerships.

Provide Introduction-to-Kindergarten: Some children, especially children from low-income families, do not participate in a center-based program prior to kindergarten. In order to improve the transition to school for all children, ready school leaders offer Introduction-to-Kindergarten including free breakfast and transportation. In ready schools carpool schedules are coordinated to assist families with inflexible work schedules and limited transportation so they can attend school programs and events throughout the school year.

Provide opportunities for collaboration among early childhood teachers. In ready schools leaders provide opportunities for educators from feeder early education programs to meet with kindergarten teachers to discuss curriculum, pedagogy, learning expectations, philosophies, and individual students. This communication between programs will ease the children's transition to school as well as provide a sense of continuity for children and their parents.

Recommendation 3: Engaging Environments

Provide a warm, nurturing, and safe environment. In ready schools, teachers and staff welcome all children and their families not just the first time but everyday. Parents feel they can visit the school at any time on any given day. Teachers communicate high expectations for every child regardless of their abilities, economic status, cultural background, and experiences. Teachers inspire and engage their students in rich purposeful learning experiences so they are motivated to learn.

Adopt a policy on bullying. Ready schools are safe both physically and emotionally. The parents in this study were mostly concerned about their child being teased at school and so they need to be assured a policy is in place. In ready schools, leaders from preschool programs and K-12 school districts adopt or develop policies on bullying and communicate these guidelines to parents as well as to the students. In fact, legislatures in the state where this study took place passed a law for each school district to adopt an anti-bullying policy before July 1, 2012 (Bully Policy USA, 2011). This policy applies to public school premises, district owned vehicles, and prohibits students to engage in bullying and the retaliation of a victim, witness, or reporter of bullying. In addition to an anti-bullying policy, early education and elementary leaders need to (a)

provide professional development to improve teacher awareness and understanding of bullying, (b) adopt or develop relevant curriculum to raise awareness of bullying among students and promote pro-social skills to counter bullying, and (c) establish procedures for dealing with bullying issues (Rigby, 2002).

Because parents and teachers are often unaware of the teasing or bullying that occurs among children, it is important for parents and teachers to empower children by telling the bully to stop unwanted behavior and telling a trusted adult to help stop the bullying. As noted by Rigby (2002), younger children are easily influenced and less involved in bullying than older children, therefore, early intervention is best. Encouraging parents to talk with their child about school on a daily basis might make it easier for their child to go to approach them when issues arise.

Incorporate the five domains of early learning and development. In a ready school young children are actively engaged in a variety of learning activities that address the five domains of early learning and development including (a) language and literacy development, (b) cognition and general knowledge, (c) social and emotional development, (d) physical well-being and motor development, and (e) approaches to learning (Kagan et al., 1995). School leaders need to develop or adopt comprehensive early learning standards that build on these five domains.

Recommendation 4: Effective Curriculum Instruction, and Assessments

“Ready schools help children master literacy, numeracy, and other skills and use their knowledge to make sense of their world” (National Goals Panel, 1998, p. 10). This statement affirms the bottom line responsibility of the schools to ensure the achievement of every child.

As revealed in the findings of this study, if a child is eager and willing to start school then this child is eager and ready to learn. Teachers in ready schools understand how children learn best—they channel their students’ excitement and enthusiasm into rich learning experiences that help them make sense of their complex and exciting world. Teachers employ early learning standards to fit the learning styles and developmental needs of their students. As noted by Condrón (2009), ready teachers provide opportunities for their students to learn through exploration, curiosity, and enthusiasm. In a ready school professional development opportunities focus on brain development and ways to heighten student motivation through authentic and engaging learning experiences, thereby increasing academic success.

Employ effective educational materials and instruction. In ready schools, children are motivated to learn because materials and instructional methods are interesting, meaningful, and engaging. Teachers use effective curriculum and diverse instructional approaches to build upon children’s interests and prior knowledge and provide experiences that accommodate the variation in children’s abilities. Teachers participate in professional development opportunities that focus on (a) differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all students, (b) early brain development to understand how children learn best, (c) and high-quality interventions to help struggling learners target deficit skills.

Align school improvement efforts with assessment and student progress. In ready schools teachers ensure assessment procedures are aligned with early learning expectations. School improvement goals are driven by assessment results and students’ progress. Children who struggle learning skills and concepts receive support and targeted interventions to help them achieve at proficiency levels.

