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Decision-Making Perspectives for Kindergarten Entry

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DECISION-MAKING PERSPECTIVES
FOR KINDERGARTEN ENTRY:
A Qualitative Study of Practicing Teachers
and Their Views on Kindergarten Readiness

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Education

By

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigated the factors teachers utilize when recommending parents delay or not delay kindergarten entry for their child. Fourteen preschool and kindergarten teachers representing the demographic areas of rural, urban, suburban, and private schools, were interviewed to gather data concerning school readiness skills, learning differences between genders, kindergarten screening, state standards, and situations for recommended kindergarten delay. Consistently among all demographic groups, teachers are of the same opinion in the following issues: first, children need to be evaluated individually for kindergarten entrance; second, social-emotional growth is the greatest readiness factor; third, academic rigors of kindergarten require attention of parents and teachers in the decision to delay or not delay kindergarten entry; fourth, children with questionable readiness are at an advantage if given an extra year before entrance.

KEYWORDS: delayed-entry, school readiness, academic redshirting, age-at-entrance, achievement, preschool experience

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Chapter 1

“Kindergarten is not what it used to be.”

This phrase has become commonplace among teachers of preschool-aged children. Kindergarten’s structure, curriculum, expectations, and length-of-day have changed drastically since most parents and teachers were themselves enrolled in kindergarten; one newspaper has even stated that kindergarten is “the new first grade” (Weber, 2006, July 25, pp.1, 3).

There is incredible pressure upon kindergarten and preschool teachers to prepare young children for subsequent education. Teachers have to weigh the many factors that constitute readiness, and discuss their recommendations for kindergarten entry with parents at the end of the year. Birth date relative to entry (this requirement may vary from district to district), maturity, growth, confidence, readiness, personal experiences, and a host of other variables are involved in the decision to delay or not delay kindergarten entry.

In addition, teachers and parents must navigate divergent philosophies, conflicting research reports, and varying perspectives to determine kindergarten entry for each child. The challenge these negotiations entail comprises the research problem in this study.

Divergent Philosophies

For educators, the decision to delay or not delay kindergarten entry is rooted in the philosophies of child development. The philosophies of development are across the

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spectrum including maturationism, behaviorism, environmentalism, and constructivism. Each philosophy merits review. However, teachers frequently develop their *own* belief system regarding “best practices” in child development through interaction with these competing philosophies; accordingly, a few generally-recognized belief systems will also be discussed.

Maturationism.

The maturationist philosophy is based on the assertion that child development is biological and only time can mature a child. Nothing from the outside can perform this internal process. Arnold Gesell, the father of this philosophy, examined the sequential development of children and determined growth to be both natural and inevitable. He encouraged parents to be perceptive of a child’s growth and to consider growth on a larger scale. Without neglecting the significance of parental guidance in development, Gessell urges appreciation of natural growth mechanisms, thereby relieving anxiety and tension for both parent and child. Parents foster a child with deference to individual rates of development; some children simply need more time (or to use Gessell’s words, “the gift of time”) (Gessell & Ilg, 1949, pp.290-296).

Maturationists warn the natural order of development can become reversed when teachers and parents force symbolic (spoken or written words) and derived (cultural knowledge) learning experiences on children who are not developmentally ready (Elkind, 1989, pp. 138-144). Young children need time to explore and talk about their experiences before undergoing the rigor of formal instruction; without these foundational opportunities, learning cannot take place. Children can appear to have mastery over certain concepts, but may in fact be demonstrating merely verbal knowledge rather than

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true understanding (Elkind, 1988, p.78). Hurrying children on to a formal education for which they are not developmentally ready can have negative long-term effects, including academic failure, lack of motivation, suicide, drug use, depression, anxiety, delinquency, and an increase in psychosomatic complaints (Elkind, 1988).

Environmentalism.

A counter-theory to maturationism is environmentalism. Environmentalism is represented by such theorists as John Watson. As the father of environmental thought, John Watson saw more value in the influence of environmental factors upon learning and development than that of natural biological factors. Sometimes referred to as classical behaviorism, Watson insisted on observing behavior at the most detailed level. His analysis applied to every area of human life from emotional responses to language. His unit of analysis was the “habit.” The habit was defined as, “the coordinated and consistent act that develops in a given situation through repetition, rather than some supposed phenomenon from mental life” (Moore, 2011). His conviction in this regard prompted his claim that “he could take an infant and raise it to become any type of specialist that (he) might select – doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and yes even beggar-man and thief....” Behaviorism, (as cited in Noel & Newman, 2008). This philosophy placed the greatest emphasis on behavior, the stimulus and response, over the conscious mental functioning of humans. The central variable in child development is the environment (Moore, 2011).

Behaviorism.

B.F. Skinner also embraced the behavioral analysis of John Watson; however, he had an entirely different approach which is sometimes referred to as radical behaviorism.

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Skinner, himself defined his position stating, “I don’t believe I coined the term radical behaviorism, but when asked what I mean by it, I have always said, ‘the philosophy of a science of behavior treated as a subject matter in its own right apart from internal explanations, mental or physiological’”(as cited in Moore, 2011). B.F. Skinner did not disregard genetics, but still argued development on the basis of learned behavior; within his considerations, the principles of operant conditioning are central. Behavior is either learned or unlearned depending on the consequences resulting; good consequences encourage continuation, while bad consequences do not. A repeated pattern of behavior eventually becomes automatic. Therefore, learning is “a direct result of experience or practice that leads to a change in behavior” (as cited in Ediger, 2012). Educators and parents that share this philosophy may rely upon schools to remedy their children’s deficiencies through trial and error. Students will go to kindergarten and understand the appropriate response to a school setting. School becomes a learned response (Ediger, 2012).

Constructivism.

Constructivism values the environment for learning in connection with the active participation of the learner. Due to the experiences in their environment, each student learns by what is constructed in his or her mind. Development occurs as a child interacts with his or her world. Constructivists (with varying approaches) include Jean Piaget, Maria Montessori, and L.S. Vygotsky. Piaget is known for the maturational stages of development (Piaget, Jean & Inhelder, Barbel, 1969). A child moves through the maturational sequences with increasing observation of learning to the use of words and symbols. Learning takes place as a student adjusts his or her mental function with new

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experiences. All children go through the maturational stages; however, each child is an active participant in moving forward in the sequencing of their individual learning. Children initiate most of the activities for development and learning; therefore, the physical environment and curriculum in kindergarten is important. Teachers act more as facilitators for learners to find solutions, explore, and experiment to gain understanding of the content. L.S. Vygotsky, a social constructivist, viewed instruction as prefacing development. New learning depends not on the passage of time, but on guidance and support from teachers, parents, or even peers; as a result, age should be immaterial to school entry criteria. Children are empowered to be active in the learning process. Parents and educators that are of the constructivism philosophy closely consider the classroom environment, materials, experiences in order for children to be actively involved in their learning (Nagowah & Nagowah, 2009; Ediger, 2012; Marshall, 2003).

Belief Systems

The practices in the classroom are directly linked to a teacher's belief system. In addition to maturationism, environmentalism, behaviorism, and constructivism, a teacher's belief system is also closely connected to the retention and the delaying of kindergarten, and can be comprised of nativist, diagnostic prescriptive, interactionist, or remediationist theories (Smith & Shepard, 1988).

Teachers who are nativists hold more closely to Gessell's thought of the "gift of time." These teachers would agree that not all children are ready for kindergarten at the age of five and would benefit from waiting another year for entry. Children's preparation for school is based on each individual child's physiological development of abilities.

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These abilities develop in stages and are outside the influence of teachers or even parents. Internal mechanisms govern learning. Children are unable to close the gaps in learning due to the internal timetable of development; therefore a child six months behind will continue to be six months behind. Nativists advocate delaying entry for children that do not demonstrate readiness either by waiting a year with an extra year of preschool or placement in a transitional kindergarten (Shepard & Smith, 1988).

A teacher with a diagnostic prescriptive belief would feel that kindergartners can best learn once their abilities and disabilities are recognized and addressed. Age appropriate children for kindergarten that demonstrate lack of readiness have traits that are not intact such as auditory memory or visual-motor integration. Once these traits are identified, direct intervention is utilized. If a student's deficits are addressed, progress will occur. Through changes in instruction and academic assistance, students are able to progress the same as their peers in kindergarten (Smith & Shepard, 1988).

Interactionist teachers would also hold to a similar stage theory of development held by nativists; however, these teachers believe that readiness develops in a combination of the school environment with a child's developmental stage. Interactionists would believe the average kindergarten class contains students at a variety of developmental stages, and since these differences will continue to persist, the classroom needs to be an environment where all will succeed, regardless of learning ability. A key to learning is the social configuration of the classroom. Teachers can assess students' readiness through the use of the environment of the classroom, the interest of students with different materials, and class relationships. Students come into kindergarten with various abilities and stages and they will leave kindergarten with

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various abilities and stages. It is not a sign of failure (Ediger, 2012; Smith & Shepard, 1988).

Remediationists consider all age appropriate children ready for kindergarten. A child's readiness is a product of his or her experience, environment, parental input, and abilities. Children that are lacking in readiness skills can close the gaps through the right educational programs. Teachers can influence students' readiness and ability to learn. Remediating teachers provide help by accommodations for achievement differences, training and reinforcement, and encouragement to work hard (Shepard & Smith, 1988).

Significance of the Study

Maturationism, environmentalism, behaviorism, and constructivism are all competing philosophies of child development. Belief systems such as nativist, diagnostic prescriptive, interactionist, and remediationist, are birthed out of these philosophies. An understanding of the reviewed philosophies and belief systems of child development is the underpinning for this study. The chosen philosophy or belief system of educators and parents determine the educational choices for children. Kindergarten is the foundation of formal schooling. The time of entry into kindergarten is a major decision for many parents. Parents look many times to preschool and kindergarten teachers for advice and guidance in this decision. A significant amount of the research addresses the issue of academic readiness and achievement; however, this decision involves more than academics. The social, emotional, and mental abilities of children are as important. Children vary in development. Through classroom experience, teachers understand the importance of school readiness. The purpose of this study is to determine the factors that

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preschool and kindergarten teachers utilize in helping parents make the decision to delay or not delay kindergarten entry. Subsequently, the study investigates the new role of preschool and kindergarten teachers in regards to the readiness factors.

Research Questions:

1. What factors do teachers utilize when recommending parents delay or not delay kindergarten entry for their child?
2. How have these factors redefined the role of preschool and kindergarten teachers?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Teachers and parents not only have to examine their beliefs for kindergarten entry, but they also have to navigate the existing research. A study of this literature reveals a number of salient factors that affect parent and school decisions about kindergarten readiness. This chapter will reveal some of these factors.

