

KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS' AND PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS
OF WHAT CHARACTERISTICS A CHILD
SHOULD HAVE TO BE READY
FOR KINDERGARTEN.

THESIS

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Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate the perceptions of both kindergarten teachers and parents of kindergartners as to what characteristics are important for a child to have in order to be ready for kindergarten.

Twenty-one teachers and thirty-two parents anonymously recorded their perceptions on questionnaires distributed by Rochester area elementary schools. The questionnaire also asked where these characteristics were thought to have been initially developed, and what one single characteristic they believed to be the most important. In addition, the parent questionnaire asked if the child had attended day care or preschool and for how long. Responses were separated and analyzed for similarities and differences and are listed in Table 1. Recordings of the most important characteristic appear in Table 2.

The number and variety of responses from parents and teachers supports that there are just as many definitions of the ready child as there are children.

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Chapter I

Statement of Problem

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate kindergarten teachers' and parents' of kindergartners perceptions of what characteristics are important for a child to have to be ready for kindergarten.

Need for the Study

"The first National Education Goal, set by the president and 50 state governors, states that 'by the year 2000, every child in America will start school ready to learn'" (Urbanski, 1994). In the Friday, February 25, 1994 edition of the Democrat and Chronicle, Adam Urbanski, President of the Rochester Teachers Association, articulated the importance of children's readiness for school with his article on school readiness.

Kindergartens have changed over the years, incorporating more of a first grade curriculum and demanding more of the five year old (Golant & Golant, 1990; Wolf, 1987), and it has become apparent that children need to be prepared for this first year of formal education. Kindergarten is no longer the last haven for informal, uninterrupted explorational learning, but actual subjects are being taught, with dittos and homework -- concepts formerly encompassed in first grade (Wolf, 1987). With this change in kindergarten curriculum and the growing concerns and interests parents

have regarding their children's education, making the right decision about when to begin Kindergarten has become crucial. More and more teachers, parents, administrators, and government officials in education are asking, "What is a ready child?" There exist just as many answers as there are people asking the question (Love & Osborne, 1971). This study takes its aim at understanding teacher's and parent's beliefs about readiness, and developing a common frame between what teachers and parents think is the ready child. Three questions asked of kindergarten teachers and parents of kindergartners provided the focus for the study:

Questions to be Answered

1. What characteristics do kindergarten teachers think are most important for a child to have, in order to be ready for kindergarten?
2. Where do kindergarten teachers and parents of kindergartners think these characteristics are initially developed?
3. What characteristics do parents of kindergartners think are most important for a child to have to be ready for kindergarten?

Definitions

Readiness - "a developmental stage at which a child has the capacity to receive instruction at a given level of difficulty, or to engage in a particular activity" (Random House, 1987, p. 1606).

Developmental Readiness - The "age at which a child is behaving as a total organism" (King, 1984, p. 26); not just behaving as a five year old physically or mentally, but emotionally, socially, neurologically and academically as well.

Not Ready or Unready - When a child behaves at a developmental age that is lower than his or her chronological (biological or mental) age, he or she is not ready for kindergarten (King, 1984).

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate kindergarten teachers' and parents' of kindergartners perceptions of what characteristics are important for a child to have to be ready for kindergarten.

Introduction

In a nationwide survey of 7,000 kindergarten teachers in 1991, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching found that 35% of kindergartners were unprepared for school. Forty-two percent of the teachers indicated that overall, children are less prepared today than they were five years ago (NEA Today, February 1992, p.8). More recently, Adam Urbanski, President of the Rochester Teachers Association, published an article introducing a report on "Public School Kindergarten Teachers' Views on Children's Readiness for School." The report highlights another survey, conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, of 1500 public school kindergarten teachers about readiness to learn. Urbanski writes, "Readiness to learn is a powerful determinant of a child's success in kindergarten and early grades..." and "Now it is time for each community to do all that is necessary to [prepare their children]" (Democrat & Chronicle, February 25, 1994, p. 11-A). A look at recent

statistics shows that more and more parents are indeed enrolling their three and four year olds in preschool, to get them ready for kindergarten and formal education. Gary D. Salyers, 1989-90 President of National Association of Elementary School Principals reports in his article, "Critical Preschool Years," that "in the last 25 years, the percent of three- and four-year-olds attending some form of preschool has quadrupled, from slightly less than 10% in 1964 to 40% today" (Elkind, 1991, p.141). Kindergarten readiness has indeed become a topic of much concern, and simultaneously, the concept of kindergarten has been changing as well (Golant and Golant, 1990).