Provide opportunities that respect cultural backgrounds and experiences. In ready schools, teachers are ready for all children recognizing and understanding that each child is unique—with differences such as race, ethnicity, age, learning abilities, religious and political beliefs, prior experiences, and economic status. Teachers fall within the middle-class ranking and may not fully understand the lifestyle of various cultures including lower-income environments. In ready schools, leaders provide professional development on poverty and its' affects on student learning.

Recommendation 5: Family, School, and Community Partnerships

Provide opportunities for family engagement. In ready schools, parents are involved in their child's learning both at school and at home Teachers encourage parents to read with their child at least 20 minutes a day and provide other ways to promote learning at home. Families are invited to participate in classroom activities and attend various school events. School leaders must try to overcome the obstacles associated with family engagement such as transportation, work schedules, and childcare options for younger siblings. As noted by Dearing et al. (2006) in the literature review, when low-income parents are involved in their child's education the child has greater success in literacy learning than children whose families are not involved.

Readiness to learn is more than children's overall well-being and knowledge of basic literacy and numeracy skills but also their physical and social-emotional health. In ready schools, personnel communicate with families with information on sleep, good nutrition, how to create a nurturing environment and emotionally stimulating experiences.

Support and empower parents. In ready schools, parents have a voice. Parents are empowered to raise healthy and successful children by taking a greater role in their

child's education (Obama & Biden, 2010). Parents are involved in policy development and decisions that affect their child's education. As noted by Call (2010), children who know their parents and teachers are working together tend to be more emotionally secure in school.

In ready schools, leaders provide opportunities for parents to gather informally to discuss topics such as social-emotional readiness, bullying, and ways to enhance transition programs such as Kindergarten Round-up, Introduction-to-Kindergarten, and Open House. These gatherings or open forums may encourage positive relationships between families.

Early childhood educators provide parents with clear early learning standards for kindergarten so they know “what” skills and knowledge their child should know and be able to do in order to help build on these skills at home. More importantly, school leaders need to provide early learning parenting opportunities or programs so parents know “how” to help their child develop readiness skills at home. The early learning standards need to be easy to understand, target expectations for children age birth to five, and communicated to parents as early as possible.

Make connections to the community. Although schools have the bottom-line responsibility for helping children succeed, parents and communities share this responsibility. Ready school leaders reach out to the community for resources to ensure families have access to services and supports including health care, nutrition, and family services. School leaders seek funding sources and/or community sponsors to help provide school supplies, backpacks, and books for low-income families.

Final Thought

Get ready schools, because here they come! Children from low-income families are coming to kindergarten less prepared than their peers from families with higher incomes. The growing number of children living in poverty has the potential to make low-income the new norm in society. Now, more than ever, schools need to embrace the characteristics of a “ready school” because the school is ultimately responsible for a child’s readiness and school success. Now, more than ever, teachers need to understand the cultures of low-income environments so they can support children’s unique abilities. Now, more than ever, parents need to know how to help their child get ready for kindergarten both socially-emotionally *and* academically.

APPENDICES

Appendix A
Kindergarten Transition Practices Menu (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000)

Family-School Connections

- Contact with family during first few days of preschool or kindergarten
- Assessment of family needs
- Periodic contact with family
- Family participation in home-learning activities
- Family participation in the classroom and at school events
- Regular family meetings at school
- Family meetings about transition issues
- Family and preschool teachers meet with kindergarten teacher to share information about child
- Newsletters/resource materials
- Parent orientation after preschool and kindergarten start

Child-School Connections

- Preschool child connection with kindergarten teacher
- Preschool connection with elementary school for special school functions
- Preschool practice of kindergarten rituals
- Kindergarten activities incorporated from preschool
- Preschool teacher contact with former students
- Kindergarten support staff visits preschool children

Peer Connections

- Peer connections within the class
- Peer connections outside of school
- Peer connections with non-classmate peers who will be in kindergarten
- Preschool peer connections with kindergarten peers
- Group-based peer connections

Community Connections

- Inter-school collaboration about programs and classroom practices
- Identifying and communicating curriculum/community expectations for children
- Inter-school connection about specific child
- Connections with community agencies

Appendix B
Kindergarten Assessment

Kindergarten Assessment

Child's Name: _____ Birth Date: _____

Time of Assessment (include date): Fall ____ Winter ____ Spring ____

Fine Motor/Printing Skills

Child uses: Right Hand ____ Left Hand ____ Preference not established ____

- Child uses a correct pencil grasp.
- Child uses scissors effectively and with control.
- Child prints his/her name using a model.
(Note first name, first & last name, etc. and attach samples)
- Child prints his/her name independently.
(Note first name, first & last name, etc. and attach samples)

