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# Teacher Beliefs and Kindergarten Retention: Philosophy Into Practice

by

Enid Linda Reichenauer



A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Elementary Education

Edmonton, Alberta

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**DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my parents
Ada and John Leonard Karsten
with love and gratitude
and to
my husband
Frank
and
our sons
Stephen and Jeffrey
for their encouragement and patience

**ABSTRACT**

The first purpose of this study was to investigate the extent of kindergarten teachers' "nativist" belief. Smith and Shepard (1988) have defined nativism as the belief that child development, in general, and school readiness, in particular, reflect maturational processes largely unamenable to environmental intervention. The second purpose was to determine if there was a relationship between nativist belief and recommendations for retention. The third was to assess teachers' knowledge of research on kindergarten retention. The fourth was to determine if this knowledge was influential in promotional decisions. The fifth was to determine if there was a relationship between nativist belief and preferred alternatives to kindergarten retention.

The study employed a combined quantitative-qualitative design. Kindergarten teachers in public and private facilities in Region 3 of Alberta were surveyed using a kindergarten retention questionnaire. Quantitative data consisted of their 190 responses. Qualitative data was obtained from follow-up interviews with 11 kindergarten teachers whose beliefs occupied either ends of a continuum of belief for and against kindergarten retention.

Three indices were used to assess teachers' nativist belief: their agreement or disagreement with statements taken from the nativist literature, the factors they considered most important when making promotional decisions, and their preferred management strategies for "unready" children. The majority of surveyed teachers agreed with some nativist belief statements, but not with others. Student competencies in the communication, socioemotional, and academic readiness areas were their most important promotional factors. Teachers' most preferred management strategy was smaller classes with increased individualized/remedial instruction.

The study found considerable teacher support for kindergarten retention. Contextual factors were influential in moderating the promotional decisions of teachers, whether their beliefs were nativist or nonnativist, however.

A substantial percentage of teachers indicated they were unfamiliar with retention research. Survey comments indicated that teachers relied on their practical

knowledge when making promotional decisions. Interview findings indicated that nonretaining teachers were more receptive to retention research than were retaining teachers.

Positive correlations were found between nativist belief and some, but not all, of the management strategies for unready students advocated in the nativist literature.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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To my external reader, Dr. Andrew Biemiller, for his thoughtful review of the study.

To all of the early childhood educators who took the time out of their busy schedules to respond to the Kindergarten Retention Questionnaire.

To the eleven early childhood educators who participated in the follow-up personal interviews for candidly sharing their perspectives on kindergarten retention with me.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

My interest in kindergarten readiness and retention grew out of my own teaching experience at the early childhood and primary levels. During the course of this practice, I became increasingly concerned that some students did not appear "ready" socially, intellectually, and emotionally to fully benefit from my kindergarten routines and activities. Moreover, by the end of kindergarten these same students often did not appear ready for the academic demands of Grade 1 despite my systematic efforts to improve their "readiness" skills.

These repeated observations eventually resulted in my formulating a tacit, more-or-less unquestioned profile of an "unready" child. Most often, this child was male, of Native Canadian background, had an unsettled social history, and was the youngest child (or one of the youngest children) in the kindergarten class.

### Background to the Study

An article by O'Connor (1989), which summarized the 1987 findings of Canadian researcher, Maria Cantalini, seemed to confirm my observation that there was a relationship between chronological age and "success" in kindergarten.

Of 1200 students, Cantalini found that, by the sixth grade, 42% of the youngest males had been retained compared to 27% of the youngest females. Additionally, of all students referred for special education, 24% were the youngest in a cohort of students.

Cantalini's findings, along with her proposed strategies to ameliorate this presumed "age effect," made me aware that kindergarten readiness and retention were not just my own concerns, but those of other early childhood educators as well.

Additionally, I was intrigued by a short article in the January, 1989, issue of *Instructor* entitled "The Child at Risk: In Search of Solutions" (Peck, 1989). This article not only corroborated my own "profile" of factors contributing to a child's being "at risk" for kindergarten retention, but intensified my growing concern about the advisability of simply "recycling" children through the same kindergarten program. For example, Peck's article included the following quotation by Bettye M. Caldwell, Professor of Education, University of Arkansas: "We . . . know that retention often means that we are left with the same child a year later. We find that the rate of development appears to be the same with, *or without* retention" (p. 29, emphasis in original).

In the same article, Pat Ross, director of Student Services for the Moore, Oklahoma, school district indicated that the Metropolitan Reading Tests scores of 19 retained kindergarten students actually declined during their repeated year, leading Ross to conclude that retention is "a failure of the system" (p. 29).

Ross' denouncement of kindergarten retention challenged me to examine my own tacit beliefs about readiness and retention. In particular, I began to question whether these beliefs involved the type of expectations described by Charlesworth (1989):

> There has been a trend toward identifying high-risk children at all socioeconomic levels who may not be ready for kindergarten. Rather than serving a readiness function in the sense of socializing children for future schooling, kindergarten has become an experience for which children need to be ready when they arrive. (p. 5)

Christopher Clark's (1989) discussion of the impact of teachers' " beliefs and personal theories" on their practice provided the final impetus for the present study of kindergarten teacher beliefs concerning kindergarten readiness and retention.

To illustrate the "dramatic consequences" that unconscious, implicit beliefs and theories might have upon practice, Clark cited Smith and Shepard's (1988) study of the possible relationship between kindergarten teachers' implicit theories of child development and their promotional practices.

Using a combined quantitative and qualitative approach, Smith and Shepard constructed a typology of kindergarten teacher beliefs. These beliefs ranged along a continuum of "nativism" versus "non-nativism"; that is, kindergarten teachers were found to differ in the degree to which they construed the development of school readiness as an internal, organismic process unrelated to environmental intervention ("nativism") or as a process amenable to influence by parents, teachers, and other environmental agencies ("non-nativism").

Based on the study conducted with Shepard, Smith (1989) further suggested that kindergarten teachers' beliefs about the "mechanisms by which young children develop readiness for school and the role played by teachers in this development are the background for understanding their beliefs about retention" (p. 136).

A number of descriptive surveys also provide information about teachers' attitudes towards retention. However, in addition to Shepard and Smith's study, there exists only a limited number of studies that attempt to describe the relationship between teachers' beliefs and promotional practices within the context of a conceptual framework (Edson, 1990; Graue, 1993; Tomchin & Impara, 1992).

## Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

With the notable exceptions of the studies cited above, little research attention has been focused on the kindergarten teachers' conceptualizations of readiness and retention using *their own words*. As Tomchin and Impara (1992) have pointed out, however, it is usually the teacher who has the central role in a retention decision.

Furthermore, there exists a substantial body of research that purportedly demonstrates either the lack of effect or detrimental effects of retention. The literature on retention casts no light on whether or not teachers are aware of research on the efficacy or effects of retention, and, if so, are influenced by it when making promotional decisions.