Changes in Kindergarten

Golant and Golant (1990) write that in the 1980's kindergarten used to be a place for children to prepare for elementary school, or to bridge the gap between home and formal education. Now, kindergarten is no longer the last haven for informal, uninterrupted explorational learning. Actual subjects are being taught with dittos and homework, as well as concepts formerly encompassed in first grade (Wolf, 1987). Before the 1960's, "...kindergarten introduced children to colors, coat racks, and cooperation. But ever since then, kindergarten has become a cutthroat world of academic competition" (Better Homes and Gardens, April, 1988, p. 46).

Why the change in curriculum? One reason may be that parents are looking for ways to have their child get a head start, in order to compete successfully for a topnotch college 14 years down the road (Salyers, in

Elkind, 1991). Demands, then, for a "top notch" kindergarten spur a more academic curriculum, to enhance competitiveness with other kindergarten programs. Another reason is clearly explained by David Elkind, a major advocate for the protection of childhood, and author of several books on the subject. In his opinion, "the Russian launching of Sputnik in 1957 drove Americans into a frenzy of self-criticism about education and promoted the massive curriculum movement of the 1960's that brought academics from major universities into curriculum writing" (1988, p.7). What wasn't taken into account; however, was how much and how fast the young child could understand and learn.

Additionally, Elkind (1988), writes that the efforts to help disadvantaged youth prepare for school spread to preparing every child, at younger and younger ages. Head Start programs, initially developed for disadvantaged youth, increased in popularity and soon, every parent desired for their child a "head start." Regardless of the reason, kindergarten in the 1990's has **become** elementary school and young children must prepare for it in advance.

To adequately prepare for anything, one must first know what to prepare for: In this case -- kindergarten. But how does one know a child is, or is not, ready for kindergarten? What characteristics are important for success? What is readiness? What does it mean for a child to be ready for kindergarten?

What is Readiness?

There are just as many definitions of readiness as there are people who try to define it, and yet there is an underlying base to all definitions: That readiness is the state of being ready, or the time when it is "satisfying to act, and annoying not to act" (Love and Osborne, 1971, p. 53). Over this base, however, various contexts of readiness can be found in every interpretation. Gredler (1992) writes that readiness can be viewed under several descriptions: 1) chronological age; 2) developmental growth or maturation; and 3) chronological age, maturation, and the social experiences of the child.

Berk (1988) highlights five important areas of development that are evidenced in the five-year old child. Physical development encompasses hand-eye-foot coordination in small and large muscle control, and balance. Sitting still for more than ten minutes is often an extremely difficult challenge for the five-year old, as his muscle control is still developing. Language acquisition appears in the use of complex sentences and questions, and in believing the literalness of language, such as "chocolate mousse." A five-year old will most likely picture a great big chocolate "moose" and wonder how it will be eaten for dessert at the relatively small dining room table. Thirdly, cognitive development progresses with an understanding of the passing of time (yesterday, today and tomorrow); with counting (not from rote memory); and writing his or her own name. Most children at this stage are in Piaget's Preoperational Period, and exhibit egocentric and symbolic thinking. They do not yet practice logic

to understand perceptions, as in comprehending that although it is only one finger's length to Grandma's house on the map, it still takes a whole day to get there. This concept still eludes them.

Progress in emotional development finds increases in self-confidence, self-sufficiency, and in the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. "The five-year-old child is rather calm and self-assured, feeling a balance of control between himself and adults" (Berk, 1988, p. 122). Hygiene and toileting are usually no longer a problem, and the child can choose his own activities, and play rather independently. Policing the behavior of others is also evident as the five-year-old begins to distinguish between right and wrong. Although tattling on his friends may make him feel that he is on his way to becoming an adult, it may not particularly endear him to his classmates (Berk, 1988). Lastly, skills of turn taking, sharing and pretend play strengthen as the five-year-old develops socially. Cooperative, imaginative play is extensive and usually very involved, as children practice turn-taking and sharing, as shown in this conversation.

Pamela: "You be the sister, okay?"

Susan: "Okay, I'll be the sister and you be the mommy.

Mommies tell their children to set the table."

Pamela: "No, you rock the baby 'cause dinner isn't ready yet."

Susan: "No, you pretend it's already done and I'll bring the baby to the table (p. 112-123).

Berk (1988) proposes that kindergartens incorporate ways to enhance and further develop these areas. Therefore, if a child does not

exhibit all of these traits and skills, he is not automatically "unready" for kindergarten. It is kindergarten's mission, then, to encourage and guide the child in these developments.

Brazelton suggests that "there is no right age for all children to begin [pre]school, but there is a right time for each individual child" (Democrat and Chronicle, September 2, 1993, p. 3-C). When determining if a child is ready for school, he recommends that parents think about what the school will require of the child.