Upper Case Letters

Names

Points To

Identifies Sound ✓

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Z | U | P | L | H | D |
| Y | T | O | K | G | C |
| X | S | N | J | F | B |
| W | R | M | I | E | A |
| V | Q | | | | |

Lower Case Letters

Names

Points To

Identifies Sound ✓

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| e | j | n | r | v | z |
| d | i | m | q | u | y |
| c | h | l | p | t | x |
| b | g | k | o | s | w |
| a | f | | | | |

Sight Words (includes words from Scott Foresman, 2008)

| | | | | | |
|------|--------|-------|--------|------|------|
| is | to | the | can | am | I |
| a | like | have | but | in | my |
| we | little | for | he | not | of |
| look | see | two | me | they | you |
| with | go | she | up | four | and |
| one | red | that | at | are | five |
| from | here | three | do | was | get |
| what | green | where | blue | said | it |
| come | big | did | yellow | | |

Rhyming Words

cat _____ bug _____ hot _____
pig _____ pet _____

Independent Rhyming

_____ / _____ _____ / _____
_____ / _____ _____ / _____

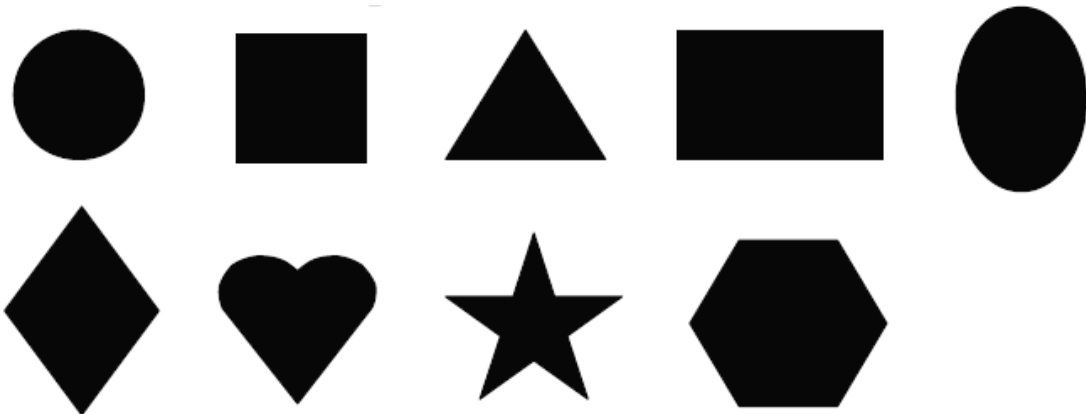
Parts of a Book (use any book)

Identifies: Cover _____ Title Page _____ Beginning _____ End _____

Basic Shapes

Names

Points To



Colors (use colored objects)

Names

Points To

red blue yellow green orange purple black white

Patterning (use manipulatives for color and shape patterns)

Can the child extend a pattern that you begin?

AB _____ AAB _____ ABC _____

Can the child construct a pattern independently?

AB _____ ABC _____ Other _____

Say, "use two colors/shapes" "use three colors/shapes"

Can the child correctly identify a pattern?

Is this a pattern? _____

What kind of a pattern is it?

Identifies by colors or shapes (red, blue, red, blue) _____

Identifies by algebraic name (AB, AAB, ABC) _____

Sorting and Classifying (use math manipulatives)

- The child can sort and classify objects according to similar attributes (size, shape, color). List manipulatives used.

Counting

- The child can rote count to: _____
- The child can count by 10's to: _____

Coins (use real coins)



