Children's Experience Starting Kindergarten

by

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Abstract

The transition to formal schooling is a critical period in the life of a child and their family (Maxwell & Eller, 1994). A successful transition to school is a predictor of not only elementary school performance, but also life outcomes (Maxwell & Eller, 1994). Children's opinions of the first year of this formal transition to schooling were explored, including what they say is important for them to know when starting school. Focus groups contained 3-4 children in Kindergarten from a rural area of British Columbia, four girls and six boys in total. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative methods. Data were coded into themes and sub-themes by three coders. Results indicate that children mention positive or negative feelings or attitudes about school most commonly (i.e. dispositions), making up 34% of responses. Skills was the second most common category, making up 23% of the responses. Rules comprised 18% of responses. These responses were broken down into activity descriptions, academic skills and non-academic skills. Children also discussed social adjustment, educational environment, physical, and family related factors as important when starting school. This study differed from previous research (Dockett & Perry, 1999, 2002) in which rules were more emphasised by participants. In this study rules were not discussed as frequently as in previous research. Rather, social-emotional concerns or dispositions, children's feelings and attitudes toward school, were more emphasised by participants.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my loving and supportive family and friends. Aura – you have shown endless patience in my time spent reading and writing, have offered expert help, and have always encouraged me to keep learning. Mum and Dad -- you taught me to think independently, to question almost everything, and have been supportive throughout my education. I could not have done this without your help. Christopher, Denise, Diggory, and Perelandra – I appreciate the endless creative inspiration. Christina, you are always supportive of all my endeavours. Bev and Naomi – thank you for encouraging words over the years. Tony, Stef, and Eva for artwork and your help. A big thank you to all.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The transition to formal schooling is a critical period in the life of a child and their

family (Maxwell & Eller 1994). A successful transition to school is a predictor of not only

elementary school performance, but also life outcomes (Maxwell & Eller 1994). Teachers'

and parents' views of school readiness have been examined in a number of studies (Crnic &

Lamberty, 1994; Dockett & Perry, 1999; Doherty, 1997; Graue, 1992; Kagan, 1992; Maxwell

& Eller, 1994; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999; Ramey & Ramey, 1994; Smith & Shepard,

1988). According to Maxwell & Eller, "The implications of kindergarten experience is

highlighted by evidence that children who have academic and social difficulties in the early

school years are likely to continue having problems throughout their school careers and in

their later lives" (p.56).

The importance of children's transition to school has received national attention with

the 1997 Speech from the Throne stating that in Canada there must be "progress made in

providing our children with the best possible start," (Human Resources Development Canada,

1998, p.1). This is similar to the National Education Goals Panel in the United States that

states, "by the year 2000 every child in America should start school ready to learn" (Boyer,

1991). The call for high quality effective programs promoting school readiness has led to

research and policy to improve school readiness on a larger scale, such as in the U.S. (NICHD

longitudinal study, Family Support Movement), Canada (National Longitudinal Study of

Youth and Children), the United Kingdom (AVON longitudinal study, Sure Start), and

Australia (Children in Australia) (NSW Department of Community Services, 2003; Brink &

McKellar, 2000).

The National Longitudinal Study of Youth and Children (NLSYC) in Canada has

examined factors affecting school readiness: neighbourhood characteristics, socio-economic

characteristics, neighbourhood factors over and above the characteristics of families, and how

neighbourhood effects change with age group (Kilhen, Hertzman, & Brooks-Gunn, 1998;

Willms, 2002). Beyond risk and protective factor research, social contact research attempts to

ascertain if life outcomes are affected by aspects of the group children belong to beyond

individual economic and social background (Willms, 2002). Results indicate that

neighbourhood characteristics such as social economic characteristics and cohesion are

correlated with higher competencies in young children (Kohen et al., 1998). Neighbourhood

characteristics have an effect on school readiness (Kohen et al., 1998).

In Canada, the goal of improving outcomes for children has also been embraced by

provincial governments and communities across Canada, leading to programs such as Project

School Ready located in Nova Scotia and The North York Early Years Action Group (Janus

& Offord, 2000). School readiness is being used as a benchmark to assess how effective

polices have been at supporting families, children, and communities prior to school entry

(Janus, 2000). A baseline will allow for measurement of goals to improve outcomes for

children (NSW Department of Community Services, 2003).

Research with key stakeholders such as parents, educators, community leaders as well

as the children themselves is necessary to gain full insight into early school needs. Research

working directly with young children is being encouraged by groups such as the United Nations (Saks, 1996). The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that in matters concerning children, "the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration," (UN, 1986, Part 1, Article 3). This is related to this study as children are being asked directly about their own interests, and what is important to them to be successful in life, encouraging practice that takes into account the best interests of children.

Children's views of school readiness and their experience starting school differ from parent and teacher views. Teacher and parent views have received some attention; further research is needed to investigate children's perspectives. In the ecology of school readiness, that is factors shaping and determining a child's readiness for school, children's views are the least documented. In the ecology of starting school children's voice is least documented. The ecological scope includes all stakeholder views: community, teacher, parent, and student (see Figure 1). In addition, further study is needed with children, as they are the most important stakeholders in kindergarten transition. In the present study the child's views of beginning school are added, thereby contributing an important part of this ecology as the student view has received the least attention.

Figure 1: Ecology of School Readiness
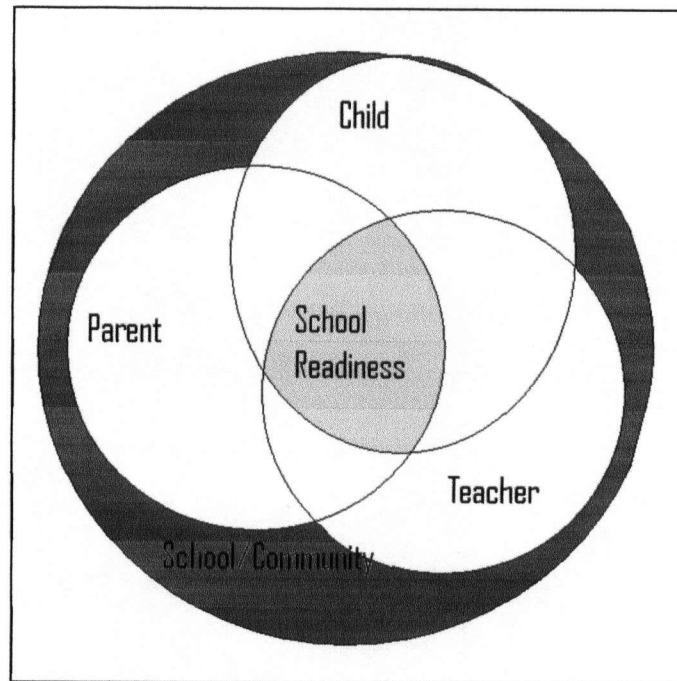
Purpose of the Study

In the present study the following objectives were addressed: to gain knowledge, from the perspective of children on their experiences in starting school. In the present study several questions were addressed: What are the experiences of children starting school? What do children say they need to know when starting school? It is hoped that the responses to these questions will facilitate insight into children's views of early school experience and school readiness.

Key Terms

School Readiness

"School readiness" may be defined as a child's ability to meet the demands of school including activities such as handling curriculum and sitting quietly when entering the formal system (Kagan, 1992). School readiness is based in part on a child's level of physiological maturation, innate abilities, and temperament. The Education Goals Panel put forward a perspective on school readiness: "physical well-being and appropriate motor development; emotional health and a positive approach to new experiences; age-appropriate social knowledge and competence; age appropriate language skills; and age-appropriate general knowledge and cognitive skills" (Doherty, 1997, p.21). According to Doherty (1997), these components reflect what a student needs to succeed in school.

An important expansion to this traditional concept of school readiness "emphasizes the importance of the school being ready for the child" (Doherty, 1997, p.13). This reflects concerns about early elementary classrooms that do not address the disparate levels of readiness among children, use developmentally inappropriate approaches to instruction, or have unrealistic academic demands (Doherty, 1997). An important part of school readiness is the school being "ready" for children. When a school is ready to meet a child's needs and able teach them what they need for their developmental level, then all students are school ready. In this study school readiness is viewed as both the child being able to handle demands of the school environment, in addition to the school being ready to teach all children appropriately.

Kindergarten Student

A kindergarten student was a child who attended kindergarten in 2002-2003. These children were a minimum 5 years (by December 2002) and were between 5 and 6 years of age in the present study.