The purpose of this study was to gain further insight into the following, previously unexplored, questions: 1) Can Albertan kindergarten teachers be characterized as having a "nativist" orientation toward child development? 2) Is there a relationship between nativist belief and promotional practice? 3) Is there a relationship between teachers' nativist belief and the types of strategies they favour for students who are experiencing difficulties? 4) Are kindergarten teachers knowledgeable about research on kindergarten retention? 5) Is there a relationship between kindergarten teachers' nativist belief and the importance they attribute to research on the effectiveness or effects of kindergarten retention when they make promotional decisions?

## Rationale for the Research Methods

These questions were investigated using a combined quantitative-qualitative study design.

Quantitative data were obtained from 190 responses to a kindergarten retention questionnaire mailed to kindergarten teachers in privately operated centres, private schools, and 15 school jurisdictions in central Alberta. This sampling frame provided a cross-section of urban, small urban, and rural communities. Data collection was conducted in the spring of 1996. Spring is the time of year when teachers generally make promotional considerations for the upcoming school year.

Questionnaire responses ranged along a continuum from unequivocal endorsement to unequivocal rejection of the practice of kindergarten retention.

Qualitative data were obtained from semistructured, follow-up interviews with

11 kindergarten teachers conducted in May and June, 1996. All 11 teachers had indicated their willingness to be interviewed regarding their views on kindergarten retention. The views of teachers selected for follow-up interviews were representative of either end of the support-nonsupport continuum.

The main criteria for selection of teachers to represent those supportive of kindergarten retention was evidence of an established pattern of recommending students for retention during the past 5 school years.

The 6 teachers selected for interview demonstrated this pattern; all 6 also strongly disagreed with the questionnaire statement that "children should never be retained"; moreover, 2 had attached additional comments explaining their reasons for recommending kindergarten retention.

The main criterion for selection of early childhood educators to represent those opposed to kindergarten retention was evidence of a consistent pattern of recommending "zero" students during the past 5 school years.

Four of the 5 interviewed teachers demonstrated this pattern. (One had taught kindergarten less than 2 years.) Additionally, all 5 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "children should never be retained." Incidentally, only 15 of the 190 questionnaire respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement; these 5 respondents were the only ones in this group of 15 who agreed to be interviewed.

The rationale for using a combined quantitative-qualitative study design was based on a pragmatic approach to research in early childhood education endorsed by Goodwin and Goodwin (1996).

Citing Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989), Goodwin and Goodwin (1996) have suggested that up to five purposes can be served by combining quantitative and qualitative components in a single study design:

> One purpose [is] *triangulation*. . . . That is, the separate methods [can] be used to measure the same phenomenon and, given convergence of the results of each, to more definitively and more credibly establish accuracy. A second purpose [is] *complementarity*, whereby the results from one method . . . are used to enhance, elaborate, or illustrate the results of the other method . . . . The third purpose [is] *development*; via it, one method is initiated first with findings used to guide the implementation of the other method subsequently. Via an *initiation* purpose, the researcher deliberately seeks paradox or contradiction. Thus, areas highlighted by the non-convergence of qualitative and quantitative approaches might yield reformulations or areas for additional study. The fifth purpose [is] *expansion*, that is, the combined methods [are] used to extend the scope and depth of inquiry. A common pattern [is] to use quantitative methods to rearch outcomes and qualitative procedures to assess implementation. ( p. 162, italics in original)

A combined quantitative-qualitative approach was used in this study in order to further all five purposes described by Goodwin and Goodwin.

Regarding the first and fifth purposes, "triangulation" and "expansion," it was assumed that a combination of methods would provide a more credible and indepth exploration of the relationship between kindergarten teacher beliefs and retention than could be provided by a single research method.

The second purpose, "complementarity," was served because the interview data added substance to the aggregate findings and, in turn, the aggregate findings increased the generalizability of the information obtained from the individual interviews.

Likewise, the third purpose, "development," was served in that the aggregate findings, that is, the questionnaire responses, were used as the basis for selecting informants for the more indepth individual interviews.

Finally, the fourth purpose, "initiation," was served by a discussion of differences in the quantitative and qualitative findings, which suggested specific

aspects of the topic that could be enlightened by further research.

## Significance of the Study

On a conceptual level, this study elucidates the relationship between kindergarten teachers' beliefs about child development and their promotional practices. Specifically, it provides information about the importance teachers attribute to biological maturation and to the social environment, including their own role, in the development of school readiness of young children, as well as their preferred educational remedies for "unready" children. The study also casts light upon teachers' knowledge of research on kindergarten retention and their estimation of its importance for promotional decision-making.

For classroom practice, the study provides information relevant to both policy-making regarding kindergarten promotion and to the necessity or further necessity of disseminating the findings of relevant research on kindergarten retention through preservice teacher preparation, inservice professional development or both.

For teacher education, the study will prove useful to teacher educators in informing their discussions of the topic of kindergarten retention during preservice and inservice early childhood education courses.

## Overview

This dissertation consists of seven chapters.

Chapter 1 has outlined the purpose of the study, the rationale for the research methods used, and the relevance of the topic for theory and practice in early childhood education.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature on grade retention. The first part of the literature review discusses North American retention rates and policies and includes an estimate of the financial cost associated with grade retention.

The second part of the literature review identifies aspects of grade retention that have received research attention. Specifically, these aspects are the demographic features of retainees, the effects of grade retention on students' academic achievement and emotional adjustment, and the relationship between retention and early school leaving.

The third part of the literature review presents an overview of research on the relationship between teacher beliefs and classroom practice in general and the relationship between teacher beliefs and retention in particular. Specific reference is made to the relationship between the beliefs of kindergarten teachers and their promotional practices.

The fourth part of the literature review discusses teacher utilization of research. This last section focuses on the issue of the extent to which teachers are knowledgeable about research on grade retention and are influenced by it when making promotional decisions.

Chapter 3 describes the research methods used in the study, including selection of teachers, description and assumptions related to the research instruments, quantitative and qualitative data collection and analyses, and ethical considerations of the study.

Chapter 4 presents descriptive and inferential analyses of the survey data, based on the elaboration model suggested by Babbie (1995).

Chapter 5 presents the qualitative findings based on follow-up interviews with the 11 selected teachers. These data are analyzed from the perspective of Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory approach.

Chapter 6 summarizes and discusses the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study.

Chapter 7 presents the conclusions of the study, considers their theoretical and practical implications, makes suggestions for future research, and offers a personal reflection about the significance of the study.

# CHAPTER 2

# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review consists of four parts. The introduction presents a brief discussion of estimated North American elementary school retention rates, promotional practice in Canadian school boards, and an estimate of educational cost associated with grade retention. Second is a survey of the main strands of research on grade retention with particular reference to kindergarten retention. Third is an overview of research on the relationship between teacher beliefs and classroom practice. Again, particular reference is made to the relationship between kindergarten teacher beliefs and promotional practices. Fourth is a synopsis of teacher utilization of research. This last section includes consideration of the extent to which teachers are knowledgeable about research on grade retention and are affected by it when they make promotional decisions.