He must be able to concentrate and pay attention. He must have the physical stamina and patience to sit for long periods and he must be able to fit into the rhythms of the school. A child must have the capacity to understand, remember, follow two- and three-part directions, do assigned tasks and take care of personal possessions (Brazelton, p. 3-C).

Along with these physical developments, there is a level of neurological and emotional maturity necessary for skills such as cutting, drawing and writing, getting along with other children, and separating from home. However, all children are not the same and do not develop simultaneously. "It would be a mistake to think all children are ready at the same time" (Brazelton, p. 3-C). Each child will develop in his or her own time, making readiness a highly personal matter (Love and Osborne, 1971).

Some experts on children and human development feel that a child, to be successful, does not need to know how to read, count, write, or even

say the letters and numbers before he/she begins school (Ames and Chase, 1980). Conversely, they feel that a child who does possess all these skills still may not be ready. In their book, Don't Push Your Preschooler, Ames and Chase (1980) suggest chronological age and a comparison in maturity to other same-aged children as good determining factors. They also list several questions parents should ask themselves to ascertain their child's readiness. Austin and Lafferty (found in Ames and Chase, 1980) in 1963, published a list of 43 such questions and Ames and Chase highlight nine as the most significant.

1. Will your child be five years and six months or older when he begins kindergarten?
2. Can he tell you the names of three or four colors that you point out?
3. Can he draw or copy a square?
4. Can she name drawings of a cross, square, circle?
5. Can he repeat a series of four numbers without practice?
6. Can she tell her left hand from her right?
7. Can he draw and color beyond a simple scribble?
8. Can she tell what things are made of, such as cars, chairs and shoes?
9. Can he travel alone in the neighborhood (two blocks) to a store, school, playground or the homes of friends? (This aspect takes on new concerns in today's society as compared to that of the 1960's) (p. 179).

As traveling alone in the neighborhood would not even be considered by most parents today, some adjustment may be necessary. It would be more appropriate to consider the child's comprehension of the importance of

staying away from strangers, saying no to drugs and unwanted advances, and recognizing and seeking out someone they can trust (officer in uniform).

The skills identified in these questions include cognitive, fine motor coordination, and independence. Answering them should give parents a good idea where their children are in respect to rising to the challenges of kindergarten and succeeding.

World Book Educational Products, producers of leading World Book Encyclopedias, conducted a school readiness survey in 1993 of 3,000 kindergarten teachers in the United States and Canada and identified 105 desirable readiness skills that will help children get off to a good start when they begin school. Those 105 skills were broken down into nine groups:

- Understanding size of objects
- Familiarity with colors and shapes
- Familiarity with numbers
- Reading readiness
- Understanding of position and direction
- Understanding the simple concepts of time
- Listening and sequencing events
- Acquisition of motor skills
- Social/emotional development

It is interesting to note that the emphasis here is on cognitive skills, with only one mention of social/emotional development. However, this section encompasses the largest listing of individual skills, including sharing with

others, caring for self, feeling good about self, adjusting to time away from family, and asking to go to school and liking it.

In similar fashion, teachers at a suburban elementary school in Rochester, New York put together a two page statement of what they consider the ready child to be, and what a parent can do to enhance the characteristics and skills they write about. I received this handout with a returned questionnaire and the comments that "this is not necessarily district policy, but we [the kindergarten department] are allowed to use it as a basis and then we brainstormed ideas around it" (name withheld for confidentiality, 1994). Characteristics are listed with the title, "Readiness is a child who..." and is followed by a list of verbs and descriptors.

- Listens - to directions, stories and poems for
five to ten minutes
- Hears- rhyming words, same/different-sound words
- Sees - likenesses and differences in pictures, and
letters and words that match
- Understands - relationships in words like up
and down, big and little
- Speaks - stays on topic of discussion; retells
a story adequately; relates a personal
experience
- Thinks - gives details, main ideas, reasons for
own opinions
- Adjusts - to change in routine, new situations;
to defeat without crying or sulking;
to asking for help when needed
- Plays - cooperatively; shares, takes turns,
assumes equal responsibility; physical
play skills

Works - without being distracted; follows directions
completes tasks; takes pride in work

Since every child may not exhibit all of these characteristics in the details described, parents should look for and strive to enhance these characteristics to best prepare their child for kindergarten at this particular school.

Although most professionals and educators, such as Ames and Chase, Berk, Brazelton, Elkind, and others, have their own personal perceptions of what the ready child is, "Most parents use size, skills, and maturity to decide whether their child is ready for school" (Better Homes and Gardens, April 1988, p. 46). According to Frank Newman, President of the Education Commission of the States, child readiness is "currently determined by various educational, developmental, and psychosocial scales, and by arbitrary age cutoffs" (Elkind, 1991, p.100). In his opinion, "Kindergartens should be places that take children where they are and with whatever they bring" (p.100). Newman feels that children's developmental needs should take center stage, with preschool and kindergarten programs creating a foundation upon which the remaining school years will rest. Similarly, Stanford University Education Professor Robert Calfee, Ph.D., believes there is no such thing as being ready for kindergarten. "If the kids aren't ready for what the teachers are doing, the teachers should change, not the students" (Better Homes and Gardens, March 1990, p. 23).