School Transition

The transition to school is seen as taking place in the kindergarten year. The kindergarten year is seen by many as a transitional year, a preparatory experience facilitating the smooth transition to the grade one-year and beyond (Pianta & Cox, 1999). According to Pianta and Cox the transition to school "sets the tone and direction of a child's school career" (p.47). This transition year is key in setting the stage for a successful school career for students.

Summary: Significance of the Study

There is a need to increase knowledge about children's views of their experience starting school, especially in light of the following: 1) positive early school experiences promote resilience and positive growth in children; 2) the limited number of empirical studies regarding children's opinions; 3) children's views of school readiness and their experience have been shown to differ from parent and teacher views.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Resiliency: Early School Experience

Factors That Affect School Adjustment

The transition to kindergarten involves a move from home or pre-school, a new peer group, a new "student" role, new expectations, and a new adult authority figure in the teacher (Maxwell & Eller, 1994). Children's skills and prior knowledge or experience, pre-school attendance, home lives and parental interaction, and kindergarten classroom characteristics have been found to impact early school adjustment (Maxwell & Eller, 1994).

Increasing resiliency and decreasing risk. There are known risk factors that are likely to set a developmental trajectory leading to negative life outcomes such as conduct disorder, relationship problems or social-emotional difficulties (Doherty, 1997; May & Kundert, 1997; Reid & Eddy, 1997). Building in protective factors can improve resiliency for children and enhance their chances for healthy and productive lives (Landy & Kwok Kwam, 1998). Given the challenges children face today, Canadian premiers have ensured their commitment to investing in child development to give children their best chance (Government of Canada, 2000). As stated by Pianta & Kraft-Sayre (1999), school success has been identified as one of the most critical protective factors for at–risk children. Lack of school readiness puts children at risk for academic, social, and behavioural difficulties in school such as leaving before high school graduation, becoming pregnant as a teenager, becoming involved in criminal behaviour, and becoming addicted to tobacco, alcohol and other drugs (Hertzman, 2000). Medical practitioners also suggest optimising development by facilitating school readiness, as

a method of achieving better health for adults and reducing long-term health care costs (Zuckerman, 2003).

Theoretical Basis for School Readiness

Various theoretical bases for school readiness exist. The theoretical orientation of a practitioner, researcher, or community will impact on both conventions and practice surrounding young children's transition to school. Meisels (1999) identifies four theoretical orientations towards readiness: idealist/nativist, environmental/empiricist, social constructivist, and integrationist (Meisels, 1999).

Idealist/Nativist. The Nativist (or Idealist) view of child development may be traced back to philosopher Immanuel Kant (1781) who saw skills as innate or within the child at birth. Smith and Shepard (1988) state that "nearly all functions of the organism, including the mental ones such as perception, are innate rather than acquired through the senses" (p.332). School readiness is defined as allowing the child to develop the underlying structures necessary for learning, to a point where they are ready for the school. When this orientation is used to assess school readiness, a struggling child may be given "the gift of time" by retaining the child for a year and providing a chance to "catch up" with a second year of kindergarten or by delaying school entry. As stated by Meisels (1999), "the idealist/nativist perspective on readiness holds that children are ready to learn when they are ready to learn" (p.47). Children will eventually develop to the point that they will concentrate, focus, have social skills, and enjoy school activities.

Environmental/Empiricist. The Empiricist focuses on outward behaviours of the child. This point of view may be traced back to John Locke (1690) who believed that the newborn was a *tabula rasa* or a "blank slate" upon which environmental factors in the child's world exerts influence on development. William James (1890) stated that at birth the visual world of the child presented a "blooming, buzzing confusion." The child's ability to understand particular sensations develops through learning (Shaffer, 1993). To the Empiricist, school readiness is seen as "a cumulative skills model that posits a hierarchy of tasks that culminate in a final task and in which intermediate tasks cannot be mastered before earlier goals are achieved" (Meisels, 1998, p.48). This might include knowing colours, one's address, shapes, how to print one's name, making a pattern, identifying like objects (sorting), counting to 10, and behaving in a socially desirable way for the classroom (Meisels, 1999). The empiricist view of school readiness leads to an emphasis on a child starting school acquiring specific skills seen as precursors to success at school, not as an end goal to be learned at school (Kagan, 1990). Readiness is a universal and stable goal for parents and pre-school teachers (and ultimately children) to aim towards.

Interactionist. This falls between the Nativist and Empiricist views. Children are born with innate abilities and biological maturation, and biological functions require learning in the environment to contribute to normal development (Shaffer, 1993). Growth is *bi-directional* and reflects interplay between nature (maturation) and the effects of nurture (experience/learning), (Shaffer, 1993). Readiness focuses on "children's learning and on

schools' capacities to meet the individual needs of their students" (Meisels, 1998, p.49). As

stated by Meisels (1996):

> Readiness and early school achievement are bi-directional concepts that
>
> focus both on children's current skills, knowledge and abilities and on the
>
> conditions of the environment in which children are reared and taught.
>
> Because different children are prepared for different experiences, and
>
> different children respond differentially to apparently similar
>
> environmental inputs, readiness is a relative term. Although it can be
>
> applied to individual children, it is not something in the child, and it is not
>
> something in the curriculum. It is a product of the interaction between
>
> children's prior experiences, their genetic endowment, their maturational
>
> status, and the whole range of environmental and cultural experiences that
>
> they encounter. (Meisels, 1996, p.410)

Social Constructivist. Child development is context driven (Meisels, 1999). Within

social constructivism, readiness is a social and cultural creation. It is "a set of ideas or

meanings constructed by people in communities, families, and schools as they participate in

the kindergarten experience. These ideas come out of community values and expectations and

are related to individual children in terms of attributes like their age, sex, and preschool

experience" (Graue, 1992, p.226). Readiness is a relative concept defined by the community.

Conventions and Practice of School Readiness

The theoretical orientation, explicit or implicit, that one holds about school readiness and kindergarten transition will impact both conventions and practice in early years education and the transition to school. Children's behaviour and abilities fluctuate rapidly and learning occurs in spurts making single assessments at a young age inaccurate in assessing long-term potential (Crnic & Lamberty, 1994). Children who are "screened out" may have a greater need for school than children deemed "school ready" as their overall environment may not have provided them with the opportunities for learning. These children need to be taught skills needed to learn and not just be provided more time to mature (Brown, & Faupel, 1987). For instance, an isolated child in a rural area of Canada may not have had social opportunities to interact with other children and may be in more need of this form of interaction than children who are deemed "ready". A "maturist" suggestion of waiting a year for this child to mature has not been shown to help, but could harm the child through lost learning time at a critical period for social interaction (Brown & Faupel, 1987). A well-rounded view investigating readiness in context is desirable. As stated by Doherty (1997), "a holistic examination of a child's learning in the child development context should allow the identification of factors impacting on learning outcomes, as pre-requisites, risk factors, and protective factors" (p.77).

Psychologists and educators also agree that understanding school readiness and the transition-to-school progression involves a move beyond purely academic considerations to consider factors such as social skills and motivation (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Entwisle,

Alexander, Cadigan & Pallas, 1986; Kagan, 1992; Maxwell & Eller, 1994). Social skills in

the young grades may predict later success in life even when controlling for IQ. A child who

is not able to get along with fellow students in the early years is more likely to leave school

prior to graduation (Doherty, 1997). In discussing school readiness it is important to consider

all influences on the developing child including children themselves, the family, the

community, the school, and the classroom.

Ecological Theory

The Ecological model is an Interactionist view of human development and school

readiness. The maturing child interacts with the environment including interactions with

parents, home, community and other people or settings that promote development.

Development occurs as a result of the process of interaction between the person and the

environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). School readiness may be viewed differently

in various contexts such as home, school, community, and child factors that interact to

promote development and learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Current research has looked more

closely at teachers' and parents' views of early school transition. This study looks specifically

at the missing aspect if the ecological setting - the child.

Thurman's (1997) ecological congruency model is a development of Bronfenbrenner's

theory and furthers the case for this study of considering a child's viewpoint. Thurman's

model focuses on the developing child and is concerned with "both the development of the

child and the fit between the characteristics of the child and the environment" (Thurman,

1997). It is necessary to facilitate an adaptive fit between child and setting to optimize

development (Wolery, 2000). This leads to the exploration of what factors allow for school readiness and the school's role in transitioning children to school. According to ecological theory, a fit between child and setting is necessary, the environment must be taken into account (Love et al., 1994). As such it is necessary to study further children's experience of school in the important first year. This study contributes to other research and furthers the understanding of the ecology of early school.