Academic Redshirting

According to Frey, a growing number of parents are choosing to delay kindergarten entry. This is known as academic redshirting; it is a response to try to counteract social promotion and retention (Frey, 2005). Rates of academic redshirting range from seven percent (DiPerna & Graue, 2000) to nine percent (Lincove & Painter, 2006) and students that have birthdates right before the state/district cutoff date for kindergarten entry (DiPerna & Graue, 2000). Parents that choose to delay a child's entry into kindergarten often do not consult the school about their decision (May & Kundert, 1995). Whether accurate or not, parents' perceptions of what is taking place at the local school play a role in the decision to delay or not delay kindergarten (Bellissimo, Sacks, & Mergendoller, 1995). In a study by Noel and Newman (2003), fifteen mothers were studied to inquire how they determined to delay their child's entry into kindergarten. Two groups emerged from the study. One group held their children back due to personal philosophies and experiences. The other group made their decision based on the characteristics of their child. Neither group made their decision based on age.

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Socioeconomic Factors.

Parents that choose to delay kindergarten tend to have a higher level of education (Elder & Lubotsky, 2009; Grissom, 2004; Noel & Newman, 2003; Noel & Newman, 2008). These parents are typically white, suburban, and middle-class. They feel that children can benefit from another year of growth and development, particularly if their children have late birthdays or show a lack of maturity (Frey, 2005). The majority of academic redshirted students are from economically advantaged families (Datar, 2006). The socioeconomic status of many of these families provides academic advantages for developing readiness skills through experiences such as preschool programs, story times, music classes, and trips to the zoo or farm compared to their lower-class counterparts; these academic advantages are measureable through the eighth-grade year (Elder & Lubotsky, 2009; Meisels, 1992). A higher percentage of European-American students (six percent) start kindergarten at the age of six (compared with just under two percent of African-American students) (Brooks & Brown, 2010).

Race, gender, and the free-and-reduced lunch program are all larger factors in school success. By sixth grade, the race of students and their participation in the free-and-reduced lunch program is thirteen times more significant an issue compared to students' age at the time of school entry (Jones & Mandeville, 1990).

Gender.

In addition to middle class students, children more likely to be redshirted are males (DiPerna & Graue, 2000; Grissom, 2004; Lincove & Painter, 2006; May & Kundert, 1995). At the time of kindergarten entry, six year old males achieve significantly higher reading scores compared to their five year old counterparts.

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Researchers continue to track the same level of achievement through the students' fifth and sixth grade year (Crosser, 1991). The same study reports only a slight difference in achievement for math scores in comparing the six year old and five year old males. Similarly, females that were delayed also had a slight advantage in total scores. However, males that were delayed had the biggest advantage in achievement scores overall (Crosser, 1991). Females in second and third grade scored significantly higher in language skills test scores than all males collectively (delayed or not delayed) (Sweetland & De Simone, 1987).

The gender factor has long been researched as seen in a 1963 study by Hall that concluded overage boys and girls have higher scores in achievement tests than underage boys and girls. Boys that entered first grade before the age of six years and six months scored lower than any other group. The differences in the achievement test scores, between older and younger students, particularly boys, continue to increase as these students progress from third to sixth grade. At one time the Highline District of suburban Seattle considered delayed entrance to first-grade boys that were at least six years and six months old if rigid achievement standards were maintained without school readiness screening (Hall, 1963).

Outside of test performance, surveyed parents claim boys have more problems with attention than girls (Kinard & Reinherz, 1986). Studies support the claim: independent of age, boys are referred more for mental health services than girls (DeMeis & Stearns, 1992; Kinard & Reinherz, 1986). Boys born later in the year compared to boys born earlier in the year are significantly more likely to be referred to psychological services for academic problems in the primary grades. These (DiPasquale, Moule, &

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Flewelling, 1980) attention and behavior difficulties may be another reason males are redshirted more often. The teachers' biased approach with male students is the greatest challenge in the classroom (all males do not have difficulties in school) according to a study by Gredler (1980). Erroneous perceptions of teachers may be the source of the number of psychological referrals of young males.

Race.

The study of six Virginia junior kindergartens found young poor males were more likely to be in "junior kindergartens" (classes designed for incoming kindergarten students with questionable readiness skills) compared to the least likely of non-poor, older females (Walsh et al., 1991). In three school districts in Southern California, younger boys were more likely to be delayed in school entry by the parents or retained in kindergarten. A relationship was also found in choosing to delay entry or being retained with ethnicity. Younger non-minority (termed "Anglos" in the study) boys were more likely to be delayed for kindergarten entrance by their parents than other children. Latino boys were more likely to enter school younger, to be identified as at risk, and to be retained at the end of kindergarten (Cosden, Zimmer, & Tuss, 1993).

Another research study compared achievement test scores of older and younger African-American students and white students. Older nine-year-old white students significantly scored higher in achievement tests compared to younger nine-year-old white students. The difference in the achievement scores decreased when the students were tested at age thirteen; the differences in scores were no longer evident at the time of testing at seventeen. The results are similar when older nine-year-old African-American students significantly score higher in achievement tests compared to younger nine-year-

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old African-American students; however, the differences in scores continued through age thirteen with the African-American students. Again, by age seventeen, the differences in test scores between younger and older African-American students are not evident (Langer, Kalk, & Searls, 1984).

Birth-date Effect

DiPasquale's study on the "birth-date effect" supports the idea that some children are just not ready to perform first grade work due to age (DiPasquale et al., 1980). Birth-dates were the greatest factor for academic achievement throughout elementary school. Older students with birthdates in September, October, and November scored higher in reading, math, and general knowledge compared to younger students with birthdates in June, July, and August. There was also a slight difference in the areas of self-control, social interaction, and approaches to learning in favor of older students with autumn birthdates (Oshima & Domaleski, 2006).

Symbolic and derived instruction at early ages may have positive short-term effects, but it also may have negative long-term results. Symbolic and derived instruction is learning that involves written and spoken words passed down through culture. It can focus on the past or future experiences. Young children are concerned about the present. They learn in a manipulative and fundamental nature. Using the senses and exploring is the basis for their developing knowledge. Children developmentally are not ready for symbolic and derived instruction (Elkind, 1989, pp.138-144).

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Birth-date and Retention.

Children that are older at the time of kindergarten entry reduce their probability of repeating kindergarten, first, or second grade by thirteen percent (Elder and Lubotsky, 2009). In a study by DeMeis and Stearns (1992), students that are younger are placed significantly more often in pre-first-grade classes than are older classmates. Chilean students that delayed entrance to first grade for a year decreased their probability of retention in first grade by two percent. There is a persistent effect through fourth and eighth grades with increases in test scores by at least 0.3 standard deviations (McEwan & Shapiro, 2008).

Age at the time of school entry was found to be a significant factor through sixth grade in a study of South Carolina students in first, second, third, and sixth grade. In first grade the risk of failure due to a late birthday is as much as ten percent, compared to only three percent by third and sixth grade. In a group of students that had to repeat a grade, a higher proportion of students had late birthdays (Autumn). Even as the smallest factor, age still has a significant effect on student achievement. Both overage and underage students were in the high risk category for academic failure (Jones & Mandeville, 1990).

Birth-date and Behavior.

In addition to lessening retention, being older also reduces the probability of being diagnosed with a learning disability such as ADD or ADHD by almost three percent (Elder & Lubotsky, 2009). According to a study by Maddux (1980), a younger first-grader is more likely to be labeled as learning disabled compared to an older first-grader. The risk of a learning disability label is a possibility as younger students continue through elementary and junior high school (Maddux, 1980).

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In a study of 699 students kindergarten through twelfth grade, researchers found a pattern of students born in later months of the year (September, October, November) compared to students born in earlier months of the year (February, March, April) were more likely to be referred for services for difficulties in social behavior. Male students comprised the majority of the group. The referral rates for students were not associated with age at the time of school entry, rather the chronological age (birth months) of students. Teachers' perceived or actual observations of students are the basis for the referrals. The study implored educational professionals for sensitivity in evaluating the various normal development patterns of children. Temporary skill levels does not equate with long term failure. Older students should not be referred for special services and younger students ignored on the basis of age. It is essential for teachers not to make decisions or referrals solely on age or month of birth (DeMeis & Stearns, 1992).

Birth-date and Academic Performance.

Another perspective to consider with the issue of birth-date effect is a child's academic performance. In a study by Oshima (2006), age was found to be a larger factor than gender in academic achievement scores in the primary grades (kindergarten through second grade). Depending on the grade level, the factor of age resulted in as much as seven percent of variation in test scores. The academic performance gap dependent on age is evident in kindergarten and decreases rapidly in first through third grades; the performance gap persists through fifth grade and disappears by middle school.

There are many other research findings of academic achievement comparing younger and older students. In research of twenty-nine pairs of third-graders from upstate New York, overaged children consistently scored significantly higher (significant at the

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.01 level) than their younger classmates in the areas of vocabulary, comprehension, arithmetic fundamentals. Arithmetic reasoning scores were significantly higher with a confidence at the .05 level (Carroll, 1963).

A study in Ireland investigated the reading skills of students in correlation with the students' month of birth. The results concluded children with earlier birth months (months at the beginning of the calendar year resulting in older children by fall enrollment) had better early spelling and non-word reading attainment. The early spelling and non-word reading skills disappeared as children grew older; however, reading attainment lasted through the early school years until year seven in the school system of Ireland (McPhillips & Jordan-Black, 2009).

Age at kindergarten entry can play a significant role when evaluating the reading skills of younger and older children. Ninety-six percent of the variance in reading proficiency of students is attributed to a child's natural time of growth and maturity. There is a natural positive progression from kindergarten to third grade in reading proficiency skills. There is not a discernible difference when comparing the reading proficiency skills and reading proficiency growth of kindergarten and third-grade European-American students and African-American students when the groups entered kindergarten when first eligible (Brooks & Brown, 2010).

Early kindergarten entrants were at a disadvantage in beginning school according to a study by Miller (1967). On three out of six group readiness measures these students scored significantly lower than average-age students. By second grade the readiness differences disappeared and by fourth grade there was no significant difference in achievement between the age groups (Miller & Norris, 1967).