## Introduction

This introductory section discusses recent estimates of retention rates in Canada and the United States, Canadian school district retention policies, and one estimate of educational cost associated with retention.

### North American Retention Rates and Policies

American researchers including Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber (1994), Karweit (1992a, 1992b), and Shepard & Smith (1990) have noted the lack of comprehensive national statistics on retention rates. Ziegler (1992) has commented on a similar lack of national statistics in Canada.

Smith and Shepard (1987) have attributed poor documentation of retention practices in the United States to the fact that retention has historically been a local or state, not national, issue. Smith and Shepard have attempted to make two estimates of general retention rates, however.

### Estimates of Retention Rates

Smith and Shepard (1987) examined U. S. Census Bureau data on the percentage of school-aged children who were enrolled in a grade below the modal grade for their age. Census data for 1982, the most recent they analyzed, indicated that 21% of males and 15% of females were one year below the modal grade for their age. After excluding children who entered school behind schedule, Smith and Shepard estimated an overall retention rate of 15-19%. They noted that the percentage of school-aged children who were enrolled a grade below the mode had shown an increase since the middle 1970s. In their opinion, an overall retention rate of 15-19% closely resembled that of such third-world countries as Haiti and Sierra Leone compared to retention rates in Japan and most European countries, whose retention rates were less than 1%.

Shepard and Smith (1990) also analyzed data from 13 states and the District of Columbia. They estimated that 5-7% of public school children, or approximately 2 children in every class of 30, were retained in the United States annually. They further estimated that a 6% annual rate would produce a *cumulative* rate of retention greater than 50% by the ninth grade. Shepard and Smith (1990) concluded that, contrary to public perception, current nonpromotion rates were as high as in the 19th century prior to social promotion.

Based on 1990 U. S. Census Bureau statistics on enrollment data, Alexander et al. (1994) estimated that approximately 10-14% of Whites and 17-24% of African American students were "off time" by age 11.

Citing the *National Education Longitudinal Study* (NELS:88), Meisels (1995) stated that one in five American public school students is retained at least once between kindergarten and the eighth grade.

In her review of Canadian retention rates, Ziegler (1992) noted a lack of recent data for most Canadian jurisdictions. For example, in 1961 the Toronto Public School Principals' Association reported that 29.5% of Grade 6 students had spent more than 6 years in school.

Ziegler reported the following longitudinal data for North York and Peel boards.

According to a superintendent's report, 24% of North York Grade 6 students in the 17 schools he supervised were overage for grade in 1971, 75% having repeated a primary grade. By 1982 the percentage of overaged Grade 6 students exceeded 30% and was still 20% in 1984 for JK-8 despite the administration's having brought the increase to the attention of principals. Following an administrative mandate, the retention rate for JK-8 had dropped to 5% as of September, 1987. In the Peel board, the retention rate was 15% by Grade 6 in 1971, rising to 17% by 1981 with the exclusion of special education.

Cantalini (1987) reported age- and gender-related retention rates for 1,174 Grade 6 students in the Lambton County Catholic School Board. Of this sample, 42% of the youngest, December-born males had been retained by Grade 6 compared to 27% of the youngest, December-born females.

## Retention Policies of Canadian Jurisdictions

The Canadian Education Association (1989) surveyed 122 public and separate school boards across Canada regarding their grade promotion-retention policies and received a 70% response.

In a brief discussion of its findings, the Canadian Education Association indicated that provincial departments of education set very broad guidelines on grade promotion. These guidelines usually concern program content and the maximum number of years a student may spend in elementary school.

The Canadian Education Association indicated that two thirds of the surveyed boards had their own guidelines or policies and that the remaining boards used some type of evaluation instrument, such as the 21-item, teacher-completed "In- Grade Retention Scale" used by the Lambton County Board. The Canadian Education Association also indicated, however, that "many" boards had no specific promotion policy and that promotional decisions were made at the individual school level.

The Canadian Education Association reported the comments of only five boards regarding kindergarten retention. Only one board indicated that the question of retention was inappropriate at the kindergarten level. The Edmonton Catholic District Board indicated that some schools offered a 4-year primary program, although it was not described. The Peace River Board indicated that it did retain kindergarten students, but did not report its promotional criteria.

In an *Overview of Canadian Education*, Gayfer (1991) summarized policy regarding grade retention as follows:

> Most provinces and territories have adopted some form of non-graded continuous progress by which students proceed to the next level of learning in a subject rather than, as in the past, repeat a full year in all subjects if their performance was not adequate in one or two subjects. (p. 26)

Ziegler's (1992) data indicate that the practice of continuous progress may be more prevalent at the secondary rather than elementary level, however. Based on her review of Canadian retention rates, Ziegler concluded that "at the elementary level, grade repetition is both possible and practiced" (pp. 26-27).

## The Educational Cost of Grade Retention

Assuming that Shepard and Smith's (1990) estimate of an overall retention rate of 6% remains fairly accurate, retention is an educational practice associated with a significant financial cost.

Based on this retention rate and a 1990 per-pupil cost of $4,051, as determined by the U. S. Department of Education, Shepard and Smith estimated that American school districts spend almost 10 billion dollars annually to pay for the extra year of schooling necessitated by retaining 2.4 million students.

Shepard and Smith proposed an economic reason for what they regard as a failure on the part of local districts, even states, to address the issue of retention: since retention does not appear as a "line item" on any budget, no jurisdiction appears to bear the extra cost. The financial cost of retention is obscured further because many students do not stay in the same jurisdiction for their entire school career.

Shepard and Smith concluded that because the financial cost of retention was not "explicitly acknowledged," savings from promoted students was not being redirected to "more effective" programs, such as remediation, summer school, classroom aides, or reduced class size.

## An Overview of Research on Grade Retention

According to Tomchin and Impara (1992), studies on retention in general have focused on three major areas. One strand of research focuses on the effects of retention on academic and personality variables. A second strand examines the relationship between elementary school retention and dropping out of school. A third strand examines predictors of retention. Research findings in each of these three areas are now summarized in turn.

## The Academic and Emotional Effects of Retention

This strand of research on grade retention includes a considerable body of literature that reports either its ineffectiveness or negative outcomes on academic achievement, behaviour, or self-concept. For example, Holmes' (1989) meta-analysis of 63 studies measuring the effects of retention on the academic achievement, personal adjustment, self-concept, attitude toward school, and attendance of kindergarten, elementary, and junior high school students revealed overall negative effects in 54 of the studies. After examining nine studies in which retained students and promoted controls had been matched on IQ and prior achievement, Holmes found an even greater negative effect (Holmes, 1989). Based on a review of the 63 studies meta-analyzed by Holmes as well as an additional 7 studies, Madak (1994) reported a negative relationship between retention and the criterion variables identified by Holmes in 87% of the studies.