Risk and Readiness

When school readiness is thought to be located in the student, such as the maturational perspective, school and society characteristics are often ignored (May & Kundert, 1997). In an ecological perspective, interactions among school culture, children, teachers, materials, and other school factors are risk factors (May & Kundert, 1997). In this view school readiness is defined, in addition to child factors the schools ability to meet children where they are developmentally is central. That is, the school's "ability to accommodate the normal developmental variations of the child appropriately; this emphasises the context of the school and how it interacts with the child" (May & Kundert, 1997, p.74). In considering vulnerable children it is essential to consider readiness as an interaction between programs provided to support children and the children themselves (May & Kundert, 1997).

The Early Development Instrument

The concept that vulnerability also exists in neighbourhoods and interactions with the child has influenced how school readiness is conceptualised in Canada. In British Columbia one of six health goals is currently to ensure all children have the support they require in order

to have "the best possible start in life, including: appropriate pre- and post-natal care; effective early childhood nurturing and parenting; and, appropriate early childhood stimulation, socialization and education" (BC Ministry of Health, 1997, p18). In Canada, informal checks of school readiness by schools and teachers were extended to a formal process "so that we can assess our progress in providing children with the best possible start" (Janus & Offord, 2000, p. 71 – 72). The important early years of development are viewed in an interactionist manner, due to interaction between genes and environment, with a need to look at this interaction to assess quality programs and potential interventions through an ecological framework. Knowing child outcomes helps communities know what programs will really work for children – what is going right for them (Offord & Janus, 2000).

A measure of children's school readiness to learn was thus in demand in Canada to assess school readiness at a community level (Offord & Janus, 2000). The Early Development Instrument (EDI) combines the social constructivist and interactionist points of view, similar to the ecological position. The EDI is based on, "the concept of readiness to learn as it is reflected in a child's preparedness for school... ...physical health and well being; social knowledge and competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive development; general knowledge and communication skills, as well as two indicators: special skills and special problems" (Offord & Janus, 2000, p. 73-74). The EDI measures a child's ability to meet the demands of school including sitting and co-operation, listening, and benefiting from the educational opportunities at school.

Problem areas were identified through a population-level assessment, rather than an individual assessment, with "all interventions having a central universal component" (p.73) as this is what is needed most by communities to reflect all children's needs as opposed to targeting specific vulnerable children (Offord & Janus, 2000). Communities will have information on children's school readiness-to-learn by neighbourhood and school if they wish. The emphasis of the EDI is on giving communities the knowledge on which to base effective interventions to improve young children's outcomes. In the long-term, "it provides a prerequisite for prevention at the population level for children zero to five years of age, and can be used to monitor the effectiveness of early interventions" (Offord & Janus, 2000, p. 75). In considering this model, the New South Wales Department of Community Services (2003) outlines some advantages to this approach:

> An advantage with this approach is that all children are tested but no children or families feel targeted or stigmatized. The community is privy to the overall results and can be informed about programs that have been shown to be most effective in redressing specific difficulties. From the programs available they may select those that they think would be most in line with community goals and values. By assessing school readiness every year, the efficacy of the early childhood policies and programs is constantly monitored and evaluated for each new cohort of children, and results can be fed back and adjustments made accordingly. It is now clear that high quality childcare, parenting programs, and

early intervention can significantly improve children's life chances at an individual as well as a community level (p.13).

Stakeholders: School, Teachers, Parents, Children

It is important that the school is ready for children (Belskey & MacKinnon, 1994; Biemiller & Doxey, 1993, Kagan, 1992; Graue, 1992; Maxwell & Eller, 1994; Ramey & Ramey, 1994). Schools need to be ready for a diverse group of children, be ready to use appropriate instruction, and have realistic academic standards while fostering child development. Readiness may be used to conceptualise instructional level (Graue, 1992). Children coming into Canadian schools have a wide range of needs, experiences and backgrounds. English or French speakers' language skills may vary in the classroom from skills at the four-year-old level to the six-year-old level and immigrant or refugee children may speak no French or English (Doherty, 1997). Teacher and parent beliefs about readiness may impact practice. Teachers who view readiness as a way to conceptualize instruction and modify instruction may focus on the potential that all children bring to school (Graue, 1992). How a school responds to children may indicate how ready children are for that environment.

Kindergarten was historically a time for children to develop social skills with age mates but is becoming viewed in a more academic light as more children come in from preschool or day-care (Maxwell & Eller, 1994). Ensuring schools are ready for a child involves developmentally appropriate practice in kindergarten (Graue, 1992). Developmentally appropriate practice requires knowledge of research and practice involving age-appropriate practice to meet the needs of the child.

Teachers' views of readiness. Teachers often view readiness or the transition to school in terms of the belief that children need to be prepared for school (Ramey & Ramey, 1994). From an empiricist perspective, children will come to school having learned a set of skills and abilities that may allow them to learn. From a maturist perspective, the child will be developed or mature enough to handle school. Motor co-ordination and physical well being, emotional adjustment, cognitive skills, ability to understand directions, and skills are reported by teachers as important to school readiness (NSW Department of Community Service, 2003). Dockett and Perry (2002) found that early years teachers emphasised social adjustment, specifically, "being able to operate as part of a large group, through sharing the teacher's attention, demonstrating independence as required, and being able to follow directions" (p.3).

Early childhood educators take a somewhat different view. According to the American National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1995), an association of teachers of young children, school readiness must consider at minimum three central factors: diversity of early experience and inequity in these experiences; variation in development and learning; and how school expectations by schools are supportive of children's differences. More emphasis is placed on the school than factors in the child. While parents may call for a more structured setting for learning to occur, early childhood educators emphasise less structured aspects of learning as affecting children's school readiness (NSW Department of Community Service, 2003).

Children come to school from diverse families and situations, with admission to school based on age. A student in British Columbia must start school "on the first school day of a school year if, on or before December 31 of that school year, the person will have reached the age of 5 years" (School Act, 1996, Statute 3.1). Parents may delay school entry for one year (School Act, 1996, Statute 3.1). This perspective holds that schools should be ready for children of all abilities to start kindergarten in the fifth year. In some provinces, public schools offer optional nursery classes (pre-kindergarten) for children which may ease the transition to school (Maryfield, 2001).

Parents' views of readiness. Parents' views of school readiness have been found to vary across class and community. Graue (1992) found that isolated communities tend to see school as a chance for children to come together for social interaction and for learning. These communities saw readiness in terms of age with teachers adapting to student levels. Families from lower socio-economic backgrounds held similar opinions about school readiness. Upper and middle class families were concerned about where a child stood compared to the other children and focused more on academic and social factors of school readiness. Graue (1992) concludes:

> The vast differences examined with regards to parents' perceptions of school
> readiness in the three communities outline the need to examine the context,
> school, and individuals, which define readiness in the area. Readiness is thus
> tied to the beliefs about children, the nature of the curriculum, and the
> relationships among parents and staff (p.18).

Dockett and Perry (2002) found that parents' views varied from children's views. Parents emphasised social adjustment, as do teachers, but a different aspect of social adjustment. Parents emphasised the importance of their child, "adjusting to other adults in an unfamiliar setting, through aspects such as being able to separate easily from the parent and join the teacher in class, and being able to interact and respond appropriately to non-familial adults" (Dockett & Perry, 2003, p.3). Another parental concern was the two-way character of the teacher and student interaction, parents often wondering if a teacher would like their child or appreciate and respond positively to the uniqueness of their particular child (Dockett & Perry, 2003).

Children's Views of School Readiness. The most important stakeholder in early years education, children, is also the least documented. According to Cook-Sather (2002), we "must seriously question the assumption that we know more than the young people of today about how they learn" (p.3). According to Evans (2002), the first line of reality in schools is in the student's own point of view and practice will improve based on issues that students identify.