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Paradoxically, some studies find no evidence that the age of kindergarten entry affect boys and girls differently. Older kindergarteners scored higher on literacy and math tests; however, these differences in testing scores disappeared by third grade (Stipek & Byler, 2001). A hundred and twenty-eight kindergarten students from northeast Texas were given the reading readiness test and the results concluded there was no significant difference for gender or for age (Kolstad, Hammack, & Jernigan, 1990).

Long Term Results of School Entry Age

Elder and Lubotsky (2008) makes a poignant statement: “If older children were able to learn at a faster rate, one would expect the achievement gaps to widen from one year to the next.” This statement is an indictment of the idea that there are benefits to delaying a child’s entry into kindergarten. The authors’ comments refer to the idea that older children learn faster than younger children; if this is true, the achievement gaps should continue throughout a child’s school career. Older students ought to outperform their younger peers at all grade levels compared to their younger peers. The gaps should continue to widen based on age. The following studies illustrate a different trend. Older students at the time of school entry perform better academically in the primary grades compared to younger students. The subsequent studies only vary in the time the age advantages diminish and eventually disappear.

Achievement scores and IQ scores were compared among older and younger students in second, fifth, and seventh grade. Only in second grade did older students score higher in IQ tests. In achievement scores there was no difference. In the fifth-and

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seventh-grade IQ and achievement scores, there were no significant differences between the older and younger students (Kundert, May, & Brent, 1995).

Academic difference narrows rapidly by the time a student reaches third grade (Oshima & Domaleski, 2006; Shepard & Smith, 1988). There is only modest significance of being an older third-grader compared to younger third-grader in academic achievement (McPhillips & Jordan-Black, 2009). There is a diminishing difference in fourth and fifth grade, and the difference is near zero in middle school (Oshima & Domaleski, 2006).

Kinard and Reinherz's longitudinal study found dissimilarities in academic and behavioral measures based on age at the time of school entry, but again these differences disappear by the time students reach the third and fourth grade. The researchers attribute the divergence to information processing skills which consisted of a child's body awareness and control, visual-perceptual motor skills, and language skills. The academic benefits overall for delaying entry are only evident through the early elementary grades; the benefits decline and eventually disappear by middle school (Lincove & Painter, 2006; McPhillips & Jordan-Black, 2009).

Sweetland and DeSimone's study (1987) of one hundred fifty-two students found that the youngest children born in the fourth quartile performed more poorly on academic measures than their older peers in the same grade level, a trend continuing from first through fourth grade. The students still achieved above the national norms, but consistently scored below their older peers. The results were less pronounced as the students entered the fifth and sixth grade. This study concluded that mental age, or IQ, is a better predictor of school achievement than chronological age.

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A study of six-year-old and five-year-old first graders found that the six-year-olds had significantly higher achievement scores in reading, language, math, and total skills compared to the five-year-olds. When the students were retested at fourth grade, the results were the same. When these students reached eighth grade, there were no significant differences in math, language, and total achievement scores. However, reading scores were still higher for those that were age six in first grade compared to age five (Davis, Trimble, & Vincent, 1980).

Once again, in an urban district of Pittsburgh a study of first-graders demonstrated a significant effect of a child's age at entrance in first grade to first grade achievement. Four years later students were retested and no significant effects were found between age and achievement. School success was not based on age of entrance at first grade (Bickel, Zigmond, & Strayhorn, 1991). Cameron and Wilson's study (1990) found that there was a small but statistically significant achievement difference when comparing older and younger students in the second and fourth grade. However, the delayed older students had no advantage in their achievement scores compared to their grade-level peers.

Research studies extend beyond elementary school, middle school students were studied for the "entry age effect." Nine hundred and thirty-three students from a middle-class suburban school were given the South Carolina Basic Skills Assessment. The older students in sixth grade scored significantly higher on reading achievement compared to the younger students in the same grade. The study found that there were no significant differences in seventh or eighth grade (Hauck & Finch, 1993).

By the preceding studies, it appears the long term benefits of older students only endure for a small amount of time, however, a study for science education by Bell &

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Daniels (1990), investigated the persistence of the birth date effect through high school. Science surveys were given to eleven, thirteen, and fifteen-year-old students. At age thirteen, summer born children were more likely to be a part of the low-ability group; fifteen year old students with summer birth dates were more likely to be a part of the low-ability group by one quarter of a standard deviation compared to students with autumn birth dates. The differences in favor of older students were in the areas of reading information from graphs, tables, and charts, representing this information, interpreting the presented information, applying science concepts, and planning parts of investigation. The only area of non-significance was making and interpreting observations. The study conceded the differences could be the factor of teaching methods, but the effect of the summer birth-date still needs to be considered (Bell & Daniels, 1990).

Preschool Experience

Elder and Lubotsky (2008) conclude that it is really not “the age factor” that determines success in kindergarten and subsequent schooling; rather, it is the experience and skills of students coming into kindergarten. Children that are a year older have the benefit of an extra year of learning, experiences, and enrichment activities. Early childhood education makes a significant difference regardless of the number of years a child has been enrolled in a preschool. Young children performed well in kindergarten entry tests if they had received at least two years of preschool experience. Years of preschool experience negated age as a factor for kindergarten entry (Gullo & Burton, 1992).

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According to Furlong and Quirk, preschool experience, not chronological age, is of greatest advantage in the improvement of a child's school readiness. School readiness is a predictor of future academic success (Furlong & Quirk, 2011). Interestingly, a comparison of preschool and kindergarten teachers found that preschool teachers had higher expectations for kindergarten readiness than did kindergarten teachers. Eighty percent of preschool teachers listed more skills as very important for kindergarten readiness compared to eighty percent of the kindergarten teachers (Hains, Fowler, Schwartz, Kottwitz, & Rosenkoetter, 1989).

According to a study of Hispanic second-graders, there is greater benefit from a quality preschool experience compared to an earlier date for kindergarten entrance (Furlong & Quirk, 2011). Entrance age alone does not constitute a major risk factor for school success. In a study of first-graders, younger first-graders benefited "substantially" from schooling (Morrison, Griffith, & Alberts, 1997).

In addition, children that are five years of age derive more general syntactic benefit than children that are four years of age. In kindergarten, older children obtain more linguistic knowledge compared to younger children. Age is a factor in gathering linguistic knowledge; however, schooling enhances children's ability to manage working memory. Both linguistic knowledge and working memory are needed for general syntactic development (Ferreira & Morrison, 1994).

According to a study by Bentin, Hammer, & Cahan (1991), the development of phonological awareness is affected both by chronological age and schooling. Schooling had a four times greater effect than age. By the age of six, cognitive-linguistic skills develop which are essential for achieving phonological awareness. The skills are

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necessary for reading acquisition. Maturation cannot be the only explanation for cognitive-linguistic skills due to the fact that a six-year-old has more experience than a five-year-old in areas relevant to phonological awareness (Bentin, Hammer, & Cahan, 1991).

In a longitudinal study of children from Head Start to first grade, only in kindergarten were there significant differences between older and younger students in emergent literary skills; by the end of first grade the statistical differences had disappeared. On emergent literary skills, the youngest kindergarten students outperformed their same-aged peers who remained in preschool. The results of this study showed an additional year of schooling had a stronger impact on emergent literary skills (as much as 1.7 times) compared to age. By the time these students reached second grade the impact was 4.3 times stronger on reading skills (Crone & Whitehurst, 1999). Similar results were found in a study of Jerusalem schools, schooling had a larger affect on verbal than nonverbal tests. Overall in Jerusalem, the effect of schooling on achievement was twice the effect of age (Cahan & Cohen, 1989) . These research studies support the value of preschool education; however there are more factors to consider in a child's readiness for kindergarten.

Social and Emotional Readiness

The social aspect of kindergarten is also a consideration for teachers and parents. There can be a social disadvantage for younger kindergarten children. Younger children had less favorable ratings of social acceptance and behavior; they also had ratings of

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being more aggressive. These issues dissipated by first grade (Spitzer, Cupp, & Parke, 1995).

In the study of third graders from upstate New York, children that were older at time of entry were evaluated by their teachers on adjustment criteria; the criteria included persistence, attention span, self-confidence, initiative, independence, social acceptance, social maturity, respect for rules, attitudes toward adults, and responsibility. The older students were rated slightly higher in nine of ten areas. The non-statistical differences between older and younger students were in areas of independence, attention span, and persistence. Both older and younger students were ranked equally in the area of responsibility (Carroll, 1963). Older children also viewed their relationship with their teacher significantly better than intermediate and younger children; these feelings remained even up to third grade (Stipek & Byler, 2001).

Highly structured curriculum programs can be stressful rather than supportive. These negative consequences to early formal schooling may include children's poor attitude toward school, low self-perceptions of their abilities, anxiety about achievement, and stress behaviors. This negativity can be tempered by delaying a child's entry into kindergarten which may benefit his/her self-confidence, success, and happiness (Phillips & Stipek, 1993).

Uphoff and Gilmore (1985) advocate delaying kindergarten entry to facilitate preparedness for school. Children that are not delayed have increased stress-related symptoms; these symptoms may result in adverse effects on life. A pilot study of youth suicides showed that 45% to 55% were males with summer to fall birth-dates, and 83% were females with summer birth-dates. Although the young adults' exact time of school

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entry is unknown, the relationship pattern of late birth-dates and high stress levels is worth noting.

Educator Anita Ede (2004) wrote an article on delaying entry to kindergarten. She personally chose to hold back her late-birthday daughter. Even amidst mixed feelings, she concludes her daughter developed self-confidence and leadership skills as a result of delayed kindergarten entry.

The preceding research give evidence for the social and emotional benefits of being older at the time of school entry, however, there are studies in contrast. In Miller's (1957) study of an Evanston, Illinois school district, researchers found that younger children were more likely to test below their real potential and to have difficulties in social relationships. A few months in age difference between younger and older students is a large percent of a child's total life, but it decreases proportionally as children grow. This accounts for the negligible differences emotionally and physically by the time students reach fourth grade. Overall, the study found that younger students were well adjusted. Chronological age was not a major factor; even at the same chronological age, children differ developmentally and must be considered individually. Moreover, a recent study concluded there is no benefit to a child's social-emotional development in delaying kindergarten entry (Datar, 2006; McPhillips & Jordan-Black, 2009).

Disadvantages of Delaying Kindergarten Entry

In addition to researched benefits of kindergarten delay, there is also substantial research showing disadvantages. According to a study by Grissom (2004), children that

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are older by more than 12 months due to delayed entry show a decline in test scores. The decline in test scores remains in the sixth grade and even the tenth grade.