The prevalent researcher indictment of retention as an educational practice can be summarized in Norton's (1990) comments:

> Studies on the topic of student retention over the past 80 years have made it clear that: (a) Retention does not increase learning - that is, pupils who are promoted, rather than retained, tend to learn *more* the next year than pupils of like ability who are not promoted, (b) Nonpromotion does not increase learning readiness for most pupils, (c) Retention does not improve socialization; non-promoted students tend to choose companions from grades higher than their own, and (d) Retention tends to promote problems in discipline, has negative effect on the student's self-concept, and therefore does not serve to "motivate" student learning or serve to "awaken the laggard" (Norton, 1983) as some persons contend. (p. 204, italics in original)

**Kindergarten Retention**

In the literature, "kindergarten retention" does not simply refer to the practice of having a student repeat the kindergarten year of schooling. This term has also been used to refer to so-called "extra-year placements," such as a "developmental" class before kindergarten, or a "readiness," or "transition," class between kindergarten and the first grade, particularly by critics of kindergarten retention (e.g., Siegel & Hanson, 1991).

Shepard (1989) has theorized that kindergarten retention is qualitatively different from retention at later grades in the following respects. First, it is intended to be a preventative treatment to spare the child anticipated academic failure. Second, behavioral immaturity is often a reason for retention rather than academic difficulties. Third, students retained in kindergarten are presumably not as socially stigmatized as those retained in later grades.

Smith and Shepard (1987) observed a "dramatic" increase in the number of children repeating kindergarten in the United States during the 1980s. They attributed this rise in retention rates to teachers' beliefs about child development, to the "downward press" of school curriculum into kindergarten, to parental pressures, and to what they term the "bureaucratization of schools."

Kindergarten retention, in its various forms, is a practice that has provoked considerable criticism from early childhood researchers. For example, advocates of "developmentally appropriate" curriculum, such as Elkind (1987) and Katz (1992), have objected to it on philosophical grounds. Additionally, numerous reviews of empirical research on the effectiveness-effects of early retention including those of Foster (1993), Graham (1994), Gredler (1992), Melvin and Juliebö (1991), Meisels (1992, 1995), Morrison (1992), Nason (1991), Shepard (1989), Siegel and Hanson (1991), and Walters and Borgers (1995), have been uniformly critical.

The following studies are illustrative of recent research on the short-term consequences of kindergarten retention.

Using teacher ratings as outcome measures, Pianta, Tietbohl, and Bennett (1997) examined kindergarten retainees' classroom adjustment relative to both age-matched and grade-matched comparison groups as well as to themselves over 2 1/2 years. Initially, retainers were significantly more poorly adjusted than age- or grade-mates; they showed a reduction in behaviour problems, specifically acting-out and shy-anxious behaviours, but only slightly increased competence for task orientation over time. The researchers concluded that "although repeating a grade was not a clear solution for increasing competence, it was associated with decreased incompetence" (p. 148). They remained critical of retention as an intervention to improve children's social competencies, however, and labeled it a "passive" intervention which involved no deliberate efforts to change target behaviours.

Phillips (1992) investigated the effects of attending an extra-year developmental kindergarten pilot program. She compared measures of academic progress, social competence, and self-perceptions of 61 developmental kindergartners with those of 41 students who had been retained following "academic" kindergarten in nonpilot schools and 45 not-retained students. Students were matched on the basis of chronological age and screening test scores prior to school entry. Outcome measures at the end of the fourth year of schooling of all subjects were used to assess the effects of a developmental kindergarten program on academic achievement, social competency, and self-perceptions. Results on the dependent measures were adjusted for initial group differences in the independent measures of race, sex, age, individual socioeconomic status, school SES, and predicted ability as measured by the Primary Mental Abilities test administered to all subjects during their second month of kindergarten as a criterion for placement. Three types of measures were used to evaluate student's progress: academic measures, including teachers' report card grades and standardized test scores, social competency as rated by teachers on report cards, and self-perception levels as reported on the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Children.

Phillips found that the at-risk students who had participated in the developmental intervention year demonstrated greater academic progress, better work and study skills, and higher self-perceptions than those in the two comparison groups. However, these effects were not equally distributed. That is, the developmental kindergarten program was judged effective at the end of 4 years of school only for White female students.

Phillips concluded that none of the three alternative placements was effective for all children. She recommended that the school district follow students longitudinally, that it compare her results to those of students in a "developmentally appropriate" 1-year kindergarten program, and that it consider funding a Head Start type of program for at-risk 4-year-olds instead of requiring that a child become over-aged by attending a two-tiered kindergarten program.

Dennebaum and Kuhlberg (1994) examined the relationship between attending an extra-year transition program and later school achievement as measured by Metropolitan Achievement Test scores in the first, second, and third grades. Students who were placed in transition classrooms (the K-T-1 group) were approximately a year older than those in K-1R (recommended for retention or transition, but proceeded to first grade) and K-1 (promoted to first grade without teacher reservation) comparison groups at the time the standardized tests were administered. However, the K-T-1 group did not perform significantly better than the younger children with 1 year less of schooling; their performance was significantly lower than the younger children's on the Language and Complete Battery scores in third grade. Dennebaum and Kulberg also noted that students who were retained or placed in transition classrooms were significantly younger at kindergarten entrance than the K-1R and K-1 groups. They hypothesized that this may have been a result of the belief in the "gift of time" for children who were perceived as developmentally immature.

Dennebaum and Kuhlberg concluded that their findings provided no support for the view that nonpromotion benefits later achievement. Rather, they recommended further investigation of alternatives to extra-year programs, such as exploring ways in which the system could "conform to the child and . . . place more focus on the individual differences in readiness" (p. 12).

Mantzicopoulos and Morrison (1992) used both same-age and same-grade analyses in comparing academic achievement and behavioural scores of a group of 53 children who had been retained in kindergarten and a group of 53 promoted peers who had been matched on demographic characteristics, a measure of school readiness, and preacademic achievement in reading and mathematics. Same-age comparisons revealed that the retained group outperformed the promoted group in both reading and mathematics during the second year of school. However, this advantage disappeared during the third year of school. Same-grade comparisons revealed a similar pattern. Mantzicopoulos and Morrison considered that the behavioural measures were more difficult to interpret. During their first year of kindergarten, teachers rated retained students as significantly more inattentive and immature than their promoted counterparts. The retained group received ratings "within the normal range" on both same-age and same-grade comparisons during the second year of kindergarten. Mantzicopoulos and Morrison rejected the implication that the improvement in behaviour was attributable to retention, however; since retained and promoted subjects were not matched on behaviour problems, they concluded that it was not possible to rule out regression to the mean effects to account for the retained group's apparent behavioural improvement.

The following studies are illustrative of recent attempts to assess the long-term effects of early retention.