Dockett and Perry's (1999) results indicate that children's views differ from parents' and teachers' views of school readiness. Dockett and Perry (1999) interviewed children in kindergarten in New Zealand and found that early in the year, kindergarten children's responses to questions about starting school included rules, dispositions, knowledge, social adjustment, physical issues, skills, family issues, and the educational environment. Their results indicate that children's views of school readiness and their experience differ from parents' and teachers' views. Children were generally positive in response to school,

however, the following concerns were raised: not knowing what was going on or happening at school, what they should be doing, or what should be happening (Dockett & Perry, 1999). Some children felt scared when they first came to school because of not knowing what would happen to them, what they should be doing, who they would have as a teacher, and where to put their belongings (Dockett & Perry, 1999).

The research by Dockett & Perry (1999) indicates a strong focus by children on *rules* and provides a clue about how the school and the classroom appear to a child starting kindergarten (Dockett & Perry, 1999). The emphasis on rules differs from kindergarten teachers in the study who barely mentioned rules when talking about what children need to know when starting school. They focused on social adjustment (Dockett & Perry, 1999). According to Dockett and Perry (1999), it may be that what teachers see as instruction in social adjustment, children interpret as rules with the same aim -- fitting in to a new learning environment. "Whereas teachers believe they are achieving this by establishing co-operative, interactive environments, focussing on social rights and obligations, children believe that they are being taught the rules" (Dockett & Perry, 1999, p.116). Docket and Perry (1999) conclude that children who are just starting school may not have developed a clear concept of what is and is not a fair consequence to breaking rules. Rather than imposing rules teachers need to "consider carefully the consequences that follow rule breaking to ensure that they match the seriousness of the rule and its infraction... and discussing situations with children, possibly generating rules together, in order that children can develop their concepts of social justice" (Dockett & Perry, 1999, p.116).

Another important finding by Dockett and Perry (1999) was that children focused largely on having friends and making friends - a very important part of starting school for children. Some children saw school as a place to make friends and some children without friends were devastated (Dockett & Perry, 1999). Adults do not attribute the same importance to friendships as children (Dockett & Perry, 1999). Adults should be aware of how important it is for children starting school to have a friend nearby (Dockett & Perry, 1999).

Further research into children's views of school readiness was conducted by Dockett and Perry (2003) using different methods to seek current children's input about what they need to know when they were starting school. Children's input in this study was gathered through the use of a digital camera that children themselves operated, as well as a tape recorder. Data was generated through discussion, photos of things children thought important, making classroom books, and pre-school visits/orientation. As in the previous study (Dockett & Perry, 1999), rules were cited, as something one needs to know when starting school. In photos friends were not pictured often, possibly due to organizational issues (Dockett & Perry, 2003). What children felt was most important to share in pictures was everyday functioning in the classroom such as work, the actual classroom, and classroom activities (Dockett & Perry, 2003).

According to Dockett and Perry (1999) the final implications for primary educators include "the value of talking with children, taking time to listen to issues that are of concern or interest for them. Often, issues that cause anxiety can be rectified quite easily by a knowing adult" (p.117-118). Dockett and Perry (1999) also recognize that children interpret contexts

differently than adults. Finally, they suggest school transition is a time of significant change for children and their families. They conclude that children are eager and keen to discuss things relevant to them. Adults should not assume children know what is happening to them at school, but rather should talk to them about what is happening and the reasons why this is happening (Dockett & Perry, 1999). This would help children become ready for – and later adjust to – their school environment. (Dockett & Perry, 1999). This commitment to listening to children starting school may lead to "learning what matters to them and making changes that reflect and respond to their concerns and understandings" (Dockett & Perry, 2003, p.6).

The results of Dockett and Perry's research indicates what was important to children who are starting school. However, the results are based on a limited sample of children in an urban setting in New Zealand. Issues such as school readiness may vary dependent on context. It is important that children in Canada are also consulted as stakeholders in the transition to school. It is not known if the issues will be the same in the Canadian context. Therefore, this study is needed to assess whether the needs of Canadian children are the same and whether these conclusions may be transferred to other settings. In addition, given the significant portion of the Canadian population who lives in rural setting, exploring issues with rural participants is important.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In this chapter information is provided on the methodology used in conducting the present study including participants, instrumentation, and procedures, along with data analysis, coding, and procedures for ensuring the trustworthiness of the results.

In this study focus groups were the primary method for gathering the research data. The use of focus groups is one of few methods suited to working with young children, given their inability to participate in other forms including activities requiring reading or comprehending survey questions (Stewart & Samdasini, 1990).

Focus groups tend to root data in the natural setting and experience of the participants, allowing the participants considerable latitude in responding. This allows data to come from the participants and to some extent reducing researcher bias. This is called an *emic* approach. The *etic* approach imposes the responses available such as in a Likert scale (Stewart & Samdasini, 1990). Taking some measure to allow children latitude in responding is important with children, who look at the world in a qualitatively different way than adults. Even if they could read, it might be difficult for adult researchers to create a study that took their views into account (Docket & Perry, 2001). In their book *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices,* Christensen and James (2000) state that unique concerns arise when conducting research involving young children, including paying attention to children's ways of communicating. Christensen and James (2000) articulated the dictates of an emic approach, "Only through listening and hearing what children say and paying attention to the ways in which they communicate with us will progress be made towards conducting research with,

rather than simply on, children," (p. 7). Focus groups allow children's voices to be heard with reduced impact of the researcher (adult) agenda (Stewart & Shamdasini, 1990). However, it is the researcher who generates the initial questions in the first place, and later interprets the answers. To some extent, adults can never enter the culture of the child and thus the capacity to understand children is limited. Bias cannot be removed. But it may be reduced, from the focus group co-ordination and analysis.

Purpose of the Present Study

In the present study an attempt was made to gain a better understanding of what children experience in the transition to school (kindergarten). This involved exploring what is important to children in kindergarten. Integral to this understanding was gaining this knowledge from the children about their experiences starting school. That is, to answer the already stated research questions: What is important to children as they start school? What do children say they need to know when starting school?

Participants

Initial permission to conduct the study was obtained at the district level. Subsequently, permission from the school principal in the targeted school was obtained and the two kindergarten teachers were approached to request permission to solicit participants from the students in their classrooms in June, the last month of the school year. After initially giving permission to allow the investigators to solicit participants from their classrooms, one teacher chose to not participate in the study because she felt that she did not have the time at this busy point in the school year. Given that there were no other kindergarten classrooms at

this school, and given the late date, other classrooms could not be obtained at that time. As a result, additional participants were sought through local community organisations. Specifically, an early childhood education organisation for the region was contacted to locate potential participants in the same cohort of students. Through a staff member in that office, local kindergarten aged children were located to be part of the study. A package with information and permission slips was sent to the parents as with the classroom sample.

Both children with and without formal childcare were included in the study. No children had been retained in kindergarten from the previous year. The teacher in the target classroom was sent an information packet that included a letter of explanation and request for student participation. In the classroom sample, the teacher sent a letter home explaining the study and soliciting student participation. The permission slips sent back on time determined the final number of students participating in the classroom based study. Two groups one with 3 and one with 4 children ages 5 and 6 were interviewed at the school. In the community-based sample, there was one group of 3 children. In total there were 10 participants: 4 female, 6 male. One student was reported to be an English Language Learner (ELL).

Description of the Community and School Context

The community is located on the pacific coast of British Columbia. The Community School is accessible by ferry from the lower mainland of British Columbia, and is considered a rural sample according to Census Canada. The 1996 Canadian census definition of "rural area" is "sparsely populated lands lying outside urban areas" (Statistics Canada, 1999, p.226).

The population is less than 1,000 and the density is less than 400 people per square kilometre (du Plessis, Beshiri, Bollman, & Clemenson, 2002).

The area is a middle-income community. The median income in the area is $19,540 per year (Statistics Canada, 2002). According to the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2002, September 30a) statistics, the school had 30 children enrolled in two kindergarten classrooms that met for 2.5 hours per day, five days per week at the time of the study. In the district .5% of students identify as speaking English as a second language (British Columbia Ministry of Education 2001, September 30). Several children in the school identified themselves as aboriginal (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002, September 30b). In 1996, 91% of the population identified as being of British decent and 5.1% of Aboriginal decent (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002, September 30b). In the area 9.6% of people are unemployed and 66.5% are participating in the workforce (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002, September 30b). According to the classroom teacher report, the children in the school are a diverse group economically and culturally/ideologically.