Newman's and Calfee's thoughts that the school should be ready for the child reflect those of Penelope Engel, Professional Associate of the Educational Testing Service in Washington D.C. She advocates efforts to separate school entry from readiness, as is done in New Zealand, Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, Britain and Australia. In these countries children enter school at particular ages, ready or not (Educational Leadership, February 1991). Quoting S. Meisels, of the University of Michigan's Center for Human Growth and Development, Engel writes, "If you're alive, you're ready to learn, no matter what the tests say" (Meisels in Engel, February 1991, p. 41). Additionally, she includes several guidelines for readiness assessments. They should: 1) encompass cognitive, social/emotional, attitudinal and physical/motor behaviors; 2) be an ongoing process of observations; 3) provide data useful for instructional improvement - to help the teacher get ready for the child; 4) be recorded by an adult, and not by the child on an answer sheet; 5) be administered one-on-one or to very small groups only; 6) be designed to be answered with manipulatives - pointing, acting or doing; 7) not be used for tracking or denial of school entry; 8) be conducted by a properly trained person who relates well with children; 9) gather information on behaviors and skills that children have had the chance to develop; and 10) be conducted in a natural setting, nonthreatening to the child (Engel, February 1991). An advantage of separating school entry from readiness is a release of competitive pressure surrounding children and kindergarten programs. As children enter a kindergarten class, ready

or not, it is their collective skills, developmental stages, interests and needs that make up the atmosphere of that particular year. The pressure to teach the most to young children is removed, and the focus is centered on the child and what he or she needs. Kindergartens operating under this philosophy exhibit more of the early characteristics of kindergarten -- a place of uninterrupted, explorational, uninhibited learning.

Summary

As kindergartens change, becoming more academic and more like first grade, it has become apparent that children are less and less prepared to enter such an educational atmosphere. In the quest for the best preparation, parents, teachers, administrators, and other educational professionals often ask "What is the ready child?" or "What characteristics does a ready child have?"

There exist just as many answers to these questions as there are people asking them. Some focus on areas of development while others support chronological age and maturity. Still others advocate that the school be ready for the child, whether he or she is ready or not.

Whatever the focus of the answer, school readiness is a subject of much interest and will surely continue to exist on one of the many front burners of educational issues.

Chapter III

Design of the Study

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate kindergarten teachers' and parent's of kindergartners perceptions of what characteristics are important for a child to have to be ready for kindergarten.

Questions

1. What characteristics do kindergarten teachers think are most important for a child to have to be ready for kindergarten?
2. Where do kindergarten teachers and parents of kindergartners think these characteristics are initially developed?
3. What characteristics do parents of kindergartners think are most important for a child to have to be ready for kindergarten?

Methodology

Subjects: Kindergarten teachers were chosen from randomly picked schools in rural, suburban and urban districts in and surrounding Rochester, New York.

Those teachers, in turn, were asked to randomly choose one parent from their current class list and forward a parent questionnaire to them either through a weekly mailing or through their kindergarten child.

Materials: The introductory letter and questionnaire for teachers and parents are included in Appendix A and B, respectively. Self-addressed, stamped envelopes were included with all letters and questionnaires.

Procedure: Individual school principals were contacted regarding this study and asked if they would distribute the questionnaires to kindergarten teachers in their building. In most cases, three to five teacher questionnaires were left at each school. In a few instances, principals enclosed their own memo with the questionnaire, stating their support of the project and encouraging prompt return. A total of 38 teacher letters and questionnaires were distributed.

To reach parents randomly, each kindergarten teacher who completed the questionnaire was asked to forward one parent questionnaire to a parent of a child in their class. Some kindergarten programs consisted of only three classrooms, therefore three teacher questionnaires were distributed. However, those schools agreed to forward five parent questionnaires. This accounts for a total of 50 parent letters and questionnaires distributed.

Analysis of Data

The overall characteristics teachers and parents listed as necessary for children to have to be ready for kindergarten were studied for similarities, the most common ones being noted.

The teacher and parent responses were then compared according to the most important characteristic a child should have to be ready for kindergarten.

In addition, the most common listing of where these characteristics initially are developed was also noted.

Chapter IV

Analysis of the Data

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate kindergarten teachers' and parent's of kindergartners perceptions of what characteristics are important for a child to have to be ready for kindergarten.