Thomas et al. (1992) compared 31 students in a rural school district who had been retained in either kindergarten or first grade with 31 promoted students with similar grade point average at the time of retention. Dependent measures were grade point average in second through fifth grades and teacher assessments of social competence, cognitive competence, externalizing problems and internalizing problems

in fourth and fifth grades. Thomas et al. concluded that retention was negatively related to functioning, particularly for White students. They suggested two alternative hypotheses to explain why retention may be more stigmatizing for White than for Black students. First, since approximately twice as many Black students were retained compared to Whites, a teacher may perceive a retained White student as particularly academically incompetent, socially incompetent, or both. Alternatively, retention may have differential effects on the two races due to differences in prior learning experiences or different familial-cultural expectations. While recognizing limitations in generalizing their study because of sample and geographical characteristics, Thomas et al. suggested their results point to the need for further research into the differential racial effects of retention.

Westbury (1994) compared the ability and achievement of a randomly selected group of retained students ($n$ = 125) in the Edmonton public school system with that of a randomly selected group ($n$ = 84) of continually promoted students. Groups were matched on the basis of the Edmonton Public Schools Grade 1 Reading Comprehension Test scores, gender, grade level, and school program. Westbury found that the retained group's verbal and quantitative scores on the Canadian Cognitive Ability Tests administered in Grade 3 were significantly below those of the promoted group. These differences became nonsignificant by Grade 6, however. There were also no significant differences between the two groups on district achievement tests in science, mathematics, social studies, and language arts in Grade 6. Westbury reported that the retained students showed "neither positive academic gains nor negative academic losses" in ability or subject matter achievement when compared to the promoted group. However, she considered that there were several reasons why it would be reasonable to "*expect*" significantly higher achievement for the retained group. These reasons included an additional year of schooling, an additional year of chronological age, and the exclusion of multiple and special placement repeaters. Since significant gains were not found, Westbury concluded that "educational recycling is a costly and ineffective intervention that should not have persisted" (p. 248).

Meisels and Liaw (1993) examined associations between retention and academic performance in kindergarten through Grade 8 in a nationally representative sample of 16,623 American eighth graders. Their sample was drawn from the *National Education Longitudinal Study* (1988) data set. Initial differences in subjects' race, gender, mother's education, and SES were statistically controlled. In their first subanalysis, Meisels and Liaw compared students who were retained in K-3 with those who were retained in Grade 4-8. Their second subanalysis compared students retained in K-8 with the total sample of nonretainees ($n$ = 13,420). Based on the results of multivariate analyses of the relationship between retention and eighth grade outcomes, Meisels and Liaw arrived at the following conclusion:

> Results suggest that the timing of retention is not uniformly associated with superior performance. Retention at any point is associated with less optimal academic and personal-social outcomes. Nonretained students demonstrate higher grades, test scores, and fewer academic, emotional, and behavioral problems than the retained group. Moreover, retention is associated with more negative outcomes for female, White, and higher SES students. In short, retention does not equalize outcomes even when retained students have been in school a year longer. Consistent with findings from numerous smaller, controlled studies, these results from a national sample strengthen arguments against retention policies. The importance of implementing alternative methods of assisting students at risk for academic failure is noted. (p. 69)

In addition to repeating kindergarten and extra-year programs, the practice of "red-shirting," or the delayed kindergarten entry of chronologically young but legally eligible children, has been suggested as a means of increasing the likelihood of their later school success (Holloman, 1990).

However, a study by Kundert, May, and Brent (1995) questioned the efficacy of this practice. These researchers compared the achievement of two groups of suburban Caucasian students currently in Grades 3-12, 157 delayed kindergarten entry students and 314 students who had previously been retained in grades K-5. Archival achievement measures were Cognitive Abilities Test scores for Grade 2 and Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills-2-5-7 scores for the current grade and repeated grade in the case of retained students. Kundert et al. found that achievement scores for the delayed entry group were not significantly higher than those of the retained students despite the fact that the delayed entry group had higher IQ scores.

On the other side of the kindergarten retention debate, proponents of the Gesell Institute's philosophy have advocated an extra year's placement for children with normal intelligence but "immature" development. This recommendation is based on the assumption that an extra year's growth will enable a developmentally immature student to better cope with curriculum requirements (Grant, 1997; Grant & Johnson, 1997; Ilg, Ames, Haines, & Gillespie, 1978; Scott & Ames, 1969; Uphoff, 1995; Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986). For example, Grant and Johnson (1997) recommended that retention be used primarily to "correct wrong grade placement" (p. 22); they did not cite research evidence to support this recommendation, however.

In its own estimation (Gesell Institute, 1987) and that of its detractors (Beryl Buck Institute for Education, 1989; Gredler, 1992; Meisels, 1987, 1989), the Gesell Institute has exerted a widespread influence in the developmental readiness testing of young children in the United States.

The Gesell Institute's readiness battery is premised on the philosophical position that children should be admitted to school and promoted on the basis of their maturational readiness. "Overplaced" children are to be retained in order to allow them an additional year to "grow" (Ames, Gillespie, & Streff, 1985; Ilg et al., 1978).

For example, contemporary Gesellians, Uphoff and Gilmore (1986), express the opinion that

> [repeating a grade] has been found to work well with many children under certain conditions. If failure is stressed - especially that of the child - the repeat will be less likely to produce positive results. However, when parents assume the burden and responsibility for the repeat, the odds of successful results are much improved. (p. 15)

Recently, Uphoff (1995) has apparently switched his support from grade retention to "developmentally appropriate" extra-year transition programs:

> Teachers, parents and children quickly found that this approach worked far better than the traditional practice of "retention," in which children who fail then repeat the same educational experience that did not work for them the first time. Retention frequently produced children who had negative attitudes about school and themselves, which in turn made it all the more difficult for them to cope with whatever curriculum awaited them in later grades. (p. 7)

However, several researchers (Alexander et al., 1994; Jackson, 1975; Karweit, 1991, 1992a, 1992b; Reynolds, 1992; Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1993) have disputed the utility of much research on the effects of 2-year kindergarten programs and grade retention. The following section summarizes their arguments.

## Limitations of Research on the Effects of Grade Retention

Karweit (1991, 1992b) has identified four methodological problems which, in her opinion, limit most research on 2-year kindergarten programs and grade retention. The first limitation is research design. The second limitation is the failure to identify the basis of comparison or the improper aggregation of results that use different bases

of comparison. The third limitation is the failure to identify the educational practice, "grade retention," or the inappropriate combination of studies based on different practices, such as in a meta-analysis. The fourth limitation is the failure to examine the longitudinal effects of retention.

Each of the four limitations identified by Karweit will be discussed separately, beginning with problems in research design.

Jackson's frequently cited 1975 review categorized 44 retention studies conducted from 1911 to 1973 according to methodology and indicated how research design may influence study results. Jackson classified each of the 44 studies as one of three designs.

"Type I" was essentially a causal-comparative design. Jackson considered that this type was biased in favour of promoted children, who likely did not have the same degree of academic or social problems, or both, as those retained. Uncontrolled, pre-existing differences in the promoted and retained groups before retention therefore invalidated the results of Type I studies.

"Type II" studies did not compare retained and promoted students, but compared student performance before and after retention. According to Jackson, these studies favoured retention. The results of studies employing this one-group pretest-posttest design were therefore invalidated by uncontrolled threats to internal validity.