Interview Guide

A focus group interview guide was used to conduct focus groups. This contained questions and follow-up probes constructed by the primary investigator in consultation with an early childhood research team. The team was made up of four school psychology students, and a professor of School Psychology. The interview guide was developed based upon related literature and discussion with early childhood educators and parents of young children beginning school. Based on the review of the literature, and the investigators' prior

experiences in working with young children, the interviews were constructed and conducted to be developmentally appropriate given the age of the participants. The interview guide questions were reviewed by two committee members prior to use in the field.

The interview guide that was used in the present study is included in Appendix A. The interview consisted of open-ended general (grand-tour) questions with specific probes or mini-tour questions (how, why, when) designed to elicit responses to answer the research questions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Given the age of the sample, some flexibility in the interview follow up probes was needed to help maintain rapport with the participants.

Procedure

The primary investigator (Sandra Waddle) talked with the classroom teachers by phone to schedule a time for an initial visit and the focus group interviews that did not disrupt the typical routine in the classroom. According to Stewart and Shamdasani (1990), with young children, the moderator who needs to be comfortable and relaxed working with this population as children will sense an uncomfortable adult and become uncomfortable themselves (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The primary investigator (Sandra Waddle) acted as primary moderator, with a research team member (Allison Mitchell) taking notes and acting as a secondary moderator and asking follow-up probes or questions. The moderators for this study were all experienced working with young children and received training in moderating the interview protocol for children in this age group from Dr. Laurie Ford, an expert in early years development and education and member of the research team. In

addition, time volunteering in the classrooms served to facilitate familiarity with the research team.

The first round of interviews was conducted in a school at the end of the academic year, and the second round was conducted in a family home in a near by community during the subsequent summer vacation. The initial school groups visit consisted of an activity facilitated by the teacher and assisted by the research team. The focus groups with the children were conducted during a follow up classroom visit.

The home-based interviews were conducted at a family home frequented by all the children, near the community school. This served to help with the children's comfort level and was convenient for both the children and their parents. Sandra Waddle (moderator) and Allison Mitchell (secondary moderator and field notes) conducted this focus group as well.

During the focus groups, all interviews were audio taped (with guardian permission) to allow for later transcription. Notes were taken regarding the interview setting. Two moderators participated in each group. While one researcher (Sandra Waddle) asked questions and recorded responses, the second (Allison Mitchell) kept field notes on impressions and other non-verbal aspects of the interview session and asked follow up questions or probes.

Active Participation

Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) outline five requirements to ensure active participation in focus groups that were followed: pleasant environment; positive reinforcement for expressing views; incentives for participating; trained moderators; and a

convenient location for participants. In addition, a pleasant environment socially was provided by the use of positive reinforcement to encourage participants to express their views, including verbal praise for expressing views and attention to their comments. Incentives for participation included prizes given out by the moderators, though it was made clear that prizes were not dependent on participation, all children in the class received a "prize". The moderators (Sandra Waddle and Allison Mitchell), in addition to being experienced in working with young children, are also trained as School Psychologists. Part of course work in this program is instruction and practice in how to encourage children to respond and feel good about their responses on assessments without commenting on accuracy and encouraging performance. For instance, a moderators encouraged effort. "Thank you for sharing." "Nice sharing." Additional training of the moderators was offered by Dr. Laurie Ford, the advisor on this project. A convenient location for participants was ensured by conducting the interviews in the natural environments of the participants – at school or a familiar family home.

Data Analysis

The focus groups interviews were transcribed and analyzed after each session was complete. The technique for analysing data is consistent with a systematic and vigorous focus-group technique (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The transcriptions underwent content analysis. First, data were split into units or a complete phrase; sometimes these units are called "utterances" in the focus group literature (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Initially the focus group moderators generated themes. They sat down and went through the data creating

codes according to the data expressed by the children. One category was for information not relevant to the research questions, such as rapport building questions in which the participants were asked their name and favourite colour. This was coded and verified along with the information relevant to the research questions. *A posteriori*, the moderators compared the categories to the themes identified in Dockett & Perry (2001). The data reflect the themes used by Dockett and Perry (2001) in a study of children's perceptions of school readiness in New Zealand. The theme categories and their definitions from Dockett and Perry (1999, p.110) were:

> Knowledge: ideas, facts or concepts that needed to be known in order to enter school.
>
> Social adjustment: social adjustment to the school context, including interpersonal and organizational adjustment.
>
> Skills: small units of action that could be observed or inferred from behaviour (such as doing a task like getting out a library book, printing, reading).
>
> Disposition: children's attitudes towards, or feelings about, school or learning.
>
> Rules: fitting in with the school and school expectations
>
> Physical: physical attributes needs of children; issues about safety, health and age.
>
> Family issues: issues related to family functioning or involvement with the school.
>
> Educational environment: issues about the learning environment

The Knowledge category was dropped from our analysis after the first round of coding as it was felt to be redundant, with utterances in that category fitting heuristically into others. Data that did not fit in any category, such as rapport building with children or discussions of

behaviour, was categorised as extraneous dialogue.

After categories were finalised by the interview moderators, two school psychology graduate students, Megan Toews and Sarah Duncanson at the University of British Columbia joined the research team as data coders for the study. Coders reviewed the literature in the area to gain familiarity with salient research. Categories were taught to the coders by the primary investegator and they then coded the first two pages of data with the primary investigator to help achieve an acceptable level of agreement and consistency. After the training process, remaining data were coded independently by the primary investigator and the two coders. After the blind coding, agreement between all three coders was 88.8%. This was determined by comparing all three coders' responses and there was three-way agreement 88.8% of the time. After one round, discrepancies were discussed. The coders and the primary investigator reviewed the data, discussed coding discrepancies, and worked to achieve consensus. The primary investigator was able to inform the discussion by having been at the interviews, and knowing the context of a given statement. The primary investigator acting as coder was very conscious of not leading the discussion, overtly asking the other two coders not to agree with her or be lead by her opinions. Three way coding agreement after discussion between the coders was 98.8%. This was determined by comparing all three coders' responses.

Methods to Ensure Quality Research

Several techniques were used to ensure the study was carried out in a trustworthy manner, to ensure that the investigation revealed some breadth of information about the topic

from the participants' points of view. Trustworthiness, a "safeguard" in qualitative research,

relates to the methods that were used when conducting the study (Abbott, 2003; Guba &

Lincoln, 1998).

Trustworthiness and Triangulation

In qualitative research, four common standards exist for evaluating trustworthiness of

the research: credibility, transferability, conformability, and dependability (Abbot, 2003;

Lincoln & Guba, 1985). There are a variety of processes that were used in this research study

to address each of these criteria and ensure the trustworthiness of the results.

Credibility

Credibility is the counterpart to internal validity in quantitative research (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). In order for Credibility to be achieved results need to reflect participants' ideas

and views, not those of the researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Techniques that may help in

establishing credibility include triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks (Abbott,

2003).

Triangulation. Triangulation is achieved by using multiple or different sources of data

(Abbott, 2003). Information gathered from the research team, such as observations and field

notes, were used to support or triangulate the emerging themes with other sources of data

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Team members reflected on the interviews and data input/analysis

by discussing the interviews after they took place and recording their reflections on audiotape.

The multiple sources of data collected by the research team to support the child interviews

included classroom observations, teacher interviews, research team discussions and reflective

journals. In addition to the focus group interviews together provided a more accurate picture and greater understanding of the themes that emerged. Lastly, different sources of data included previous research (Dockett & Perry, 1999).

Peer Debriefing. The researchers attempted to hear the participants' voices. Credibility was sought in this study by comparing interviews and looking for similar themes in the interviews through debriefing with the research team, and looking back at the observations taken by the moderators. After each interview, the moderators discussed the interviews and recorded the interviews that were later transcribed.

Member Checks. The primary investigator instituted member checks into data gathering and analysis. Multiple coders reduced the potential for bias. Field notes helped support the credibility of results as the notes were checked during the creation of themes and coding process by the primary investigator.

Transferability

The counterpart to external validity in quantitative research is transferability. This establishes the extent that findings might generalise to different contexts. Transferability depends on how much similarity there is between participants, contexts, and settings, and those in further studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). If these results may be applied to other populations, the results are transferable. The findings of this study transferability if the participants are similar in ethnic/cultural, socio-economic, educational, and are in similar schools to this study. The findings of this study were reasonably congruent with previous

research (Dockett & Perry, 1999). That is, the results are transferable as they may apply to other populations. Given that results were similar to previous research, it is more likely that they will apply to further settings. That is, the more diverse settings they are found to apply to presently, the more settings the results may be considered to apply to in the future.