Findings

In answering the question, "What characteristics do you consider important for a child to have to be ready for kindergarten?" both teacher and parents responded with a wide variety of answers. Teachers who responded had been in the education profession for an average of eighteen years, and had been teaching kindergarten for an average of ten years. Of all their various responses, a few appeared more often than others. Out of 21 teachers who returned the questionnaires, 14 responded with the child's ability to care for him or herself. Fourteen also reported the child's ability to attend to a story. Twelve teachers reported the child's ability to separate from family, and 12 also reported adequate social skills.

Parents responded with an equal amount of variety. Of 32 parents who returned their questionnaires, 18 reported adequate social skills as being important for a child to have to be ready for kindergarten. Thirteen responded with the child's ability to attend to a story, and 12 reported the

ability to separate from family. Tables 1 and 2 (pages 22-23) include all the responses from parents and teachers and their frequency of mention.

Parents also reported if their child had attended preschool or day care and for how long. Twenty-four of 38 parents, or 63% recorded that their child had attended preschool, for an average of 2 years. Compared with the statistics in Chapter II, of 40% (Elkind, 1991), this exemplifies the rising trend of parents enrolling their young children in preschool to prepare them for kindergarten. In addition, six parents recorded that their child attended day care for an average of 4 years. Only four parents responded that their child attended programs at both levels, and three reported that their child did not attend either day care or preschool. It is interesting to note that regardless of whether their child attended either day care or preschool, all parents responded that the characteristics they recorded are initially developed at home. Likewise, every teacher indicated that all characteristics are initially developed at home. Most respondents of both groups felt the characteristics were additionally strengthened through attendance in day care, preschool, library hour, or through playing with friends.

In answering the question, "...which [characteristic] do you consider to be the most important for a child to have to be ready for kindergarten?" again, both teachers and parents responded with various characteristics; however, both groups reported self-confidence or self-esteem more than any other characteristic. Table 3 (page 24) presents the frequency of those

most important characteristics mentioned by parents and teachers, respectively.

Table 1

Characteristics of Ready Children
(parent-ordered)

<u>Characteristic / Skill</u>	<u>Parent</u> (N=38)	<u>Teacher</u> (N=21)
Social skills	18	12
Attend to a story	13	14
Separate from family	12	14
Self confidence/esteem	12	7
Follow directions	11	11
Curiosity for learning	10	3
Familiar with numbers/letters	10	8
Communicate effectively	8	7
Care for self	6	14
Familiar with shapes & colors	6	8
Work in groups	6	3
Somewhat independent	6	0
Respect for self and others	4	5
Cooperate with others	4	7
Excited about school	3	2
Sense of responsibility	3	0
Comfortable with structure	3	5
Fine motor skills	3	3
Familiar with books	2	5
Willing to take risks	2	1
Make friends easily	2	1
Control anger	2	1
Mature for age	2	1
Write first name	1	7
Chronological age appropriate	1	1
Problem solving skills	1	1
Speak in front of group	1	2
Have sense of trust	1	0
Creative imagination	1	1
Ability to make choices	0	2
Distinguish right & wrong	0	1

Table 2

Characteristics of Ready Children
(teacher-ordered)

<u>Characteristic / Skill</u>	<u>Parent</u> (N=38)	<u>Teacher</u> (N=21)
Attend to a story	13	14
Separate from family	12	14
Care for self	6	14
Social skills	18	12
Follow directions	11	11
Familiar with numbers/letters	10	8
Familiar with shapes & colors	6	8
Self confidence/esteem	12	7
Communicate effectively	8	7
Cooperate with others	4	7
Write first name	1	7
Respect for self and others	4	5
Comfortable with structure	3	5
Familiar with books	2	5
Curiosity for learning	10	3
Work in groups	6	3
Fine motor skills	3	3
Excited about school	3	2
Speak in front of group	1	2
Ability to make choices	0	2
Willing to take risks	2	1
Make friends easily	2	1
Control anger	2	1
Mature for age	2	1
Chronological age appropriate	1	1
Problem solving skills	1	1
Creative imagination	1	1
Distinguish right & wrong	0	1
Somewhat independent	6	0
Sense of responsibility	3	0
Have sense of trust	1	0

Table 3

Most Important CharacteristicReported by Parents

<u>Characteristic / Skill</u>	<u>Parents (N=32)</u>
Self confidence/esteem	11
Social Skills	7
Attending to a story	4
Somewhat independent	2
Separate from family	2
Supportive parents	1
Follow directions	1
Excited about school	1
Respect for self and others	1
Willing to take risks	1
Mature for age	1

Reported by Teachers

<u>Characteristic / Skill</u>	<u>Teacher (N=21)</u>
Self confidence/esteem	8
Curiosity for learning	2
Excited about school	2
Attend to a story	2
Care for self	2
Social skills	2
Mature for age	1
Separate from family	1
Communicate effectively	1

Explanations of Characteristics

Twenty-one teachers and thirty-eight parents contributed their perceptions of the ready child for this study. Although no two reported the same characteristics, there were some common findings. Respondents recorded their perceptions in individual ways, and what follows is a brief description of each of those characteristics listed in Table 1 (page 22).