In contrast, "Type III" studies represented the "true" experimental design in that they employed random assignment of equivalent students to either the promotion or retention condition.

Jackson was able to identify only three studies that would qualify as "Type III," the most recent published in 1941, however. Only one significant effect favouring the promoted group was found in these three studies.

Jackson's arrived at the following general conclusion:

> *Thus, those educators who retain pupils in a grade do so without valid research evidence to indicate that such treatment will provide greater benefits to students with academic or adjustment difficulties than will promotion to the next grade.* (p. 627, italics in original)

Karweit's second criticism about basis of comparison refers to the issue of who constitutes the appropriate comparison group for retained students. Same-age comparisons measure retained students' performance against their promoted age-mates whereas same- grade comparisons measure their performance against their younger classmates.

Regarding Holmes' (1989) meta-analysis, Karweit observed that the former comparison favoured the promoted group while the latter favoured the retained group in the first year following retention, although effects were no longer evident by the third year.

Karweit's (1992b) objection to the method in which results of meta-analyses have been interpreted was that

> although recent meta-analyses (Holmes, 1989; Shepard & Smith, 1989) present results separately for same age and same grade comparisons, they ultimately combine the results across comparisons and treat the differences in effects as a methodological, not a substantive, issue. (p. 1116)

Related to the same-grade/same-age issue in making comparisons, Alexander, Entwistle, and Dauber (1994) commented on the difficulties involved in trying to ensure the approximate equivalence of promoted and retained groups *before* retention: that is, since random assignment of all at-risk students to one or the other group is both impractical and unethical, researchers on the effects of retention must therefore use a less preferred design, the "matched control" group. Alexander et al. expressed doubt, however, that a comparison group of at-risk but promoted students would ever

perfectly match a group of retained students. They regarded this problem as a "fundamental dilemma" involved in assessing the effects of retention.

Karweit (1992a) also contended that the matched control group design involves an inherent bias. The matched control group is usually comprised of students who were recommended for retention or 2-year kindergarten placement, but whose parents refused the recommendation. Karweit considered that the mere fact of parental refusal suggests preexisting, uncontrolled differences in the groups, such as socioeconomic status, parental involvement, and beliefs about child development.

Karweit's (1991, 1992b) third criticism was that most studies of the effects of retention have "lumped" together diverse practices under the generic term, "grade repetition"; transition rooms, developmental kindergartens, partial grade retention, complete grade repetition, and alternative programs are some of the treatments that have been termed "grade repetition." Karweit identified at least four types of educational practices that have been "lumped" together, namely, "recycling" (straight repeating), "alternative after failure" (repeating with additional programming), "alternative pre failure" (additional-year programming before actual failure), and "partial promotion" (repeating only certain subjects). According to Karweit, a result of grouping these practices together has been that researchers have failed to look for distinct effects of each type of treatment. She considered this a significant oversight because some studies have reported positive effects of retention.

Pierson and Connell's (1992) study was a recent example of one such study. Pierson and Connell found that a sample of Grade 3-6 retained students performed as well academically as a matched ability sample and better than a random sample of socially-promoted age-mates.

Karweit's fourth criticism was that many studies failed to examine the longitudinal effects of retention. Karweit considered that longitudinal studies are necessary to clarify both the strong association between early retention and later school failure, and the so-called "fade-out" phenomenon. The fade-out phenomenon refers to the apparent initial effectiveness of retention, followed by gradual loss of effects.

Alexander et al. (1994) identified three other weaknesses in retention studies. First, major reviews often included older studies with questionable applicability to current demographic and educational circumstances. Second, much data about retention were taken from unpublished sources, resulting in varying degrees of "quality control." Third was the problem of sampling; few studies have used nationally representative samples.

Alexander et al. and Karweit's criticisms should not be construed as their endorsement of retention, however. On the contrary, Karweit (1991) concluded that

> neither social promotion nor retention per se are effective at solving the problem of providing appropriate instruction for low performing students. The research has been phrased in such a way that a yes or no answer is called for. In fact, the main conclusion should be that both policies are failures. In most cases, doing better than the comparison group still meant a low level of performance relative to the school population at large. Retaining may not help, but simply promoting isn't a solution either. (p. 7)

## Retention and Dropping Out

According to Grissom and Shepard (1989), the possibility that retention might aggravate the problem of early school leaving was first suggested by simple correlational studies during the 1960s. More recently, even those researchers who support grade retention have conceded that it is an important predictor of early high school leaving. For example, Alexander et al. (1994) cited several studies that demonstrated substantially higher dropout rates among those who had failed a grade compared to students who had never been retained. They cited studies by Cairns, Cairns, and

Neckerman (1989), Lloyd (1978), and Stroup and Robins (1972), all of which examined the association between dropping out and early retention.

Frequently cited in the literature regarding dropping out are Grissom and Shepard's (1989) three large-scale studies, which involved 20,000 to 80,000 students each. After controlling for achievement and other background variables, Grissom and Shepard found that students who had repeated a year were 20-30% more likely to drop out of school. They also found a substantially increased risk for dropping out after repeating a grade even in a large affluent suburban school district with a 4% drop-out rate. Students who had repeated twice had a probability of dropping out of almost 100%.

Grissom and Shepard hypothesized that repeating a grade "undoubtedly contributes in subtle and interactive ways to an already complex constellation of causes for school leaving" (p. 58). They also suggested that analyses adjusting for achievement and background variables may demonstrate that there is a causal, not merely correlational, relationship between retention and dropping out. Grissom and Shepard also predicted that the effects of tougher promotional policies would result in even higher drop-out rates.

Roderick (1995) commented on the significance of earlier students that demonstrated the connection between grade retention and early school leaving. Corroborating Grissom and Shepard's prediction, Roderick observed a continuing trend towards tightening of promotional standards, accompanied by increasing retention rates during the 1990s. Based on 1992 United States Bureau of Census data, he noted that over 30% of 14-year-olds were enrolled in a grade below ninth grade, their modal grade level. Roderick also found the same age, ethnic, and gender differences in enrollment levels as observed previously and also noted that most retentions occurred between the ages of 6 and 9 years.

## Predictors of Retention

Numerous studies examining the personal characteristics of "at risk" students (Cosden, Zimmer, & Tuss, 1993; Dauber, Alexander, & Entwisle, 1993; McArthur & Bianchi, 1993; Meisels & Liaw, 1993; Zepeda, 1993) have revealed a consistent "profile." Students most likely to be retained tended to be male, chronologically young in relation to classmates, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and were members of racial or ethnic minority groups. Geographical factors were also associated with retention. In the United States, the southern states have had the highest retention rates among geographical regions (Karweit, 1991).

Ziegler's (1992) review of data from Canadian jurisdictions revealed that a disproportionately high percentage of children born in the last quarter of the year, particularly boys, were retained. Citing Cantalini's 1987 study, Ziegler noted that 42% of boys born in November and December had repeated a primary grade compared to 27% of girls, for example.