Dependability

Dependability is the counterpart to reliability in quantitative research (Teague, 1997). Dependability focuses on the likelihood that the results could be replicated with the same or similar population. That is, according to Abbott (2003) dependability "relates to the researcher's responsibility for making certain that the findings of the study are logical, traceable, and documented (Abbott, 2003, p. 141). Attempts at dependability included objective inter-rater coding, skilled interviewing, and following a prescribed procedure for the focus groups. The data analysis procedure and interview protocol were carefully documented and described in this document. Given these measures, it is more likely that replication would be possible.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the counterpart to objectivity in quantitative research. Shwandt (1997) defines confirmability as "concerned with establishing the fact that the data and interpretations of an inquiry were not merely figments of the inquirer's imagination" (Schwandt, 1997, p. 164). Addressing this concern included establishing if interests, motivations, or perspectives of the investigators may greatly bias the study results (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). Confirmability in this study was attempted through the independent coding procedures and the structured discussion and debriefing as described above (Abbott, 2003).

Credibility is similar to confirmability, but reflects a slightly different aspect of the issue of trying to ensure that data are trustworthy. Credibility is assured when the researcher can access participant's views. Confirmability is assured when the results are not simply created by the researcher. Credibility is achieved when techniques are used that allow participant views to be accessed and interpreted. Confirmability is achieved when the results are not imposed on the data by the researcher.

Chapter Four: Results

Introduction

Two hundred and forty-four codable responses or "units" were attained from the 10 participants. This number of responses is consistent with similar studies such as Dockett & Perry (1999) who had three hundred and twenty-one codable responses using a similar coding procedure. Results from the data have been categorized into seven broad themes taken from Dockett and Perry (1999) as they reflected very well the results that were found in this study. An eighth code (knowledge) was integrated into other themes reflecting this content succinctly. The seven categories remaining themes include social adjustment, skills, disposition, rules, physical, family, and educational environment. Three themes – disposition, skills, and rules – were broken into sub-themes (see Table 1).

Stewart and Shamdasani's (1990) "cut-and-paste" technique was used to tally the data, with the number of units in each category being pasted together for analysis. In this technique, each unit is placed into a category. First, one moderator segmented the "utterances" or "units" into a computer spreadsheet. The unit was placed on the left-hand side of the page, and the eight categories placed on the top. Then, each unit was categorized independently by the three coders. Finally, categories were "cut and pasted" electronically on to one page. In a second round of coding by independent reviewers, the data in the three larger categories were sub-categorised into sub-themes to answer the research questions, including *"What do you need to know to start school?"*

In the present investigation, children were asked what Kindergarten is like, specifically to answer the research questions: What is important to children as they start school? What do children say they need to know when starting school? The three primary themes that emerged were disposition, skills and rules. Children's responses to questions about what school will be like for a new student and what it was like for them when they first arrived were most likely to mention what the researchers categorize as "disposition" or children's feelings or attitudes towards school. For instance, one talked about how she was "shy" when she first started school. Then she spoke of how when she was new at school she did not know the rules in kindergarten, and what rules they needed to know and a new student would need to know.

A second major theme was categorized as "skills". Skills are small units of action described by participants that could be inferred from behaviour (such as doing a task like getting out a library book, printing, reading). Activities needing skills were described when children were asked, "What would [a new student] need to know in kindergarten?" or "If my friend is starting school next year what does she need to know?" or "What will school be like for her?"

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Units

Theme	Number of Units	% of Total Units
Disposition	80	34
Positive Disposition	50	63
Negative Disposition	25	31
Ambivalent Disposition	5	6
Skills	55	23
School Activities	20	36
Academic	24	44
Non-academic	11	20
Rules	43	18
Conventional Rules	35	88
Task	5	12
Social adjustment	26	11
Educational environment	21	9
Physical	8	3
Family	6	2
Total	239	100

Disposition

All of the participants, comprising 34% of the responses, referred to what the researchers categorized as "dispositions" in the focus group discussions. These responses were broken down into three subcategories: negative dispositions, positive dispositions and attitudes, or ambivalent dispositions if they were both negative and positive in one unit (Dockett & Perry, 1999). The children reported that starting school is a time with many emotions. Many reported positive feelings yet others indicated some negative emotions and concerns or feelings in their early school experience. Table 1 outlines the kind of dispositions participants reported and the percentage of total responses within that category. Finally, when students start school, positive feelings and excitement are a part of the experience. When starting school, they need to know how to express or cope with such feelings, such as verbally, through drawing, or using other age appropriate methods.

Positive Dispositions. The majority of units about school within the disposition theme were positive, comprising 63% of this theme. Participants described what school was like for them. One participant reported feeling "excited" about moving to grade 1 next year. Another student said they "like Kindergarten more." All groups talked about having "fun" in Kindergarten during activities such as "recess", "gym", "computer", "marbleworks", "sand table", "spelling", "swings", "reading", "centres", and "washroom". One participant commented, "I like everything in school. It is hard to [pick something] 'cause I just like so much it is hard to decide what you want." Other comments included liking being around

other children, "It feels really good to be around other kids," and liking teachers, "Miss Y was nice."

Negative Dispositions. While the children typically reported positive feelings about school, 31% of the units in this theme were negative. A number of students reported being shy or nervous when starting school: "I was sort of scared when I first came to this school until I got to my age. I didn't really like this school, to be in Kindergarten." One participant remembered hearing another student crying at school. The participants also talked about a resolution to this through a caring friend or familiar object. For other children, Kindergarten was sometimes boring: "Yeah. It is a bit too easy." Some indicated that they would prefer a shorter day and to spend more time at home: "I wish it was only an hour for school"; "I would rather stay home."

Teacher factors also contribute to what participants said school was like, such as satisfaction being dependent on the teacher. One student stated that, "Miss X always gets mad", " I don't like teachers getting mad." "Yeah".

Ambivalent Dispositions. Three units were really neither largely positive nor largely negative, but rather were more neutral suggesting mixed feelings about school or related activities. Statements such as, "Grade one is more funner than Kindergarten," "Miss X was way nicer than Miss Y." reflected uncertainty or ambivalence.

Skills

Similar to many of the informal conversations with the teachers and much of the professional literature highlighted, the students in late kindergarten in this study described

skills they needed to learn or know when starting school. The "Skill" category was the second major theme to emerge from the data, comprising 23% of the units. The "skills" theme was further divided into three subcategories: school activity skills or descriptions, academic skills, and non-academic skills.

School activities. Children described activities at school, looking for a book, playing games at school, and napping in Kindergarten. Participants described what Kindergarten is like: "All you do is just sit down in Kindergarten" or "We play fun games." Other participants argued about activities they participated in or learned at school such as how to nap: "We did not have a nap in Kindergarten". "Yes, we did. We used to do it all the time."

Academic skills. Children talked about academic activities such as doing math "right", "counting prices", "spelling", "math", "like two plus four", "and read". One student said, "I can read some books without any help."

Non-academic skills. Non-academic skills involve descriptions of activities including playground activities, social skills, and physical education. One group discussed what skills were needed to participate in a bike rally, "even people with training wheels could." Other discussion involved social skills needed for school, such as to "learn bad words", and "to listen." Playground activities were cited as something that participants needed to know for school. This included playing boys-chase-the-girls: "They catch us and let us go and catch us and let us go."

Rules

Children in this study reported that it was important to know the rules of the school when starting out. The rules category or theme was included in 18 % of the units categorized and was mentioned by eight of ten participants. The rules theme was divided into two sub-themes: conventional and task rules.

Conventional Rules. Conventional rules in this study relate to behaviour expected in the social context of the school and classroom (Dockett & Perry, 1999). Eighty-eight of the rules units were classified as in the conventional rules subcategory. The disposition related responses sometimes led to rules related responses. For instance, one child talked about how she was shy at school. This led to descriptions of the struggles this student went through when she did not know the conventional rules of the classroom. "I didn't know very much rules so like, I kept running in the hall sometimes so, I was pretty bad and stuff. And even more bad in circle time." School got better for this student, according to her story, once she figured out what to do. A classmate reflected on her similar experience, "When you don't know the rules, it is sort of like me when I was five. I did not know any of the rules. Like, no chewing gum in class, and no running in the hall, and no fighting… and we can play with any toys we like." Participants indicated what happens when rules are not followed. For instance, one student did not follow the rules and was "moved to a different desk." Another student talked about "Time Out" as a consequence to breaking rules: "You have to sit in a chair for a while."