Children that have been academically redshirted are two times more likely to receive special educational services for cognitive, emotional, and learning disabilities (DiPerna & Graue, 2000). Another study found that ten percent of participants that had been academically redshirted received special education service (May & Kundert, 1995). Older entrants were more frequently retained and referred for psychological study. They also were rated by classmates as significantly less happy and outgoing than the average or early-age entrants (Miller & Norris, 1967). In New York, the Nassau County school district reported that both overage and underage students faced more social and emotional adjustment problems (Hamalainen, 1952). At the time of adolescence, delayed-entry children have an elevated rate of behavior problems that increases with age (Byrd, 1997).

Another disadvantage to older students, regardless of the circumstances (retention, delayed kindergarten entry, or transitional classes), is that it only elevates the demands of first grade and kindergarten. As a generalization, the elevated demands hurt children not developmentally ready to learn from highly formalized activities and children of low socio-economic background (Shepard & Smith, 1986; Shepard & Smith, 1988). As students grow older, the instruction at each grade level increases (based on the abilities and needs of older students not the average age child's abilities and needs) which contributes to the higher academic demands. Delaying entry also disrupts school districts from trying to establish equity in the classroom (Meisels, 1992).

In addition to retention, delaying entry, and transitional classes, moving up the kindergarten entrance date increases the demands of first grade and kindergarten.

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Regardless of the entry date to kindergarten, there are younger students and older students (Shepard & Smith, 1986; Shepard & Smith, 1988). According to Meisels (1992), changing the entry date will do little to improve later school success and may impede the efforts. Experts argue that by third grade the differences are gone; therefore, reducing the rigid demands and teaching children at their individual level is a better option (Shepard & Smith, 1986; Shepard & Smith, 1988).

Siegel and Hanson (1991) reviewed the kindergarten educational policies of age at time of entry, retention, delaying entry, length of day, and cut-off dates. According to the study, the practices of today are not the best option. The majority of school districts ignore educational research. Most practices are the same as one hundred years ago. Before kindergarten entry, the majority of children have been in daycare or some type of early educational program. The review concludes that districts are operating under the guidance of “myths, tradition, [and] outdated norms rather than ... empirical research and a realistic view of the child’s world today.”

In summary, the research presents five themes. First, white middle class families tend to delay their children more than any other demographic group. Second, boys are academically redshirted more than girls and benefit the most in the decision to delay school entry. Third, the birth-date affect is a factor with advantages and disadvantages. Most research finds agreement in academic and social advantages at least in the primary grades. Fourth, age is only one factor in the decision to delay or not delay kindergarten entry. Preschool experience along with socio-economic advantages play a pivotal and perhaps more important role in kindergarten readiness compared to age at time of entry. Fifth, research has found advantages and also disadvantages to the decision to delay

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entrance into kindergarten. The research findings are the backdrop to the methods utilized in this study.

Chapter 3

Methods

Methods of Procedure

This is a qualitative research project. A grounded theory design will be implemented for the study. The project will adhere to Glaser and Strauss' (1967) characteristics of grounded theory: fit, understanding, generality, and control. Using controllable variables (identical guided interview questions and equivalent school settings), the basis of the study is gathered from participants directly involved in early childhood education; the study is useful for teachers and parents involved in the decisions for children's education (as cited in Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

Participants

Through a general announcement of the intended study, the researcher contacted teachers to request their participation. Friends, families, and colleagues aided in the quest for teachers that would represent a variety of demographic areas. Through a list of possible participants, teachers were selected based on a proper sampling of each demographic area: rural, suburban, urban, and private schools in Northwest Ohio. Of the seventeen possible participants, fourteen agreed to partake in the project. Representation is as follows:

Rural District- District A and District B – Northwest, Ohio

1 preschool teacher

2 kindergarten teachers

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Suburban District – District C- Suburb of Toledo, Ohio

2 preschool teachers 2 kindergarten teachers

Private School- Toledo, Ohio area

2 preschool teachers 2 kindergarten teachers

Urban District – Toledo, Ohio

2 preschool teachers 1 kindergarten teacher

Each teacher was asked to participate in a thirty-minute phone or in-person recorded interview. In appreciation for project involvement, each participant was given a gift card to a local coffee shop.

The interview utilized guided questions, centering upon kindergarten readiness, age of kindergarten students, state and district cut off dates, curriculum, length of kindergarten day, parents and administration expectations, and personal reflections on kindergarten. The questions were open-ended, and all teachers were encouraged to express their opinions about any aspects of kindergarten or preschool that was not addressed in the interview questions (see Appendix A for interview questions).

The information from all of these recorded interviews was transcribed into written form. The data was compared and contrasted for the similarities and differences between the individual teachers, between preschool and kindergarten teachers and between teachers from the various demographic areas (see Appendix B for coding criteria).

Chapter 4

Results

Rural Teachers

The one preschool and two kindergarten teachers that participated represented rural districts in northwest Ohio. Both districts have small student enrollments (2029 students and 1602 students respectively, according to the Ohio Department of Education) and received an excellent rating on the 2010-2011 State report card. Both districts have close to ninety percent white population. Thirty-eight percent of the student population of District A is considered economically disadvantaged and twenty-eight percent of the student population of District B is economically disadvantaged.

The kindergarten is all-day for one district. The other district has a rotating schedule of all-day every-other-day with a changeable Friday. Some districts operate with rotating schedule due to the budget. The rotating schedule is more difficult for children, parents, and teachers compared to an everyday schedule according to the kindergarten teachers.

The rural district of District A screens students the Spring before their entrance into kindergarten, during which time the State of Ohio's readiness test KRA-L is given. The teachers discuss with parents the results of the screening; at this time teachers suggest readiness skills children could practice during the summer, such as counting or letter recognition. In contrast, District B screens their kindergarten students three days before the start of kindergarten. The State of Ohio's readiness test KRA-L is given and

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results are discussed with parents at fall conferences. The teachers agreed the most important skills for school readiness are those of maturity and socialization. Teachers answered that incoming kindergarteners need to be able to sit, listen, and focus for a given amount of time. The ability to get along, share, and take turns are additional readiness skills desired by teachers.

Students come to kindergarten with a variety of levels of preschool experience. Students may not have a preschool experience; however, they may have a stay-at-home mother. They can often provide time and quality experiences for their child (library time, zoo, nature walks). With the benefits of a stay-at-home mother, rural teachers did comment that students needed to be able to separate from their mothers. This ability to separate is also a factor for school readiness.

Teachers whole-heartedly agreed with the statement that “kindergarten is not what it used to be.” Two teachers had taught first grade. Each teacher had over twenty years of teaching experience. The structure, curriculum, and experiences of today’s kindergarten correspond to the first grade of fifteen or twenty years ago. Both teachers agreed kindergarten is more difficult than the first grade from a decade ago. One teacher commented, “This is not the ‘milk-and-cookies playtime thing’ you remember.” Preschool and kindergarten teachers’ roles have been redefined over the past ten years. The preschool teacher communicated her position is actually of a kindergarten teacher from ten years ago. Ten years ago, she focused on all areas of a child’s development. Currently, she spends an enormous amount of time on concepts such as letter recognition and sounds. In her opinion, the children are not developmentally ready for this type of learning. There is little time to develop fine-motor and eye-hand coordination skills

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without direct correlation to a State standard. She has little time for development of social skills, cooperative learning, problem solving, frustration tolerance, and emotional competence. In addition to academics, rural teachers' roles have been redefined as the role of counselor to students with many emotional needs as well as parents that do not understand the rigors of instruction placed on these young children.

Teachers, both preschool and kindergarten, feel more pressure from the State of Ohio standards than they feel from administration, fellow teachers, or parents. Teachers and administration are burdened by the same demands. State standards dictate the time schedule of the kindergarten day; there is no time for fun projects or play time.

Kindergarten teachers realize the expectations of first grade teachers; therefore, the challenge is to prepare their students. During a meeting on State standards, a teacher asked her superintendent if the district would reach a point that it would not be able to comply with the standards due to their difficulty. The superintendent indicated the State Department of Education would continue to increase the number of standards and their difficulty until districts confronted the department with the reality it is unable and unwilling to comply with the standards. The standards will continue to be academically rigorous, as long as there are children in schools that are able to meet the expectations.

The pressure of the State standards becomes real when a child in your class has never held a pencil, according to a preschool teacher. The aspect of the standards most troubling is placing a child into kindergarten that is already behind and hoping he or/she can "catch up". How will this child "catch up" when he is already starting kindergarten below his peers because they have more opportunities, parents that work with them nightly, and socio-economic benefits?

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While both districts currently follow the Ohio kindergarten entrance age of five by September 30th; both are also in the process of changing the entrance date for the 2013-2014 school year. One district will have a July 31st entrance date and the other an August 1st entrance date. All of the teachers interviewed are happy with these earlier dates of entry; however, they believe that a child needs to be considered for entry on an individual basis. The kindergarten entry date is not flawless; each teacher could remember students that thrived or struggled regardless of his/her birth date.

The preschool teacher had actually persuaded the district to move the entrance date. Her classroom is made up of typical children (children without identified learning issues) and children that may need special services such as speech or occupational therapy. Some of her students are at a disadvantage due to the September 30th “cut-off” date. If a student has a September birthday and turns five by the September 30th “cut-off” date, State law requires the student to be in kindergarten even if he or she is not ready emotionally, socially, or academically. The students in her preschool class are not able to enroll in preschool for another year due to the fact that the preschool is funded by the State. These children would have to pay to stay in preschool for another year. Most of these families are struggling economically and cannot afford preschool tuition, so the teacher often sends the students on to kindergarten, even though she knows that the students are not ready. She encounters this problem every year with at least one student.

Teachers were asked if a boy’s or girl’s age influence their expectations for the kindergarten year. The preschool teacher felt that a younger boy may struggle more than a younger girl. Kindergarten teachers were more hesitant in order not to sound biased but both conceded that boys coming in at a young age are not quite as ready as girls coming

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in at a young age. Girls were able to come into a classroom and attend to a task better than boys. The preschool teacher felt that boys needed to be able to have more opportunities to run and play. Classrooms frequently lack these opportunities. In her opinion, males comprise more of the special needs population compared to girls.

Participants were asked if there were reasons that they would suggest parents delay kindergarten entrance for an age appropriate child, and the rationale given to convince them of the need. A child's social and emotional development is the basis for most recommendations according to the preschool teacher. The kindergarten teachers recommend kindergarten entrance delay on the basis of screening results. One responded that if a child could not recognize colors, shapes and their written name, or count past ten, that the parents should consider an extra year before kindergarten.