Because many retained students have come from impoverished minority backgrounds, some researchers (Cosden, Zimmer, & Gutierrez, 1993; Haberman & Dill, 1993; Karweit, 1991; Zepeda, 1993) have criticized retention as a practice that perpetuates educational and social inequity. For example, Haberman and Dill (1993) have contended that

> by the year 2000, 27% of all children will live in poverty; 56% will live with a poorly educated single mother, and the number of children whose first language is not English will approximate six million (Bempechat and Ginsburg, 1989, p. 36). Poverty and the stress of poverty dramatically affect the quality of support parents are able to give and how much they can influence educational outcomes (Bempechat, 1992, p. 3). Researchers note that greater deficits in support and poorer educational environments frequently portend failure on standardized measures, and that the resultant retention practices have an

inordinately dramatic effect on children in poverty. (Karweit, 1991, p. 2). (p. 352)

Byrd and Weitzman's (1994) study represented the first use of a nationally representative sample ($N$ = 9996) to identify child health factors associated with early school failure. The researchers found that poverty, male gender, low maternal education, deafness, speech defects, low birth weight, enuresis, and exposure to household smoking were all independently associated with increased risk of repeating kindergarten or first grade. In bivariate analyses, recurrent otitis media, Black race, and low maternal age were also associated with early retention. Behaviour problems had a strong independent association, although Byrd and Weitzman excluded this factor from their predictive model because of uncertainty about its temporal relationship to retention.

Dauber, Alexander, and Entwisle (1993) suggested that factors related to retention may vary as students progress through elementary school. Citing a 1989 study by Mantzicopoulos, Morrison, Hinshaw, and Carte, they suggested that while some factors found to influence kindergarten retention were similar to those in later retention (gender, SES, academic performance), other factors may be more important for kindergarten retention than for later retention. These factors included visual-motor integration, inattentiveness, impulsivity, and hyperactivity.

The first purpose of Dauber et al.'s own (1993) study was to identify factors that would distinguish retained and promoted students in general. Its second purpose was to identify factors that would distinguish the risk of first grade retainees from retainees in Grades 2, 3, and 4. The researchers found that retainees in general differed considerably from never-retained students. Retainees were disproportionately poor, Black, male, and offspring of high school dropouts. Retainees also demonstrated poorer test performance, were rated by their parents as less able to do schoolwork, received lower first-quarter conduct marks, and were more likely to have changed schools between kindergarten and first grade. Background factors did not distinguish early from later retainees. However, early retainees scored significantly lower on quantitative academic performance measures, parent ability ratings, and a standardized teacher observation inventory. Dauber et al. concluded that students who were retained in first grade were apparently the poorest performers early in their school career. Furthermore, parents and teachers were apparently able to discern their potential academic problems. Hence, it may be important to include parent judgments in an early intervention assessment program. The researchers also concluded that further research was necessary to identify risk factors in later years so that appropriate intervention could be instituted prior to retention.

To investigate factors other than achievement that could influence kindergarten teachers when making promotional decisions, Bergin, Osburn, and Cryan (1996) sent hypothetical profiles to 600 kindergarten teachers in the state of Ohio. They found that their 252 respondents were not significantly more likely to recommend retention for boys or for August-born children, although some respondents' comments did indicate concern about age; respondents were more likely to recommend retention for children who were described as dependent and immature, however. Bergin, Osburn, and Cryan also found that older teachers were more likely to recommend retention and that teachers who recommended retention most often mentioned low independence and immaturity as reasons for retention in their written comments.

In addition to the student characteristics noted above, Karweit (1991) observed that students were more likely to be retained at specific transitional points in their educational careers, such as kindergarten or first grade (school entry), or Grade 6 (exit from elementary and entry into middle school), or Grade 9 (high school entry).

Rather than focusing on student predictor variables, some studies have focused on characteristics and practices at classroom, school, district, and even system levels associated with increased incidence of retention.

Brynes and Yamamoto (1986) and Schwager, Mitchell, Mitchell, and Hecht (1992) are among researchers who have proposed that retention serves a systems-

maintenance function. For example, Schwager et. al. argued that

> since retention disrupts neither school scheduling nor school structure, student accountability concerns can be accommodated without requiring system changes. Additionally, because retention costs are part of the general budget, not identifiable line-item expenditures, they are not subject to budget politics (Fuhrman, 1990). Retention is a convenient but ineffective response to low achievement, shored up by common beliefs that "something" is being done to help the child. These beliefs almost certainly influence both the adoption and the implementation of school district policies. (p. 422)

Zepeda's (1993) survey data obtained from five central California districts described how classroom/school climate may contribute to differences in promotional practice. In general, the 478 retained kindergartners in Zepeda's sample were from lower-income, female-headed households, had no preschool experience, and were disproportionally from ethnic and/or language minority backgrounds. Zepeda also reported the curricular practices of a subset of kindergarten teachers classified as "high" or "low" in retaining children. She found statistically significant differences between the two groups. Teachers in high-retaining schools reported using more developmentally inappropriate activities (as measured by 1990 National Association for the Education of Young Children guidelines), focusing on whole-group lessons, formal reading instruction and test-taking. In contrast, teachers in low-retaining schools reported providing more developmentally appropriate activities, focusing on individual or small-group instruction, and use of manipulatives and other materials familiar to the children.

Smith and Shepard's (1988) qualitative study of one Boulder, CO school district represents another study focusing on contextual variables as factors in explaining variations in kindergarten retention practices. Specifically, Smith and Shepard wished to gain insight into the school contexts that help account for teachers' beliefs and practices related to kindergarten retention.

They defined teachers' beliefs as

> those propositions about development and early learning that a teacher holds to be true, with what degree of credulity, with what kind and quality of evidence, in relation to what other beliefs, values, and emotional attitudes, and in light of what consequences such beliefs have in actions . . . (p. 309)

Their preliminary analysis showed that high- and low-retaining schools could not be distinguished by variables such as socioeconomic status, average levels of tested academic abilities, ethnic or linguistic characteristics of students. However, based on participant observations, document analysis, and interviews with parents and teachers, it became apparent to Smith and Shepard that kindergarten teachers differed among themselves regarding the extent to which they viewed the development of school readiness as an organismic process unamenable to environmental intervention ("nativism") or as a process that was amenable to environmental influence ("non-nativism"). With only one exception in the 26 schools they studied, Smith and Shepard found a high degree of agreement in teachers' beliefs. In terms of organizational structure, high-retaining schools were characterized as more bureaucratic with a greater degree of grade segregation than low-retaining schools. Smith and Shepard hypothesized that teachers' nativist beliefs and use of retention may have been a response to the standardized curriculum, inflexible standards for evaluating kindergarten success, and rigid school structure imposed upon them. In contrast, teachers in low-retaining schools may have been more successful in resisting formal and informal expectations of district policy, parents, and higher grade teachers. Thus, these teachers may have been able to provide more flexible methods of dealing with differences in students' readiness and abilities. However, Smith and Shepard also

considered the alternative possibility that teachers with strong nativist beliefs may have been instrumental in the initial structuring of the high-retaining schools.