Task Rules. Task rules involved accepted ways of doing particular activities or tasks at school. Only five responses included rules regarding tasks and were discussed by only one

group. They referred to figuring out how to do an activity such as using training wheels if you cannot ride a two-wheeler alone. Other points included how a new student would know task rules such as how to use a computer, "The teacher can tell them, or they can ask someone who knows."

Social Adjustment

This area included responses related to adjustment to the school context, such as organizational and interpersonal adjustment (Dockett & Perry, 1999). There were 26 units of information this area. Topics included the importance of friendship including with whom and where they play. When starting school, the feeling of belonging to the group at school was discussed: "And like, you're going to, like, meet all these new friends and... The first time I came into my classroom there was all these friends and people around me and... Cause like, you're not like, left out, cause like, how can you be left out cause like you know everyone. Everyone is your friend. You are all their friends." When responding to the interviewers' arrival, one participant talked about relationships at school, "I have never talked to different people in this school except my friends and my big buddy."

Educational Environment

This area encompassed issues around the physical and social learning environment (Dockett & Perry, 1999). Areas highlighted by the students included reflections on the act of attending school, how long they were going to be there, what they would do there, and how long the days were. When the groups were asked if they had any questions, one participant said: "I have something to say. It sort of feels that I think about – you're going to this place

for seven years ... and learning all of this stuff..." Another participant said, "well, um, like when I move into grade one or something, maybe..." and "L Ten one, eight, in Grade one. How many minutes do we get in Grade one for recess?" "Kindergarten is three hours".

Five statements reflected on teacher's social roles such as that they would change in Grade 1 and what teachers do: "The teacher is telling us a whole bunch of stuff." Other student responses included details about a discipline strategy used by teachers.

Physical

This category included physical attributes such as age and health and physical needs of participants. Eight responses fell in this area. One child stated that when she started school she, "always had a bad sleep." Others talked about being younger than they are and more inexperienced, "It is sort of like me when I was five." Further participant discussion centred on illness at school, a memory for one participant and her friend, "Remember that time I barfed? ...I barfed on the school ground. And barfed!" Another student remembered feeling sick at school as well, "Remember that time I felt sick on the play structure?"

Family

One child said that if they did not know a rule at school, "a big brother or like a big sister could tell them." Another student was glad to have a parent there at a difficult moment in the beginning of school, "My mum she was there to help me." Family involvement at school was mentioned in family attendance at a school play put on by a sister, and a big brother that also went to the school.

Summary

Participants were, for the most part, eager to discuss their experiences starting school. Broad themes such as disposition, skills, or rules all are part of the whole experience of the young child as they enter an important phase of their lives. Participants described what they needed to know at school including rules about how to act, skills in the classroom and on the playground, and the emotions that are involved in the important transition. This energy, how eager the participants were, is difficult to impart in data analysis. One participant said, "I have something to say. It sort of feels that I think about – you are going to this place for seven years... and like learning all this stuff... And like, you're going to like meet all these new friends." As a small town school, where kids are coming in on the bus, access to age-mates cannot be taken for granted, "It feels really good to be around kids. Cause like, you're not like, left out, cause like, how can you be left out, cause like you know everyone. Everyone is your friend. You are all their friends." Participants had important information to share about what they needed when starting school.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the themes and how they relate to children's experience of starting school, what the children perceive is important to them as they start school and what they believe they need to know starting school. The implications of the findings will be discussed, including how the information gained from these children may be useful to teachers and parents to understand and encourage a positive transition to formal school. The results of this study further the literature on children's transition to school, building on previous research.

Themes

Each of the three central themes (disposition, rules, and skills) are in some way related to each other as they came from an interview on the same topic. For example, the child who does not know the rules and breaks them gets in trouble and expresses feelings of upset when describing the situation. The disposition responses sometimes led to rules responses. For instance, one child talked about how she was shy at school. This led to descriptions of the struggles this student went through when she did not know the conventional rules of the classroom. Skills were sometimes discussed in the context of attitudes towards something at school. There was some crossover between the themes.

Disposition and Starting School

Results from the present study are consistent with previous research reporting that children consider how they feel about going to school as being important (Dockett & Perry, 1999). When children are starting school it is important to know that feelings and attitudes are

a part of the transition to school and what children should expect. Children in the present study also talked about needing to adjust emotionally to the school environment. Children cited positive and negative emotions towards school. Therefore, it is important that children starting school be able to express their feelings and have those feelings heard (Dockett & Perry, 1999). Motivation is a factor in success at school that has received attention. As stated by Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (1999), it is important for children to feel that school is positive and work through feelings that may be negative during school transition. A child who does not feel comfortable at school may lack motivation to learn, fail to make friends, and fail to thrive at school. A caring adult or friend may listen to the child's feelings and attitudes towards school to help a child work through feelings. This could be facilitated by community, district, school or classroom initiatives.

Skills and Starting School

Basic academic skills are widely agreed upon as critical to early school success. Participants in the present study talked about the skills they acquired in Kindergarten and the importance of skills. Participants reported that skills are important when starting school in order to take part in school life. Participants reported that they needed to know how to play certain games, perform informal non-academic school activities, how to take part in formal school activities, and do academic skills. While acquiring skills is one aspect of school readiness reported in the literature (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Dockett & Perry, 2003) in previous studies the skills themes was more endorsed by educators than children. More central in this study for children, skills were emphasised by respondents as important for the

transition to school. This difference, children emphasising skills as important to school readiness, may be due to context differences. First, this sample is rural Canadian, and the other urban and from New Zealand. Children in Canada may be taught to expect different things at school. Students may have different expectations than an urban school. Context may influence what children find important. In addition, they were a bit older (end of kindergarten) than Dockett and Perry (1999) where children were just beginning school. The importance of skills to children may increase with time. For instance, after having a teacher emphasise the learning of skills, a large part of the curriculum in Kindergarten involves learning how to do things. After a year at school children may place greater emphasis on skills.

Rules and Starting School

The students in the study indicated that rules are important for a successful school experience. Participants talked about needing to know rules to function in the classroom, playground, and school environments. It appears that rules fell mostly into the conventional category – rules around school culture. Conventional rules in this study relate to behavioural expectations in the social context of the school and classroom (Dockett & Perry, 1999). Children felt that they need to know the social rules for adjusting to school culture.

Rules were the most emphasized by participants in other studies asking children about what they need to know when starting school (Dockett & Perry 1999). Not as central in this study, they were still important to children.

Conventional rules are important when starting school. Until the rules are understood, school can be difficult. One participant talked about how school was difficult until he learned

to follow the rules, such as how to walk to class and participate in group activities. Making rules clear such as engaging children in discussion or eliciting rules from them may ease their transition to school.

Limitations of the Study

Given the time of year the study was conducted, access to students was limited. The dependability of findings to other students starting school may be limited given a small sample size. The results may be more applicable to similar populations, such as children of similar cultures or settings. That is, the results may better apply to a Canadian rural sample more aptly than some other groups.

The lack of specific demographic information is another weakness. The general age of the participants is known, however the specific age of each participant would have been helpful. Again this information is not available because it was not collected. The initial parental consent forms asked for this information, but the teacher altered the forms without consent of the investigator to fit the usual format of the classroom participation permission forms.

Other limitations include the power dynamic inherent in working directly with young children. Though children were encouraged to share honestly anything they felt important, they may have had some desire to please an adult or felt inhibited due to the dynamic.

Strengths of the Study

Several strengths emphasise the quality of this study. First, the use of multiple coders was undertaken to ensure the trustworthiness of the results. Three objective or blind coders resulted in three-way agreement of 88.8% after the first round. This level of agreement is excellent. Second, the researchers ventured into a rural setting, which is not common given the impracticality for Universities located in largely urban settings. Previous research into children's opinions of school readiness was conducted in Urban Sydney (Dockett & Perry, 1999). Third, at every step of the research project multiple members of the research team were consulted to reduce the bias of the primary investigator. This included the initial creation of themes, the adoption of the previously used themes, the letting go of one theme, coding, and finally analysis and interpretation of the results. Lastly, ethical rigour was in place from the beginning. This included extensive review by a University ethics committee before any work began. The moderators followed ethical guidelines ensuring not only that no harm was done in gathering data but also that each child and teacher or parent involved in data collection was treated with dignity and respect.