There is a real advantage to screening students in the Spring. Parents have the summer before kindergarten to think about the recommendations for their child and to observe their child's social and emotional development in light of the teacher's comments. Due to the academic load of kindergarten, one teacher urges parents that are unsure of their child's readiness to delay entry a year. She indicated that since the standards have continued to increase and kindergarten is increasingly more academic, she has suggested delay far more to parents in the last ten years of her teaching experience.

The other kindergarten teacher encourages the parents of these "borderline children" to come and visit her classroom at the end of the year. She wants them to see for themselves the type of work that their children are going to be expected to perform in kindergarten. Sadly, few parents have accepted her offer to visit the classroom. She

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commented, “I’ve never had a parent that waited a year for kindergarten say that I wish I had sent them, but I have had many parents say that they wish they had waited.”

One preschool teacher tells parents that the academic rigors of kindergarten are not the same as they were twenty years ago when the parents themselves were in kindergarten. Fifteen years ago she was not making children sit down and identify letters, numbers, and counting; today the demonstration of such skills is expected. The preschool teacher felt that “we know if a child is not ready for kindergarten.” She said, “I don’t think I have ever been wrong. It makes me sad. I don’t want them to have a hard time, but they do.” In this teacher’s experience, parents that did not follow a recommendation for their children to delay kindergarten entry eventually have their children on an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) or in Title I reading (government funded reading program for students with poor reading skills). In her opinion, teachers can “teach a concept fifty thousand ways, but if a child is not developmentally ready for the information he/she is not going to get it.” When a child is not developmentally ready, there is nothing you can do about it except give time. Frequently family finances dictate the decision to delay or not delay kindergarten entry. These parents do not have the funds to pay for preschool, even on a sliding scale. Kindergarten is free of charge; therefore, many children are forced to attend whether prepared or unprepared.

The teachers were asked their response to the statement, “There is substantial research that delaying an age-appropriate student entrance to kindergarten has little long term benefit and may cause more harm than good.” One kindergarten teacher replied that she was “surprised, yet not surprised,” but didn’t know if she agreed with the statement. She felt the goal for the student was to be healthy, mature, and capable of learning. The

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other kindergarten teacher did not agree with the statement. She did not feel that achievement levels of students developed equally by middle school. She asserted that children that have academic difficulties will continue to have difficulty in subsequent grade levels. By the time a student gets to third grade, the student can qualify for academic services provided by the State. She has witnessed this occurrence in her district and found that most of these students (students that had difficulty with kindergarten readiness and entered kindergarten against the recommendation to delay entry for a year) will qualify for academic services.

The preschool teacher felt that the researchers, proposing little benefit of delaying kindergarten entry and perhaps harm, have a wrong perspective. Preschool and kindergarten are the solid foundation for the rest of a child's schooling. She is unable to comprehend the reasons that some educators and parents do not recognize the need to give a child extra time; a child could have confidence and success compared to frustration and failure in her estimation. During the interview, the preschool teacher mentioned her concern with the new bill regarding reading proficiency in third grade. Recently, the State of Ohio ratified a bill entitled "The Third Grade Guarantee." This bill establishes proficiency standards in reading. Students in third grade are required to meet the reading proficiency standards; if these standards are not met, the students will be retained. Educators ask the question, "Why do teachers and administrators want to retain a third grader; would it not be better to do it in the beginning at the kindergarten age and build the solid foundation?"

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Private Schools

Two preschool and two kindergarten teachers from a Toledo private school participated in this investigation. The school is located within the Toledo city limits. The student body of some six hundred students (grades preschool through twelfth grade) represents a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The school offers both all-day and half-day kindergarten. Students are encouraged by the middle of the school year to begin to transition to three half-days and two all-days, eventually moving to all-day only by the end of the year. Students are screened the Spring before kindergarten entry. The KRT (Kindergarten Readiness Test) is used along with the school's own testing of gross motor skills and observations of maturity.

Both preschool and kindergarten teachers agreed that the ability to focus, to practice self-control, and to sit still were the most important readiness skills. Since, structure and routine are very important for kindergarten success, teachers expect students to have some type of prior experience with a structured environment, such as Sunday school, swim lessons, gymnastics or an activity that expects children to follow directions. In addition, more of these students also have a "stay-at-home mom." Similar to the rural districts, these mothers have more time to provide background knowledge and experience for their children. Again, a readiness factor for this school is a child's ability to separate from their mother.

Both kindergarten teachers agreed that kindergarten has drastically changed, even within the last ten years. Kindergarten used to be a socialization program. Across the nation, kindergarten today is the first grade of ten years ago. The veritable explosion of technology is one source of change. The State standards have also changed kindergarten.

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In the past, teachers had a course of study; now, teachers are required to meet state standards that are ever increasing in difficulty.

The preschool teachers had a different perspective of the source of change in the kindergarten classroom. One responded that “preschool had changed, so it forced kindergarten to change.” Preschool has become childcare for many families. Since it is now is childcare, it has become a competitive business. Preschool uses academics as a selling point to consumers (parents) in order to be more competitive and to make profits. Preschool, as a business, raises the bar of expectations for all preschools which results in the expectations of kindergarten being raised. The greatest loss is the child who loses his/her childhood in the process. The other preschool teacher felt that kindergarten has changed so much due to increasing needs of the students. Often both parents of a child are working longer hours, which results in the child receiving less time at home with their family; accordingly, students have unmet emotional needs for love, attention, and security. With increasing academic pressure at school and growing emotional needs from home, students have the potential to have harmful stress levels in their lives.

Kindergarten and preschool teachers agree that their role as a teacher has been redefined particularly in the last ten years. The kindergarten teacher discussed the higher demands and expectations of the current classroom. The State standards for math and language arts are more intense and soon there will be changes in the social studies and science standards. She misses the opportunities to do some of the “fun” projects and units that she once incorporated in the year, but no longer can fit into the schedule. The kindergarten teacher also feels her role has been redefined due to the needs of children from broken homes, children living in blended families, children with learning

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disabilities, and the spiritual needs of children as well as parents. In her opinion, her role has been redefined as she attempts to build a strong foundation for the students and to be “counter-culture” in a culture that is harmful and pervasive to children and families. The preschool teacher shared similar thoughts. She is currently utilizing five different curriculums for preschool. She is constantly aware of the thirty-six objectives to meet for the year. At one time, preschool was a socialization time; however, this has changed. The preschool teacher communicated her role has been redefined by parents. Parents no longer want preschool to be a social time for their child, but rather an intense preparation for kindergarten.

The school follows the State of Ohio required entrance date of September 30th. Presently, there is no consideration to change the entrance date. Parents have the opportunity for their child tested and placed in kindergarten even if he or she is not five by the required date. More concern was expressed about early entrance of students into kindergarten compared to the requirement date. The teachers voiced concern that students may pass the test academically but are not emotionally prepared for kindergarten. Private preschools and kindergartens have the same requirements from the State of Ohio as public schools. The teachers feel pressure from the State standards, but they feel that they place more pressure upon themselves. One preschool teacher shared that she also feels a lot of pressure from parents; they want higher academics at an earlier age.

The age of boys or girls does raise concerns for both the preschool and kindergarten teachers. School is an environment that is more conducive for girls. Girls sit and play and generally have more control of impulses. Boys play by running around

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and making noises. Kindergarten teachers viewed boys as slower to mature. One teacher indicated that a boy with a late birthday is a “double red flag.” With fifteen years of tutoring experience, the boys she instructed generally started kindergarten at a young age and were not retained. It was a continual struggle to come up to their peers academically.

The teachers were asked if they ever suggested delay for an age-appropriate child entering kindergarten, and what rationale was given to parents. The teachers responded that the primary concern is social and emotional readiness. The school screens perspective kindergarteners in the Spring. This allows time for the parents to think about the decision and evaluate the teacher’s recommendation. The teachers encourage parents to give their children an extra year. The teachers pointed out the difference between students that struggle and hate school with students that have confidence, good self-esteem, happiness, and a love for school. Kindergarten sets the stage for years of schooling; it is important to make it a positive experience rather than a negative one. Teachers agreed that kindergarten entrance is not an issue of parenting; parents need to put aside personal pride to consider what is best for the child. Often teachers stated, “I have never had a parent say they are sorry that they waited a year for their child to enter kindergarten, but I have had lots of parents that have said I wish I had waited a year to put my child in.”

The teachers were asked their response to the statement, “There is substantial research that delaying an age-appropriate student entrance to kindergarten has little long-term benefit and may cause more harm than good.” The preschool teacher responded that one must go back to the individual child. The other teacher responded that she was surprised by the statement. She realizes how this may be possible with academic

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achievement. However, she pointed out even if the student catches up by third grade, why would parents want to struggle and have their child struggle to get him or her to that point? The child is also in danger of hating school by that point and perhaps struggling with confidence. This participant would like to see the social and emotional growth of the students evaluated. It is one thing to compare test scores, and another thing to have the ability to function in the social and emotional side of life. The social and emotional aspects of life define who you are and who you will be in a social world. She ended with a question: “What is school really about? Is it retaining book knowledge and facts or is it preparing students to be successful people?” The kindergarten teachers disagreed with the statement. Both responded that they had never seen any negative effects from delaying a child, short or long term. Each of these teachers has been teaching for over 20 years. The teachers responded that they have seen far more consequences for children that needed to delay kindergarten entry and yet enrolled in kindergarten compared to children that complied with the recommendation to delay kindergarten entry.

Urban District

According to the 2010-2011 report of the Ohio Department of Education, Toledo Public Schools have an enrollment of 22,277 students. The student population is comprised of forty percent Caucasian and forty-five percent African-Americans. Seventy-seven percent of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged. This district received a grade of Continuous Improvement on the State report card. The kindergarten day is all-day, every-day. The students are screened during the first three days of school. The district utilizes KRA-L and DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) tests as measures of kindergarten readiness.

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The two preschool and one kindergarten teachers that participated in this project talked about the readiness skills that they would like for their students to have for kindergarten, but the reality (as stated by one of the teachers) is that “you get what you get.” Most, if not all of these students, have not had any type of preschool experience, and only a few of them have had an experience with Head Start (a government operated early education program for disadvantaged children). As a result, most of these students have few kindergarten readiness skills. Both the preschool and kindergarten teacher mentioned the readiness skill for students to recognize their own name. Many of these students have a nickname or have been in custody situations and may not even know their real name. The two preschool teachers mentioned that kindergarten readiness for urban students first starts with basic needs to be met; needs include safety, security, and love as well as food and warm clothing for the winter months. The teachers all responded that it would be nice if the students could come into kindergarten able to sit and listen to a story. Teachers would like for children to recognize their name in print and know the letters in their name. Shapes and colors would be helpful too.