tells value of √

Identifies: Penny _____ Nickel _____ Dime _____ Quarter _____

Numeral Identification

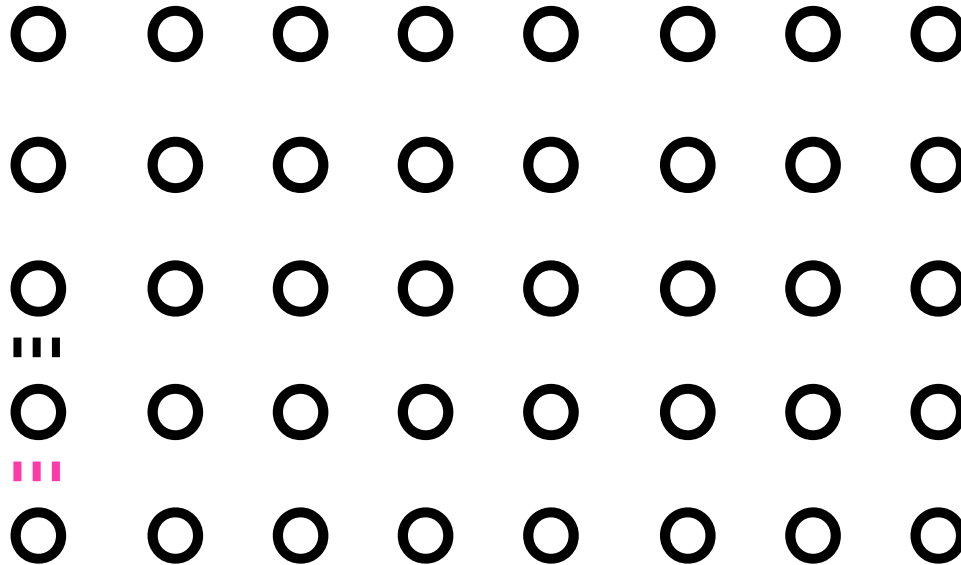
Names

Points To

| | | | |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 6 | 2 | 7 | 4 |
| 3 | 1 | 0 | 8 |
| 5 | 9 | 10 | 15 |
| 12 | 17 | 19 | 13 |
| 20 | 14 | 18 | 16 |
| 11 | 28 | 21 | 26 |
| 23 | 29 | 24 | 22 |
| 27 | 30 | 25 | 31 |

Counting Objects

The child can count objects to: _____



Days of the Week

- The child can say the days of the week in the correct order.
- The child can correctly identify the days of the week relative to the terms yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Social Development

- The child follows rules.
- The child cooperates with other children.
- The child listens to others.
- The child follows oral directions.
- The child can work independently.
- The child has an appropriate attention span.

I need your help!

Hello, my name is Roanne Malm
and I'm a UND student doing a research project on

Getting Reading for Kindergarten!

If you are willing to talk about your experiences and ideas
on getting your child ready for kindergarten,
please contact me for more information by May 8, 2011.

701-741-3769 or roanne.malm@und.nodak.edu

Interviews will be held during the month of May.

Thank you!



A limited number of parents will be selected for this research project.
Each participant will receive \$25.00 and a free learning kit for their child.

Appendix D
Request to Conduct Research

Request to Conduct Research in the Grand Forks Public Schools

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| Date: April 8, 2011 | Name: Roanne E. Malm | Phone: 701-741-3769 |
| Fax or Email: roanne.malm@gfschools.org | Research Advisor: Dr. Pauline Stonehouse | |
| Address: 231 Centennial Drive Stop 7189 | College or Dept.: Educational Leadership | |
| Research Title: Perceptions of Five Low-Income Parents on School Readiness | | |
| <p>Give a brief description of your research. Attach additional papers if necessary. Please attach sample copies of assessment instrument, tests, or communications to be used:</p> <p>Some children are not ready for kindergarten consequently causing a learning gap and placing the low performers at risk of school failure. I am requesting to conduct a qualitative study to explore the perceptions of parents regarding kindergarten readiness.</p> <p>To best learn the perceptions of low-income parents, 5-6 parents will be selected to participate in a two-phase individual interview process. Each phase (interview) will involve the participants responding to a predetermined list of six questions that relate to school readiness. The second phase (interview) will include one question that involves participants looking at a kindergarten assessment, sharing their comments, and talking about how they develop various areas of knowledge with their own children.</p> <p>The parents selected for the study will have a child age 4-5 who is the oldest child in the family, on the Grand Forks Public Schools Head Start waiting list, and eligible to start kindergarten in the fall of 2011. Parents of children enrolled at Viking School will not be included as the researcher is the principal of this school and parents may feel uncomfortable or intimidated by this association.</p> <p>The research reveals that it is the economically disadvantaged children who begin school significantly behind their peers and have difficulty throughout school and in life. Understanding parents' perspectives of their child's school readiness will inform educators of ways to improve the transition from home to school, specifically for low-income children, and help close the learning gap that occurs in kindergarten. The information collected from this research will contribute to the development of a new definition of kindergarten readiness that embraces a parent perspective. The new definition of readiness may be recognized and used by early childhood advocates at a local, state, and national level.</p> <p>The director of the Grand Forks Head Start program will provide a list of parents who meet the specific criteria for the study. A flyer will be mailed to participants the end of April and interviews will be scheduled in May. In order to ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used in place of parents' names and children's names (if mentioned) in the study. Attached is a copy of the consent form submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB).</p> | | |
| Number of students needed for research: N/A | Number of teachers needed for research: N/A | Grade Level or Department: Head Start/Grand Forks Public Schools |
| What schools are you interested in conducting the research in? N/A | | |
| Will confidential records be required? (If yes, indicate type.) Data from parent interviews will be kept confidential. | | Length of time required to complete the research: May 2011 |
| To be completed by School District Official: | | |
| Approved: | | Not Approved: |
| Assistant Superintendent Signature: | | Date: |
| Approved to conduct research in the following schools: N/A | | |