Implications for Practice

Research is conducted to increase understanding and ultimately to inform quality practice. Listening to students in research is one step. Transferring the findings to practice will be the next extension. As stated by Cook-Sather (2002), "It is easy to assert that a first step toward including student perspectives on schooling is counting students among those who belong on the list of stakeholders with a voice in shaping educational policy and practice.

It is much harder to actually change the ways we as educators and educational researchers think about and interact with students" (p.9). Dockett and Perry (1999) are implementing findings of their research in co-ordinating transition programs. Dockett, Perry, & Howard (2000) state that effective transition programs: establish positive relationships between the children, parents, and educators; facilitate each child's development as a capable learner; differentiate between "orientation-to-school" and "transition-to-school" programs; draw upon dedicated funding and resources; involve a range of stakeholders; are well planned and effectively evaluated; are flexible and responsive; are based on mutual trust and respect; rely on reciprocal communication among participants; take into account contextual aspects of community and of individual families and children within that community. Implementing the findings of this research may improve outcomes for children.

The results of this study may be implemented into practice through classroom, school, parental, or community initiatives. Given the need for local ownership of programs to be successful and the dislike of mandated programs by teachers in British Columbia, voluntary programs may be the best option. For instance, the Government of Manitoba has made "School Readiness" grants available to local organizations (school, community centres, etc.) implementing programs that encourage school readiness. One element of such a program may include encouraging children to talk about their feelings and attitudes about school with a parent, friend or teacher and facilitating good listening from the caregiver or friend. Another possible route is for workshops such as professional development of teachers in which

classroom-based solutions to the children's needs stated in this research that might be developed.

Future Research Directions

Future research pursuits should include more studies looking at what students think is important when starting school. Innovative methods, such as in Dockett & Perry's (2003) later work explores, need to be created and replicated to increase knowledge in this area. More than just replication, better methods for working with young children need to be created and implemented. Studies with children in other countries and with diverse backgrounds would contribute to further understanding of how other children view starting school.

Exploring the teacher and parent views of school readiness in the same setting this study was conducted may further strengthen the results by filling in the rest of the ecological picture of school readiness.

Another future research direction may involve expanding the sample size may strengthen conclusions. This study may encourage future research. For instance, a future study may consider this study a pilot to build on for further research into school readiness in Canada. In British Columbia, a larger sample looking at a broader cross section of the population may fill another gap in the literature. For instance, multi-cultural classrooms in downtown Vancouver, more remote rural settings, and suburban populations of children have not been accessed by researchers looking at children's opinions of school readiness.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

1. Introductions

Hello everyone! My name is _____. I am here from the University of British Columbia.

Does anyone know what a University is? (pause – listen to answers) It is a place where

grown-ups go to school.

O.K. To start, I want to make sure I have each of your names and get to know you a little. Let's go around the circle and say our name, and our favourite colour. I will start. My name is ____ and my favourite colour is _____.

Great! You are such a wonderful group. Now, I am going to ask you about school. We want to learn about kids like you, and what you think and feel about school! There are no right or wrong answers. What you have to say is very important. And you can leave if you do not want to stay. You do not *have* to be here. Any questions?

So, I am going to ask you some questions about school. There are no *right* or *wrong* answers, and what you say is very important.

Before you leave, you are all going to be able to pick a prize from this prize box. Any questions?

<<moderator reminder: legitimise the expression of opinions by lower-status or quieter

children by explicitly asking for them and by providing verbal rewards. This will encourage

active participation and acceptance of opinions. E.g. "Lisa, did you want to share now?"

"John, what do you remember?" Encourage discussion.>>

Question1:

There are some children I know who are going to be starting school soon. What will they need to know?

<<Probes – pick appropriate probes that respond to what the children are saying. Check those used and complete those with blanks. If you make up a probe, stay in the "spirit" of the probe if not the "letter" of the probe. Use How, Why, When, and what conditions. Do not stop discussion, but each question should take 5-10 minutes.>>

- ***How will they know what to do?***

- ***Tell me why that helps/does not help.***

- ***When will that happen?***

- ***_____, would you like to say something?***

- ***What will they think when they first see the school?***

- ***How do you will they feel when _____.***

❑ *What will they think when _____.*

❑ **You** ***all understand what that means, but I am still confused. Can anyone help me***

understand?

❑ **(Student appears confused)** *What I mean is....*

❑ *Do you understand?_*

❑ ***Any questions?***

Question 2

What is Kindergarten like?

❑ *What is Kindergarten like?*

❑ *When does that happen?*

❑ *What is that like?*

❑ *How do you feel when* _____.

❑ *What do you think when* _____.

❑ You *all understand what that means, but I am still confused. Can anyone help me understand?*

❑ *You all look puzzled. What I mean is….*

❑ _____

❑ Any questions?

Appendix 2: Entry to educational program

3 (1) Subject to subsections (2) and (3), a person who is resident in British Columbia must

    (a) enrol in an educational program

        (i) provided by a board,

        (ii) in the case of an eligible child, provided by a board or a francophone education authority, and

        (iii) in the case of an immigrant child, provided by a board or, if the child is permitted to enrol with a francophone education authority under section 166.24, provided by that francophone education authority,

    on the first school day of a school year if, on or before December 31 of that school year, the person will have reached the age of 5 years, and,

    (b) participate in an educational program provided by a board or, in the case of an eligible child or an immigrant child, by a board or a francophone education authority until he or she reaches the age of 16 years.

[1997-52-3 effective Aug. 1/97, BC Reg. 287/97; 1999-8-12 effective June 29/99]

(2) A parent of a child referred to in subsection (1) (a) may defer the enrollment of his or her child until the first school day of the next school year.

[1999-8-12, effective June 29/99]

Appendix 3: Letter of Consent

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

**Faculty of Education
Dept of Educational &
Counselling Psychology &
Special Education**
2125 Main Mall
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

Investigating Children's Experience Starting School

Consent Form

Principal Investigator: Laurie Ford, PhD, Department of Educational & Counselling
Psychology & Special Education, 604-822-0091

Co-Investigators: Sandra Waddle, Department of Educational & Counselling
Psychology & Special Education, 604-822-4602

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Please read the following form carefully. Please sign one copy and return. Keep the other for your own records.

This form is a request for your child to take part in the study that we are doing. This project is a part of the masters degree in School Psychology for Ms. Waddle

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to help us learn more about children's learning and what it

means to be "ready" for school. Many people talk with adults about what it means to be

ready to go to school but in our study we want to know what children think about what it

means to be ready for school. The things we learn will help us better help children become ready for school.

Taking Part in Our Study Means:

1. If you agree to have your child take part in our study, he or she will take part in a small group (3 or 4 children) interview about what it means to be ready for school.

2. The interview will take about 20 minutes and will happen on Saturday at Jan Miettinen-Hart's home. They will not miss out on any important classroom lessons.

3. The interviews will be audiotaped. The audiotapes will then be written up. No names will be on the interview write-up. Your child will not be identified.

4. Students who do not take part in the study will do their typical classroom work.

5. Taking part is voluntary and will not affect any services that you or your child gets at school. You have the right to withdraw your child from the study at any time and they have the right to not take part in the study if he or she does not want to or does not want to answer any of the questions.

6. You will receive general information about the results of our project if you would like them. If you do want a copy please write your address on the next page.

7. The information you give us is confidential. **No individual information will be reported and no parent or child will be identified by name** in any reports about the study. The only people who will see to the information you give us are the people working on this project.

8. By letting your child take part in this project, you may help to improve services for young children getting ready for school.

9. Your child will receive a small prize for participating in this study as a thank you for helping us. However, children who do not participate will still be able to claim a prize.

10. If at any time you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at the University of British Columbia at (604) 822-8598.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this project you may call any of the researchers at numbers written above.

_____   _____
Laurie Ford, PhD   Sandra Waddle
Principal Investigator   Co- Investigator
Investigating Children's Experience Starting School

Consent Form

Please check one of the following and return it to school with your child:

____   Yes, I agree to have my child take part in this project

____   No, I do not wish to have my child take part in the project.

Your signature (please sign):   _____

Your name (please print your name):   _____

Date: _____

Your Child's Name: _____

Your Child's Birth Date: _____

When you sign this it means that you have received a copy of this consent form (Pages 1 & 2) for your own records.

If you would like a copy of the project summary, please write your mailing address below.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Thank you very much for your help.