The participants were asked if they thought kindergarten had changed in the past ten years. As in the interviews with teachers from other districts, all of the urban teachers felt that it had changed due to the increasing State standards. After teaching first grade for many years, one teacher felt the current curriculum is the same from her previous years as a first grade teacher. The focus in the classroom is the State standards; there is no longer time for the fun projects. In addition, one preschool teacher responded that one reason that kindergarten has changed so rapidly was the recent inundation of technology.

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Students compared to peers of suburban and private schools are behind in kindergarten if they have never used a computer and a mouse.

Participants also agreed that their roles as preschool and kindergarten teachers have been redefined in the last decade. The kindergarten teacher feels as if she is teaching first grade from ten years ago and the preschool teacher feels as if she is teaching kindergarten from ten years ago. Kindergarten was designed to be a socialization program. Students are now expected to understand and use social skills by the time they enter kindergarten. Kindergarteners are expected to sit in their seats and work on papers. Letter and sound recognition skills are expected at the time of kindergarten entry. The preschool teacher discussed how she needs to prepare her students for kindergarten seat work by having them learn to sit for ten minutes. In the preschool teacher's opinion, it would be very difficult for a child to enter kindergarten without any preschool experience due to the changes. The roles of these teachers have also been redefined by the social and emotional needs of students. Increasingly, there are more students that have learning, social, and emotional issues. Increasing needs of students add pressure upon the teachers to identify, assess, and place students in services that will provide long term benefits.

In addition to a changing role, the kindergarten teachers felt more pressure from the State standards than from anything or anyone else. Their students come in with few readiness skills and must reach a certain level in order to proceed to first grade. At the beginning of the school year, the first grade teacher expects prepared students in order to meet the challenges of the State standards for the year. The teachers echoed the feelings of rural teachers when they stated, "Everyone is in the same situation." By contrast, the

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preschool teachers did not feel pressured by the standards. These teachers were more concerned with the basic needs of their students. Some of the children only eat when they are at school. The students have great needs of care, security, and attention; State standards are a lower priority.

Toledo schools follow the State of Ohio entrance age requirement of five for kindergarten. The preschool teachers would like to see the entrance date move to an earlier date of the first of August. From their viewpoint, an extra two months of time would help children be prepared for school. The earlier date would mandate younger children to wait a year for kindergarten entry. The kindergarten teacher in contrast did not consider that the earlier entrance date to make a real difference. There will always be older and younger students, regardless of the required entry date.

Both preschool and kindergarten teachers responded that boys mature more slowly than girls. They both agreed that there is a difference in a younger boy/girl compared to an older boy/girl in readiness. One of the preschool teachers responded that “a boy would have to be an exceptional one for [her] to recommend him to enter kindergarten at age four.” She felt that a boy needed to be “a solid five” before entering kindergarten.

The urban preschool and kindergarten teachers do not have the option to suggest delay. Many children and their families receive economic aid from the government. There is paper work to fill out in order to receive the benefit of preschool education. Many parents do not want to take the time to fill out paper work or deduct preschool from their government assistance compared to free all-day kindergarten down the street. The kindergarten teacher responded that she usually sees most parents only one time at the

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beginning of the school year during the screening; she takes that opportunity to tell them all about kindergarten and the procedures of the year.

One of the preschool teachers seldom has the opportunity to convince parents of the benefit of delay-entry for their children who are not ready for kindergarten. If she does have the opportunity, she points out that it is easier for everyone involved to enrich and challenge a student versus the effort to get a student to grade level. Children that start kindergarten when they are not ready tend to struggle in school in the future.

Parents often hire a tutor and work many hours at home in the attempt to keep their child “caught up.” She points out that with the number of enrichment programs schools and communities offer, it is much easier to provide a bright student with enrichment and expansion compared to extra classes and tutors for a child that struggles.

All of the participants were surprised with the statement, “There is substantial research that delaying an age-appropriate student entrance to kindergarten has little long term benefit and may cause more harm than good.” One preschool teacher responded that these studies must not have been written by early childhood or kindergarten teachers. She felt the writers were working with test scores not children. The more time a parent and teacher give a child “to be a child,” the better that child’s emotional development, social development, and academic development will be both in kindergarten and the following years of formal schooling. With her teaching background, she pointed out that academic achievement levels do not even out by third grade, but in fact continue through fourth and fifth grade. In her experience, many of these children are diagnosed or labeled with a learning disability.

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Suburban District

District C is a suburb of Toledo, Ohio. According to the State of Ohio Department of Education 2010-2011 statistics, the school has an enrollment of 4,597 students, 88% of which are Caucasian. Twelve percent of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged. This district received an excellent rating on the Ohio Department of Education report card. District C offers a half-day kindergarten program, with all-day available for an additional cost. Kindergarten screening takes place a week before school begins. The KRA-L test is administered during this time.

Two preschool and two kindergarten teachers from the district participated in the study. All listed social and emotional skills as essential to readiness. The teachers felt that academic learning would come more easily if children were able to sit and listen. One preschool teacher stated that: “Behavior trumps learning.”

While all emphasized social and emotional skills as essential, the suburban preschool and kindergarten teachers placed a greater emphasis as academic readiness. These teachers stressed the need to know shapes, colors, letters, sounds, and even some sight words. The kindergarten teacher mentioned that if children don’t know their letters, they are starting behind. Both kindergarten teachers agreed that it is a surprise when their students have not had some type of preschool experience. These teachers believed the students with preschool experience had greater academic readiness, and the benefits of the experience are very obvious in the classroom.

Again, the suburban preschool teachers viewed preschool now as “the new kindergarten.” They responded that the school “could never get away now with what they used to do years ago.” No longer is preschool a morning of playtime and snack;

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even preschool has become more structured and academic. Likewise, all of the kindergarten teachers responded that there was little occasion for fun projects, learning centers, or exploring. One teacher was told that there was no time for Show & Tell and that it should not be included in lesson plans. She stated, “Children need to come to kindergarten with social skills, because there is no time for these skills to be taught.” The nurturing and creative environment of kindergarten is gone.

The suburban preschool teachers feel more pressure than any other participants surveyed. The standards have changed from simple letter recognition to now include sounds, sight words, and even recognition of coins. They feel great personal pressure to have students ready for kindergarten. The preschool teacher reminds herself that there will be kindergartners in the class that have never had preschool experience, so her students “should be fine.” The kindergarten teacher mentioned that the real pressure is for students to read. All students must know how to read by the end of the year. State standards, administration, and parents are multiple sources of pressure; the ability for students to read by the end of kindergarten is an additional weight.

With the increase in State standards and the changing environment of preschool and kindergarten classrooms, teachers were asked if they felt their role as a preschool/kindergarten teacher has been redefined. The participants were in full agreement with teachers from all other demographic areas that their role as a preschool/kindergarten teacher has been redefined. Once again, teachers assert the emotional problems of students, due to family stresses at home, have placed a new role for the teacher as a counselor and care giver to children and their parents. In addition to the new roles in the classroom, teachers have more requirements placed on them outside

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of the classroom. By the 2014-15 school year, the State of Ohio will require all kindergarten through second grade teachers to have a reading endorsement in order to teach children in the classroom that are determined to need reading intervention. The kindergarten teacher currently has a master's degree plus twelve additional hours, however she will be required to secure this licensure. Teachers' roles have greatly changed.

The suburban districts' preschool and kindergarten teachers were very happy with their 1st of August entrance date, first put into effect about eight years ago. When the new entrance date was adopted, the district discontinued the developmental kindergarten program (a program designed for children that were age-appropriate for kindergarten, but needed more academic and/or social-emotional readiness skills). The purpose of the earlier entrance date was aimed at younger students, perhaps not ready for kindergarten; these children would have to wait an additional year before enrollment. One kindergarten teacher mentioned that she would like the parents to have a choice in the decision but knew that it took a great deal of work to file an appeal and receive placement.

The preschool teacher viewed the multiple entrance dates across the country as a problem and suggests a national entrance date. Students that move in and out of states and districts are considered either too young or age appropriate depending on the location of the school. A national entrance date into kindergarten would also solve the reoccurring problem of parents that place their students in one district or school to gain early entrance into kindergarten and the following year enroll their children in another school to begin first grade.

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The question was posed if the age of a boy or a girl played a role in the expectations of the teacher for the school year. The preschool teachers felt that a boy's age was a concern. They admitted that when they saw some boys' behavior, they looked at the birthday chart to see if the boys had summer birthdays. One of the teachers stated that, she" never thought she would say it but there is a definite difference" in a girl and a boy that both recently had a birthday and turned five. This is especially true regarding a child's attention span and ability to sit. According to a participant, "it is quite a shock to a little boy that wants to run, jump and build to have to come in to class and sit for twenty minutes." In contrast, kindergarten teachers responded differently to this question. There was more of a hesitation to answer. There were a few of the teachers that prefaced their remarks by saying this was their personal opinion rather than a professional opinion. The kindergarten teachers were very careful to not appear biased or sexist.

When considering kindergarten readiness, the kindergarten teachers both agreed that they would not suggest delay. The State of Ohio Department of Education, as well as the school district, wants all children to be in kindergarten at age five and discourage teachers from recommending delayed entrance. The screening process takes place three days before the first day of school. These children and their parents are under the impression that school is to start with them in the classroom; it would be extremely difficult to suggest a child delay entrance into kindergarten.

One kindergarten teacher continued to reiterate that the State wants children in kindergarten when they are five. She did concede that there are red flags if a child will not communicate and will not give basic information. A child's lack of communication can mean immaturity, which is a concern for teachers. However, due to district policies

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that discourage teachers from recommending delayed entrance into kindergarten, the teacher would not discuss with parents her concerns about a child's possible need to wait a year to begin kindergarten.

Preschool teachers mentioned that it was hard to convince parents of the need to delay their child's entry into kindergarten. Regardless of the significant reasons teachers can give for the need to delay kindergarten entry, parents many times are offended at the suggestion that their child may not be ready for the challenges of kindergarten. A unique way one preschool convinces parents of the need to wait is the involvement of the parents during the school year. Parents are given the opportunity to be snack helpers at least four times a year; in addition, the parents are encouraged to come on special days, attend field trips, and help with art projects. The parents are able to see their child and his or her interaction with the other children. The teachers said that many times, the parents sense their child is immature and unready to move on by comparing their child's behavior with the rest of the class. The parental involvement has been a great help for preschool teachers to have the parents observe the social and emotional readiness of their children.