Social skills was defined by many parents and teachers as the ability to successfully "get along with others" in play and work settings, primarily through turn-taking and sharing. The ability to "make friends easily" was also reported by parents, as was an "interest in developing friendships independent of family." One teacher expressed that some social skills are necessary, but overall, they would be "refined during kindergarten." Another educator reported, "A 'ready' child demonstrates beginning social skills of sharing (including sharing adult attention, not just materials), cooperation, and respect for ideas and belongings of others."

The ability to **attend to a story** encompassed listening skills and sitting still for several minutes: "Able to sit for 10 - 20 minutes and listen to other people." Parents and teachers reported various times they thought the ready child should be able to sit and attend to a story or project from, "more than a few minutes," to "a 15 to 20 minute time frame."

Separating from home and family was described by parents and teachers as being able to comfortably adjust to time away from the primary care giver, and acclimating to new settings and people. One

parent described it as the "ability to function for 7 1/2 hours in school/on [the] bus -- for a full day of kindergarten." Another parent wrote that the child should "make attempts to separate for a time," and should be "able to be reassured by an adult." One teacher expressed it as overcoming "separation anxiety."

Self-confidence or self-esteem was the highest recorded characteristic among parents and teachers for the most important characteristic a child should have. Some parents phrased it as "having a good sense of self; positive self-esteem," "the self-confidence and ability to express his/her needs and wants," and "a sense of being loved, valued and feeling secure." One parent described it in the realm of the classroom: "A child must have a distinct sense of self, and as part of that, self-esteem. If a child does not accept himself, or respect himself, or feel that he, himself is important and valuable, how can that child respect and value the teachers and other children?" Teachers expressed self-esteem as "a feeling of self-confidence," "self-assurance," and a "self-image." One teacher felt that "Children who feel good about themselves, and feel that they are capable people exhibit the self confidence that allows skills such as name writing and letter recognition to come when they are interested in it." Similarly, other educators felt that self-esteem "will give the child the ability to adjust to change and new experiences," and that "a child who feels good about himself generally feels good and excited to be involved in 'his world.'" Linking inner-knowledge with self-esteem, one educator reported the importance of a child feeling a "sense that he/she is valued as

a 'unique individual' by those who have loved and cared for him/her - not spoiled, but a valued member in the family unit." Another teacher defined self-confidence as the ability to "talk and do things in front of others."

Following directions was reported equally among parents and teachers in response to "What characteristics do you consider important?," It only appeared once, reported by a parent, in answering the question "What is the most important characteristic?" In most instances, parents and teachers defined following directions in terms of "simple," or "1-2-3 step directions."

A **curiosity for learning** was reported by parents as the "desire to learn about the world and their [the child's] life." ; "an interest in academic learning," "a desire to learn," and "interested in learning about different topics." A few teachers reported curiosity or "motivation for learning" using just those words.

A **familiarity with numbers and letters** was listed with a scope ranging from being able to recognize them to reciting the alphabet and numbers 1-10 from memory. Several parents included address, phone number, birthday and name recognition in this category. Others specified being "able to count to ten (at least)" and "able to recite ABC's and starting to count." One parent expressed that she "[doesn't] necessarily feel that knowing the basics (for example: colors, numbers 1-10, alphabet) are the most important, but [does] feel that they would give the child a sense of knowledge when entering kindergarten..." Teachers reported this characteristic with phrases like, "being able to distinguish between letters

and numbers," "to have been exposed to letters and numbers," "recognizes and responds to first and last name in print," "some knowledge/interest in alphabet and numbers," and "can count to at least five." Although mentioned several times by both parents and teachers as one of many characteristics considered important, familiarity with numbers and letters did *not* appear on either list of the most important characteristic.

The ability to **communicate effectively** appeared several times on parent questionnaires with distinctions such as communicating concerns or needs; and thoughts and ideas. Some teachers responded within the same parameters as parents, while others reported this characteristic in terms of speaking in complete sentences and engaging in conversation.

Caring for one's self and taking care of personal needs was reported numerous times on both parent and teacher questionnaires. Many descriptions of this characteristic included dressing one's self (coats and boots as well as indoor clothing), using the bathroom independently, and caring for personal hygiene (blowing nose, washing hands). One parent used the phrase, "self reliant," and one teacher, "autonomous." In addition to what parents reported, teachers included "reasonably caring for own things," including lunch money.