Appendix E
Informed Consent Form

TITLE: *Perceptions of Five Low-Income Parents on School Readiness*

PROJECT DIRECTOR: *Roanne E. Malm*

PHONE NUMBER: *701-741-3769*

DEPARTMENT: *Educational Leadership, University of North Dakota*

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH

A person who is to participate in the research must give his or her informed consent to such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks on the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

You are invited to participate in a research study about getting your child ready for kindergarten. You have been selected to be in this study for three reasons: (a) your oldest child is age 4 or 5; (b) your oldest child is starting kindergarten in the fall of 2011; and, (c) your child is on the Head Start waiting list and possibly not enrolled in a pre-kindergarten program.

The purpose of this research study is to hear what parents have to say about getting their child ready for kindergarten. You will be asked to respond to questions related to school readiness and talk about the experiences at home that may help prepare your child for school.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?

Approximately 5-6 parents are expected to participate in two individual interviews. Individual interviews will take place at a location of the participants choosing.

HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THIS STUDY?

Participants selected for the study will participate in a two-phase individual interview process. Each phase (each interview) will take 60 minutes and involve the participants responding to a predetermined list of six questions that relate to school readiness. The participants' involvement in the study will not exceed 120 minutes, which includes two 60-minute interviews.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?

You have expressed interest in participating in this study and therefore, received this consent form to read before your first individual interview. With this consent form is a confirmation of the date, time and place of your interview.

Participants selected for the study will participate in a two-phase interview process. The first phase will last 60 minutes and involve participants responding to a list of six predetermined questions with probes relating to school readiness. The first 15 minutes of the 60-minute interview will be spent reviewing and signing the consent form and getting to know one another.

The second interview will last 60 minutes and involve the participants responding to a list of six different predetermined questions with probes relating to school readiness. One of the six questions will involve participants looking at a kindergarten assessment, sharing their comments, and talking about how they develop some of the skills and knowledge with their own children (e.g., writes name, identifies letters, cooperates with others). Participants will have the opportunity to provide additional information or possible suggestions to help their child get ready for kindergarten.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. Although it is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, the researcher has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize emotional or psychological distress. You may experience sadness when talking about your first child starting kindergarten. If you become upset by questions, you may stop at any time or choose not to answer a question.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?

You may not benefit personally from being in this study. However, the hope is that, in the future, other parents may benefit from this study. Your thoughts and ideas about getting your child ready for kindergarten may inform educators how to improve young children's transition to kindergarten. The knowledge gained from this study will add to the research on school readiness.

WILL IT COST ME ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

You will not have costs for participating in this research study. If you need childcare during your interview, the researcher will make childcare arrangements at no cost to you. If you need transportation to meet with the researcher for your interview, arrangements will be made at no cost to you.

WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?

Each parent that participates in the two-phase individual interview process will receive a \$25.00 stipend after the first phase and a collection of learning tools for their preschooler following the second and final phase.

WHO IS FUNDING THE STUDY?

The University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified. Government agencies and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board may review your study record.

Any information that is obtained in this study and that can be identified with your will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of using a different name rather than your real name in the study so that you cannot be identified. The actual data (with your real name) will be safeguarded in a home safe and only accessed by the researcher, who will shred the documents after three years.

Prior to your interview, the researcher will ask you for permission to record the interview using a digital recorder. The text will then be transcribed into a Word document, which will be used for data analysis. You have the right to review and edit the recordings. Other than you, the only other person who will have access to the recordings is the researcher. After the responses have been documented and coded, the researcher will erase the recordings from both recording formats. The interview data will be used for the purpose of this research study and publication of dissertation.

IS THIS STUDY VOLUNTARY?

Your participating is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS?

The researcher conducting this study is Roanne E. Malm. Before you decide whether or not to participate in the research, please ask any questions you may have now. You can contact the researcher at roanne.malm@und.edu or 701-741-3769. If you later have

questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact Roanne E. Malm or UND advisor, Dr. Pauline Stonehouse at pauline.stonhouse@und.edu or 701-777-4163.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at 701-777-4279. Please call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone else.

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subject's Name: _____

Signature of Subject

Date

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