The kindergarten teachers do not recommend kindergarten delay to parents. One teacher admitted that years ago she made that suggestion to a parent, and the conversation did not go well. The other teacher mentioned that she would only share her thoughts about the need to delay entrance if the parent was on a friendship level with her and had asked for her personal opinion. After school is in session for a month, the suburban district sends home the results from the kindergarten screening, at which point there is no opportunity to recommend to parents the potential need for a student to delay kindergarten entry.

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All the participants were asked to respond to the statement, “There is substantial research that delaying an age-appropriate student entrance to kindergarten has little long-term benefit and may cause more harm than good.” All of the participants were surprised with this statement except one of the kindergarten teachers who had read similar research studies. The latter responded that the research which cited few long-term benefits of kindergarten delay for students was in fact the basis for district policy decisions such as the discontinuation of the developmental kindergarten class, the earlier entrance date for kindergarten, and no recommendations for kindergarten delay.

Similarly, the preschool teachers were amazed at the statement. Both disagreed with the statement and repeated that they have seen the opposite. They have not found any way that it has hurt children that have delayed entrance. One participant gave an example of a transitional kindergarten class that was designed for children that were not ready for kindergarten (these students are now freshmen in high school). All of the parents still say they are “so happy that they held their child back” and the students are doing well. The teacher pointed out that “one cannot standardize test social skills.”

One kindergarten teacher’s reaction is that these studies must be focusing solely on academic achievement. She wouldn’t disagree with the academic element, but it is far more difficult to measure social norms. A student can be ahead academically, but be socially awkward. The school’s purpose is to look at the whole child, with the goal of preparing a student to function in the world, hold down a job, and have healthy friendships, not just have knowledge of math and science. In this teacher’s opinion, delaying a child’s entrance into kindergarten for maturity will benefit him or her. A student can be ready academically, but if a student is not ready socially then he or she is

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always behind their peers. She poignantly stated, “You can practice math facts in third grade for two hours, and learn them, and nail them down but you do not learn to share in third grade.” She went on to say that “[sharing] is not something you practice and learn, you are expected to already know.”

Summary of Results

All participants rank the social/emotional skills of a child as the most important sign of kindergarten readiness. The ability to sit, listen, share, and get along are the constant elements among all of the teachers. The ability to practice self-control gives the mind the opportunity to learn according to both preschool and kindergarten teachers.

In comparing responses from the participants, preschool teachers from all demographic areas are more fervent in their conviction to delay a child for entry if they are not ready in their whole development for kindergarten. Similarly, the kindergarten teachers likewise have strong feelings about readiness, but there is a sense that they can do little to influence parents to wait a year for kindergarten entrance. These feelings stem from several common elements: First, the State of Ohio wants children that turn five to be in kindergarten. Second, many districts have their screenings at the beginning of the school year. Children and parents have the mind-set that they are attending kindergarten, and this mindset is very hard to reverse. Third, parents find it difficult to accept the fact that their child may need an extra year to mature. Parents often take the news personally, rather than looking at the long term benefits for the child. Kindergarten teachers overall responded that they often do not even try to convince parents of the need to possibly wait

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a year for kindergarten. Fourth, many families cannot afford to pay for another year of preschool or daycare; since kindergarten is free, it is more convenient for the family.

The only kindergarten teachers that reported talking to parents about the possibility of delay are from the private and rural school districts. The private school is in a position to have more rigid standards of entry; the rural districts are small, and one conducts kindergarten screening in the Spring. The one kindergarten teacher that invites parents to come into her class to help them make a decision is a rarity, and sadly, she shared that most do not take advantage of her invitation.

Kindergarten teachers are hesitant to state that boys are “late bloomers,” but all agree boys are more active and have more difficulty with self-control and attention. Each kindergarten teacher responded with the preface of “my personal opinion” when asked a question about the difference between boys and girls; none of them wanted to appear biased about gender differences. Similarly, and without hesitation all of the preschool participants readily recognize boys with summer birthdays as a red flag for kindergarten entry. Teachers understand the natural development of boys in their need to move and explore. Interestingly, at least six out of the fourteen participants, shared they had sons; of these, five chose to delay kindergarten entrance with at least one of their sons due to a lack of readiness. In their personal cases, the biggest readiness issue was maturity.

The preschool teachers report more stress to prepare students for kindergarten compared to the kindergarten teachers. This result would correlate with Hains’ (1989) study which revealed preschool teachers had higher expectations for readiness skills compared to kindergarten teachers. The stress could be a result from their belief that they have greater possibility to influence a parent’s decision about kindergarten entry

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compared to a kindergarten teacher. It also could be that just as kindergarten is the “new first grade,” preschool is now the “new kindergarten.”

Due to socioeconomic factors, children in the suburban district have a greater probability to attend preschool. Most children in the suburban district and the private school have preschool experience. Children in the urban district usually have no preschool experience. With at least a quarter of its population considered economically disadvantaged, preschool education is also less prevalent in rural districts. Within the preschool settings, rural and urban preschools have students ranging in ages from three to five in one classroom compared to suburban and private preschools that operate with separate classrooms for the three different ages. Furthermore, the option of delaying kindergarten entry is a greater possibility due to the preschool experience of suburban and private school students. Preschool teachers have the opportunity to discuss with parents recommendations. In suburban areas, there are more options for children that are not ready for kindergarten and their families. Several studies support the correlation between socioeconomic factors and preschool attendance (Brooks & Brown, 2010; Elder & Lubotsky, 2009; Frey, 2005; Grissom, 2004; Meisels, 1992; Noel & Newman, 2003; Noel & Newman, 2008).

Finally, it was interesting to note that all of the teachers felt pressure more from the State of Ohio standards compared to administration or fellow teachers. However, the suburban and private schools were not as concerned about meeting the standards as were the teachers from the rural and urban districts. One suburban teacher indicated that her students were rising to the challenge and could handle the standards; accordingly, this particular suburban district has already begun to transition to the new State standards for

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2014. One rural preschool teacher retorted, “How can a child meet these standards when he or she has spent the first five years of his life in a smoke-filled trailer and doesn’t know how to hold a pencil?” This response correlates again with the socioeconomic factors as well as family dynamics. Children more from suburban and private schools have some type of family support and preschool experience; fewer students from the rural and urban district have preschool experience and/or family support. Regardless of respective school districts, all teachers unanimously agreed that preschools and kindergartens have drastically changed in the last decade.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Final Analysis

The first research question asked: What factors do teachers utilize when recommending parents children delay or not delay kindergarten entry for their child? Based on the conducted research, the answer to this question resonates in four common themes.

First, regardless of the demographic areas, all the teachers acknowledge the need to evaluate the individual child. These teachers approach kindergarten readiness as a whole-child issue. A parent or a teacher cannot concentrate on only one aspect of a child. The emotional, social, mental, and academic components of a child need to be evaluated in making the decision to send a child to kindergarten or to delay entry into kindergarten for an additional year.

The State of Ohio mandates a child must be five years of age by September 30th in order to attend kindergarten. Teachers agree there is not a simple solution to the problem of the entrance date. Classrooms will always have younger and older students. Some children will benefit from the date of entrance and others will be at a disadvantage with the date. The entrance date stresses the need for parents and teachers to evaluate the individual child's readiness.

Second, the greatest factor in the decision to delay or not delay kindergarten entry is maturity. Tests for maturity are currently unavailable. Gross motor skills, fine motor

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skills, and academics can all be tested in some form, but maturity cannot be tested. Students unable to sit and listen for ten minutes, unable to practice self-control, and unable to participate in a group setting are not ready for kindergarten. Throughout this study, maturity is the recurring theme.

Third, the rigors of academics for the kindergarten classroom of today necessitate the attention of parents and teachers in determining if a child is ready for kindergarten or needs another year before entrance. Kindergarten is no longer a socialization program. Students attend kindergarten “to work, not play.” Every teacher in this study complained there is little time for play and for creative activities; today’s kindergarten classroom requires children to be prepared for learning.

Fourth, children with questionable readiness for kindergarten entry are at an advantage if given an extra year before entrance. Teachers readily this is not an option for many families; however, children with questionable readiness will benefit with an extra year before kindergarten entrance if the opportunity presents itself. Teachers do not intend for students to sit at home and be idle for a year; on the contrary, children need experiences that help prepare him or her for kindergarten. Throughout the study, teachers repeated the same mantra; “I have never had a parent say they wished they had went ahead and sent [their child] to kindergarten but, I have had many parents say ‘I wish I had waited a year’.”

The follow-up research question asked: How have these factors redefined the role of preschool and kindergarten teachers? Based on the conducted research, the answer to this question originates in two reoccurring themes. First, both preschool and kindergarten classrooms have altered in nature over the last decade. The environment of kindergarten

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and preschool classrooms has changed from nurturing, play-based, socializing settings to regular academically based situations. The number of State standards has increased in language arts and math. This has forced early childhood classrooms to have a more intense academic schedule. The changes in the classroom have aided in redefining the role of preschool and kindergarten teachers. In years past, preschool and kindergarten teachers' role was one of nurturer and facilitator; however, the current role is one of instructor.

Second, the needs of the students have redefined the role of preschool and kindergarten teachers. There is an increasing amount of needs in the current classroom. Children have more social-emotional needs due to the financial stresses at home, broken homes, blended families, and single parents. Students have multiple learning issues such as, ADD, ADHD, autism spectrum, and other cognitive impairments. Teachers are expected to have a broad knowledge of learning disabilities to identify and assess for further evaluation and intervention. Students' needs have redefined the role of preschool and kindergarten teachers as caregiver, counselor, psychologist, and educator. Teachers are playing their new roles not only in their students' lives but in the lives of students' families as well. The combination of the current preschool and kindergarten classrooms with the various needs of students is a challenging new role for any teacher.

Future Investigation

This research study answers two questions, but it also generates new questions for future investigation. These three questions concentrate (respectively) on the individual

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learning needs of students, the practice of retention, and the impact of the increasing State of Ohio standards in classrooms.