Being **familiar with shapes and colors** was defined by parents as being able to name colors and recognize some shapes. A few listed "knowledge of shapes and colors" under "general academic knowledge." Teachers defined this characteristic in similar terms, and listed it under general academic knowledge.

Parents reported **working in groups** as "the ability to function in a group setting without the constant and exclusive attention from an adult," and realizing that "being in a group changes the way he or she can interact with others, including waiting to get the teacher's attention." One parent included the term "working cooperatively," meaning sharing and taking turns. To those teachers who reported this characteristic, it meant the ability to "feel comfortable in a group," "to do things cooperatively in a group situation," and "be able to be part of a group and become involved in a group project or lesson."

Children who are **somewhat independent** are able to "work independently for short periods," and know what they want to do and enjoy doing it, according to parent responses. Parents also linked independence with caring for oneself and separating from family. Although no teachers directly reported independence, it was evident in some of their descriptions of other characteristics, again including caring for oneself and separation from family.

Parents and teachers reported **respect for self and others** in straight forward terms relating to feelings, personal belongings, and a "respect for authority."

Cooperating with others was described by parents and teachers as successful peer interactions or "getting along with others," relating to sharing and taking turns in play and work.

In reporting that a child should be **excited about coming to school**, parents wrote that he/she should have "a willingness to walk into the

classroom," and "a desire to go to school and learn." Teachers responded concisely with words like, "thrilled" and "interested or excited."

While no teachers reported the characteristic of having a **sense of responsibility**, parents described it as having the "responsibility and knowledge of what is expected of them," and "responsibility of personal belongings."

Being **comfortable with structure**, as reported by both parents and teachers, included "responding to a structured situation," meaning adjusting to the rhythms of kindergarten.

An equal number of parents and teachers felt that **possessing fine motor skills** of varying degrees was a characteristic for children to possess in order to be ready for their first year of formal education. Some felt the "exposure to scissors and crayons" would be appropriate, while others expressed that a level "commensurate with writing," and sufficient enough to hold and use scissors, crayons, and glue was necessary.

Familiarity with books and stories was reported by parents as liking and using them and having an appreciation of them. Teachers responded with "prior exposure to, or interest in, books, stories and rhymes," "the understanding of books and concept of print," and "having been read to daily [at home]."

The following twelve characteristics, with one exception -- being able to write first name -- were reported just once or twice by parents and teachers.

A child's characteristic of **risk-taking** was defined as "a willingness to try new things," and being able to "take risks." One parent reported that taking risks was the most important characteristic a child should have.

Making friends easily was mentioned by both groups as being able to play and get along with others.

A few respondents mentioned being able to **control anger** and other emotions when disciplined, disappointed, or "not the center of attention." In addition, controlling anger was described as "the ability to maintain composure while being instructed and corrected (does not cry overly easily)."

One parent and one teacher each thought that being **mature for one's age** was the most important characteristic a child could have. Both defined maturity as "socially and emotionally mature - to interact with others his/her own age," and being "able to handle leaving [the] parent and sharing with other children."

Being able to **write their first name**, the exception, was reported by one parent and seven teachers. It is easily understood why more teachers found this skill important; however, neither group felt it was the most important.

Having the **appropriate chronological age** meant complying with the birthday cut-off date necessary to begin kindergarten.

Problem solving skills, described as "be[ing] able to think carefully about a question or a task," and "thinking things through" was reported once in each group.

Speaking in front of a group, having a sense of trust, showing a creative imagination, being able to make choices, and being able to distinguish right from wrong were also among those characteristics mentioned once or twice by respondents.

Chapter V

Conclusions, Implications, and Suggestions

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate kindergarten teachers' and parent's of kindergartners perceptions of what characteristics are important for a child to have to be ready for kindergarten.

Conclusions

The number and variety of responses from parents and teachers supports that there are just as many definitions of readiness as there are people to define it. Parents and teachers in this study define the ready child in many different ways, perhaps depending on their own education and experiences with children and teaching. Most parents reported that their children did attend preschool, yet every parent and teacher responded that characteristics of ready children are initially developed at home.

In this study, the most important characteristic of ready children most frequently recorded by both groups, was self confidence or esteem. It is interesting to note that despite the small sample number in this study, the majority of parents and teachers recorded more social and emotional characteristics, while it was found that researchers emphasized more cognitive characteristics and skills. However, a larger sample size may

have yielded a clearer pattern of responses, shedding even more light on the ready child's characteristics and the realm of these characteristics.