First, is there a correlation between the academic rigors of kindergarten (and subsequent schooling) with the numbers of children with anxiety/stress issues, ADD/ADHD diagnosis, and increasing number of students on Individualized Educational Plans? Teachers from all demographic areas are concerned with the number of former students that have been placed on Individualized Educational Plan or have been diagnosed with ADD/ADHD in first, second, and third grade. Prior to kindergarten, students are many times identified by teachers as immature or unprepared for the rigors of the classroom; however, the students enroll in kindergarten and the problems continue in the subsequent years of school. Teachers in this study report parents frequently hire tutors for their kindergarten students. Are the problems students face actual learning disabilities or are the problems rooted in the possibility students were unprepared for kindergarten and needed another year developmentally to handle the rigors of formal education?

Second, prior to the start of the 2012-2013 school year, the State of Ohio passed a new law entitled “The Third Grade Guarantee.” With full implementation of this law, third-grade students unable to meet certain reading proficiency standards will be retained. Why are schools waiting until third grade to retain a student? This question was asked by one of the teachers involved in this study. For a student that exhibits a lack of skills and maturity at the beginning of formal education, would it not be more beneficial to gain an extra year in preschool education, and be better prepared for the challenges of school from the very beginning? Likewise, an extra year of preschool (if needed) reduces the

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possibility of retention in subsequent grades. If teachers know that students are struggling in kindergarten, why would schools allow students to struggle for three more years until reaching third grade? By third grade, the confidence, self-esteem, and sense of failure are solidified in the life of a student. Which has the greater benefit for the educational success of a child: early intervention at the preschool/kindergarten level, or retention in third grade?

Third, throughout this study the State standards are a main topic of discussion. Differences in socioeconomic status, family dynamics, and academic preparedness are evident between the districts, particularly when comparing private/suburban schools with rural/urban schools. How does the continual increase of State standards upon classrooms allow for the disparity among the various demographic groups? Teachers in rural and urban districts discussed the difficulty for students to meet the State standards when they come to school with physical needs (food and warmth) and also emotional needs (a caring adult in their life). Generally, suburban teachers do not have to address the physical and emotional needs of students to the same extent as do rural/urban teachers. Therefore, although suburban teachers realize the State standards are rigorous, they are confident the students are able to meet the challenge. Will the increasing standards continue to widen the gap between poor and non-poor students? How can school districts and the State Department of Education work together to answer these problems?

Biblical Worldview

In the grand scheme of life, is it a “big deal” if a parent waits a year to hold back his or her child from starting kindergarten? Does it really matter if I, as the parent,

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choose to hold my child back a year to help him in the long term, while a poor minority child ten minutes down the road enrolls in kindergarten only to struggle? How can kindergarten entrance, preschool experience, and levels of poverty have anything to do with me and my walk with Jesus Christ?

The issues addressed in this study indeed have much to do with an individual's walk with Jesus Christ. The Bible speaks clearly about the intersection of faith with life. The book of James, for example, deals with this very issue:

“Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs; what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action is dead” (James 2:15-17).

Throughout this study, teachers stress the importance of evaluating children on an individual basis. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to children's educational needs. Regardless of the type of schools the participants represent, each in their own words stressed the uniqueness of each child. Knowingly or unknowingly, teachers are actually espousing a biblical concept of people (in this case children) made in the image of God, “*Imago Deo*.” With the knowledge that children are made in *Imago Deo* comes the responsibility to value children.

Ecclesiastes 3:1, states, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.” There is a time for kindergarten and also a time to wait for kindergarten depending on the child. God made each child and their timetable of development. Every child is created by God with different gifts, talents, and abilities. Each child develops differently. Some children have more maturity than others at any given age: Some are introverts, and others are extroverts; some children love to play, and others love to sit with a book. With the uniqueness of each individual, comes the

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responsibility of parents and teachers to value each child and to evaluate the best place for a child in their respective educational setting.

It is easy to have a biblical perspective of child-development based on the *Imago Deo* for our own children. What about the community's children? What about the children in the district across town? Charles Gore, Canon of Westminster from 1894 and 1902, made this poignant statement:

“We have a more or less true ideal of what our own human life ought to be-of what opportunities we ought to have for the development of our faculties- married life and old age, work and rest, ought to mean for ourselves and our families. We are to be as truly zealous and active for other classes or other individuals as we are for our own class or our own family or ourselves” (as cited in Joy & Strength, 1901, p.259).

In our own communities, it is very easy to support kindergarten readiness for young children: Parents and teachers frequently discuss the issue of preparation for kindergarten; there are preschool programs throughout the community; many local churches operate preschool programs. These latter programs especially espouse the biblical concept of a child's value and life made in *Imago Deo*. The local library offers “story-time” classes and “preschool preview” nights; the local school board is on the cutting edge of academic research and frequently discusses findings at board meetings; teachers and parents have ample opportunity to voice their opinions to district officials in community platforms. However, even in more wealthy areas, there are still children who may be economically disadvantaged and considered at high risk for academic failure. If the family's income level is low enough, these students can attend the county's preschool at little or no cost.

Two suburban area churches are practicing Romans 12:13, “Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” During the week, these churches host

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preschool programs to educate children who have special needs and/or limited financial resources. The churches do not operate the programs, but have a partnership with the county or a Head Start program to help the community. One church offers the Health Department its facilities at least twice a month to function as a clinic for the needy in the county. These churches are examples of believers in a more-financially-established area, reaching out to children and struggling families within their community. The very *Imago Deo* is reflected by the words and actions of these believers; the message to the down-trodden of the community is “You are valued.”

Along with the concept of *Imago Deo*, part of our calling as believers is the need to practice biblical reconciliation - not just in our own communities, but the communities across town as well.

He is the image of the invisible God, the first born over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead; so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Colossians 1:15-20).

“All things” include education and the needs of the poor. Christ came to reconcile everything in this life. God’s plan for creation did not intend hungry, needy children.

Sin thwarted the original plan:

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from the bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time (Romans 8:20-22).

There are few kindergarteners in the urban district of Toledo that receive any type of preschool education. Urban children are in a critical need for preparation for

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schooling. Head Start and preschool programs, operated through agencies such as United Way, are scattered throughout Toledo; however, there is still a real void in preschool education in the urban areas of the community. Greater yet, there is a real void of Christ's presence.

Believers have a part in biblical reconciliation. II Corinthians 5:20 states: "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." Our calling as believers is to be an ambassador in God's plan of reconciliation. The disparity between the districts' preschools/kindergarten classes should trouble followers of Jesus Christ. Believers may be aware of the issue, but what action is being taken? Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine you did for me" (Matthew 25:34-40). Believers have more than a moral responsibility, they have a biblical mandate:

"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (I John 3:17-18).

Evangelical Christians are known for valuing (choosing) life; it is imperative for believers to see the needs of preschool and kindergarten children and their families as a "life" issue. To love and educate children from all areas in our communities is to choose life. It is an opportunity to share physical life as well as spiritual life. There are no throw-away children; there are no throw-away people. God creates and values each one. The truth of biblical reconciliation and *Imago Deo* compel believers to practice stewardship of personal skills, time, and resources. Believers believe in the *Imago Deo* and biblical reconciliation; however, the conviction must transcend into action which is stewardship:

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So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. (I Corinthians 4:1-2)

Two public preschool teachers in this study are practicing the ministry of reconciliation through stewardship. During the interview each one alluded to their job as their ministry. They have given their time, energy, and resources to teach in challenging situations. These teachers love their students with the love of Christ. Their classrooms are filled with students that have horrendous home lives. Both of these teachers spend an enormous amount of time tending to the social and emotional needs of their students. Both teachers are the “ambassadors of Christ” in their schools and communities. They are making an impact on the lives of their students and families.

The rural preschool teacher is involved in the lives of her students’ families. She makes mental notes of her students’ siblings, and contacts these families when the siblings are the correct age to be enrolled in her grant sponsored preschool class. Within the community, she consistently shares the opportunity of preschool education; her goal is to prepare needy children for kindergarten. The urban preschool teacher works diligently with her students and is in contact with the local school district’s kindergarten teachers to help make smooth transitions for her students into kindergarten. Each one of these teachers is living out daily the call to be “salt and light” in their world.

There are many teachers tirelessly working in similar situations, carrying out the Biblical mandate to “care about justice for the poor” (Proverbs 29:7). Whether as individuals or as churches, believers have a duty to wrestle with this issue. It is easy to espouse the importance of child preparation for school. The belief in the need to prepare all children for school and the action to accomplish the task is the challenge of faith.

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It would be an incredible thing to witness inner city churches housing preschool programs that suburban churches help support with teachers, volunteers, and resources. This would send a loud message to a community filled with hopelessness that children and their families are valued. The void in our communities for quality preschool education should be filled with educational programs of excellence operated by believers.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Research Project:

1. How many years have you taught?
2. How many years of preschool/kindergarten experience?
3. What ways do you keep up on current educational research?
4. What knowledge/skills/social behaviors do you consider important for kindergarten readiness?
5. What type of testing do you use for kindergarten placement?
6. How does the age of a boy or girl play a role in your expectations for him or her in kindergarten?
7. How do you feel about the State of Ohio's September 30th cutoff date and/or the district cut-off date of August 1st?
8. What are the pressures you feel as a kindergarten/preschool teacher from: administration, parents, and next year's teachers?
9. What is your response to the comment that "kindergarten is not what it use to be?"
10. Do you believe your role has been redefined as a preschool/kindergarten teacher in the last decade? If so, in what specific ways?
11. What circumstances would cause you to suggest delaying a child's entrance into kindergarten?
12. Have you recommended kindergarten delay of entrance more or less in the last 10 years? Why?

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13. How do you convince parents the importance to delay a child's entrance into kindergarten?
14. If a child does poorly on pre-kindergarten benchmarks, what further evidence, personal opinions, or statistics do you utilize to advice parents to wait to send their child to kindergarten?
15. What is your reaction to the statement, "There is substantial research that delaying kindergarten has little to no benefits and may in fact cause more harm than good?"

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Appendix B

Coding Criteria for Interview Responses

Two methods of coding were utilized in the analysis of interview responses from preschool and kindergarten teachers. First, each question was placed on an individual spread sheet. Answers to each question were separated into two categories of preschool and kindergarten teachers. The individual questions were examined for similarities and dissimilarities between categories. The similarities and dissimilarities were recorded. Color coding was used to distinguish the similarities and dissimilarities among the participant responses.

Second, each question was placed again on an individual spread sheet. This time answers to each question were separated by demographic areas and categories of preschool and kindergarten teachers. For example, preschool teachers from suburban, rural, urban, and private schools were analyzed. The same process occurred for kindergarten teachers. Once again, individual questions were examined for similarities and dissimilarities among demographic areas and the categories of preschool and kindergarten teachers. Color coding was utilized to differentiate the results.

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