Implications for District Use

Just as educational and child development professionals hold their own perceptions of what the ready child is, so do parents and teachers, thus creating a multitude of variations among kindergarten programs. This exemplifies the importance of parents working with kindergarten teachers before making the decision about when to enroll their child. Characteristics can be identified as important and then strengthened at home or in an appropriate preschool.

Table 3 (page 24) shows the most important characteristics parents and teachers of this study think children should have in order to be ready for kindergarten. It is this listing that suggests the common ground of characteristics thought to be most important by the parents and teachers in this area of New York State. Using this information as a spring board, parents and teachers can enhance their communication about a child's readiness for kindergarten and make a more confident decision regarding enrollment time. As both parent and teacher express their personal feelings about these characteristics (and others they may value), they will better understand each other's points of view regarding expectations at home and demands in the kindergarten classroom. It may be beneficial for districts to develop a "suggestion sheet" of "Readiness is..." to be referred to by parents and teachers when making the decision of whether or not to

start a child in kindergarten. This forms the beginning of the vital communication link in a child's education. One district included in this study has already initiated this procedure.

It is interesting to note that while the researchers and professionals in education more often referred to cognitive skills when defining the ready child, parents and teachers in this study most frequently recorded intra-personal skills and developments, such as self-esteem and confidence. This supports the importance of vital connections between parent and teacher before and during the kindergarten enrollment process.

Suggestions for Future Research

Due to the small number of respondents in this study, it should be interpreted that the number of parents and teachers reporting each characteristic may fluctuate if more respondents are used in a future study, and that other most important characteristics might be shown to exist. It is the intention of this study, however, to provide a starting point for area parents and teachers to begin communicating about important characteristics of kindergarten-ready children.

Additional research could take the form of individual interviews of area parents and teachers, to discuss readiness characteristics in depth and to perhaps identify even more characteristics. Concentrating on a single district, with the projected outcome of creating a guide sheet of readiness characteristics and skills for parents and teachers, would also prove beneficial to all.

No matter the research, no matter the kindergarten program, and no matter the age of the child, there will always be as many different examples of the ready child as there are children, and it is crucial to keep in mind that every child will be ready for kindergarten, in his or her own way, and in his or her own time.

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Appendix A

February 1994

Dear Parents,

I am a graduate student at SUNY Brockport and am currently working on my thesis toward a Masters Degree in Elementary Education. I am exploring childrens' readiness for kindergarten. My thesis is entitled: "Kindergarten Teachers' and Parents' Perceptions of What Characteristics are Important for a Child to Have to be Ready for Kindergarten."

My thesis will lead to a better understanding of what a ready child is, and to a beginning of a common ground between teachers' and parents' perceptions of what a ready child is.

Enclosed are a few questions I would like you to thoughtfully answer. Please complete these and return them to me in the envelope provided. I need to begin to investigate your perceptions as soon as possible, so please mail them by Friday, February 19, 1994.

Thank you for your time and cooperation,

Holly Jean Nachbar

Enclosures

1. Do you presently have a child in kindergarten? _____
2. Did your child attend preschool? _____ For how long? _____
3. Did your child attend Day Care? _____ For how long? _____
4. What characteristics do you consider important for a child to have in order to be ready for kindergarten? (Please use back side if necessary.)

5. Where do you think these characteristics are initially developed?

6. Of the characteristics you wrote above (question 4), which one do you consider to be the most important in order for a child to be successful in kindergarten?

For purposes of clarification, your phone number would be greatly appreciated; however, if you are uncomfortable, feel free not to include it. _____

Appendix B

February 1994

Dear Teachers,

I am a graduate student at SUNY Brockport and am currently working on my thesis toward a Masters Degree in Elementary Education. I am exploring childrens' readiness for kindergarten. My thesis is entitled: "Kindergarten Teachers' and Parents' Perceptions of What Characteristics are Important for a Child to Have to be Ready for Kindergarten."

My thesis will lead to a better understanding of what a ready child is, and to a beginning of a common ground between teachers' and parents' perceptions of what a ready child is.

Enclosed are a few questions I would like you to thoughtfully answer. Please complete these and return them to me in the envelope provided. I need to begin to investigate your perceptions as soon as possible, so please mail them by Friday, February 19, 1994.

Thank you for your time and cooperation,

Holly Jean Nachbar

Enclosures

1. How many years have you been teaching? _____
Years teaching kindergarten? _____

Please reflect what you think, as an educator, not your district's policy of what a ready child is.

2. What characteristics do you consider important for a child to have in order to be ready for kindergarten? (Please use back side if necessary.)

3. Where do you think these characteristics are initially developed?

4. Of the characteristics you wrote above (question 2), which one do you consider to be the most important in order for a child to be successful in kindergarten?

For purposes of clarification, your phone number would be greatly appreciated; however, if you are uncomfortable, feel free not to include it. _____