Smith and Shepard's analysis of relationships between teachers' beliefs about development of readiness and their retention policies leads into a discussion of the relationship between teacher beliefs and classroom practice. This discussion consists of a brief summary of general literature on the topic, followed by a more in-depth examination of Smith and Shepard's study within the context of research of teachers' perspectives toward retention.

## Teacher Attitudes, Beliefs, and Practice

As Malouf and Schiller (1995) and Pajares (1992) noted, a variety of terms are found in the literature on teachers' educational beliefs, including "attitudes," "values," "judgments," "assumptions," "opinions," "perceptions," "ideologies," "orientations," "frames of reference," and "personal theories."

Clandinin and Connelly (1987) apparently encountered a "bewildering array of terms" when they attempted to review a set of 12 studies on teacher thinking and knowledge (p. 487). The two researchers noted both commonalities and differences in theoretical orientation and methodology among these 12 studies. Regarding the constructs identified in these studies, Clandinin and Connelly concluded that researchers "using different terms often appear in fact to mean much the same thing" (p. 498).

Nespor (1987) proposed a theoretical model of "belief systems" that attempts to elucidate both the structure and functions of teacher beliefs. Nespor argued that "*to understand teaching from teachers' perspectives we have to understand the beliefs with which they define their work*" (p. 323, italics in original).

Regarding structure, Nespor identified four features, "existential presumption," "alternativity," "affective and evaluative loading," and "episodic structure," which distinguish beliefs from knowledge; two additional features, "non-consensuality" and "unboundedness" refer to the ways that beliefs are organized into systems.

"Existential presumption" refers to propositions or assumptions about the existence or nonexistence of entities, such as beliefs in God; teachers in Nespor's study held strong beliefs about student "ability," "maturity," and "laziness" and they regarded such qualities as entities embodied in students.

Beliefs also include conceptualizations of "alternative," or ideal, realities; teachers frequently define goals and tasks in terms of achieving their idealized classroom situations.

Affect and evaluation are integral components of belief systems; teachers make subjective judgments about both students and subject matter and these judgments may strongly influence the types of goals and activities on which teachers focus their energies.

Citing Scrank and Abelson (1977), Nespor stated that beliefs and knowledge may be distinguished by storage of information. Whereas information in knowledge systems is stored primarily in semantic networks, which is organized logically in terms of principles, propositions, etc., belief systems information is primarily stored as episodic memory, which is organized as personal experiences, events, or episodes. Nespor found numerous examples in which teachers' current practices continued to be influenced by critical experiences or events that occurred earlier in their careers.

Nespor described two other features, "non-consensuality" and "unboundedness," which are features of belief systems rather than of individual beliefs.

"Non-consensuality" refers to the recognition of both those who hold particular beliefs and of "outsiders" that belief systems consist of propositions, conceptions, arguments, etc. that are in principle disputable; there is lack of consensus regarding how beliefs are to be evaluated, however. The reason for this non-consensus is that belief systems possess the features described above; therefore, they are resistant to the same criteria of critical evaluation as knowledge systems. For the same reason, beliefs

are also highly resistant to change.

"Unboundedness" refers to the fact that, unlike application of knowledge, there are no clear, logical rules for applying beliefs to real-world situations or events; in fact, some individuals may "read" idiosyncratic belief-based meanings into situations based on their previous personal experiences whereas other individuals may not do so.

Nespor stated that beliefs and belief systems serve two important functions for teachers: beliefs determine how teachers define tasks or problems and how they select cognitive control strategies, and, because of their affective component, beliefs facilitate the retrieval and reconstruction of memory processes.

According to Nespor, the reason why beliefs rather than research-based knowledge or academic theory are so important in defining teaching tasks and organizing relevant knowledge and information is because educational environments and problems are often "ill-defined and deeply entangled" (p. 324); because of their characteristics, beliefs are particularly suitable for "making sense" of such contexts.

After an extensive review of the literature on teacher beliefs, Pajares (1992) concluded that the construct of educational beliefs is "broad and encompassing." For purposes of research, it has been necessary to subclassify this concept in terms of "*educational beliefs about*", such as teachers' beliefs about their ability to influence students' performance ("teacher efficacy"), the nature of knowledge ("epistemological beliefs"), the causes of their or their students' performance ("attributions, locus of control, motivation, writing apprehension, math anxiety"), their self-perceptions and feelings of self-worth ("self-concept, self-esteem"), their ability to perform specific tasks ("self-efficacy"), and their beliefs about specific subjects or disciplines, such as the nature of reading, reading instruction, or whole language. According to Pajares, research on teacher beliefs has resulted in a "view of belief that speaks to an individual's judgment of the truth or falsity of a proposition, a judgment that can only be inferred from a collective understanding of what human beings say, intend, and do" (p. 316).

Referring to Rokeach's (1968) conception of a "belief system," Pajares stated that clusters of beliefs around a particular object or situation form "attitudes" that, in turn, become "action agendas." These beliefs are connected with each other and to other beliefs in other attitudes. These connections create the "values" that guide an individual's life, create and maintain other attitudes, interpret information, and direct behaviour.

Based on his review of the literature, Pajares arrived at the following general conclusions. Beliefs are acquired through the process of cultural transmission. Beliefs are related to knowledge, although there is disagreement about the exact relationship. Beliefs serve an adaptive function for individuals. Beliefs are generally agreed to be more affective and evaluative than knowledge. Beliefs function as indisputable "truth." Beliefs about education are formed prior to a teacher's entry into a preservice program. Beliefs form into "systems," as described in the preceding paragraph. Beliefs persist in spite of contradictory evidence. Hence, they are resistant to change. Beliefs affect thoughts and perceptions. Finally, beliefs influence behaviour.

Although Pajares considered that further conceptual and methodological refinements were necessary in the study of teacher beliefs, he concluded that ". . . beliefs can be, as Fenstermacher (1979) predicted, the single most important construct in educational research" (p. 329).

In reviewing the literature on beliefs, the reader encounters repeated metaphorical references to a "filter" in describing the function of beliefs. For example, McAninch's (1993) discussion of teachers' reliance on firsthand experience implied that teachers strongly believe in its importance. McAninch stated that firsthand experience ". . . provides both a justification for many teachers' decision making and a screen through which new information is filtered" (p. 7). Malouf and Schiller (1995) defined beliefs as "filters for interpreting reality" (p. 418). In discussing Dewey's distinction between beliefs based on evidence and beliefs that "insinuate themselves into acceptance," Doyle commented that these latter ". . . unexamined beliefs filter [and

distort] perception . . ." (p. 219). In synthesizing the research findings on educational beliefs, Pajares (1992) stated that thought processes ". . . may well be precursors to and creators of belief, but the filtering effect of belief structures ultimately screens, redefines, distorts, or reshapes subsequent thinking and information processing" (p. 325). In his overview of research on teaching, Fang (1996) cited several studies which claim that teacher beliefs "act as a filter through which a host of instructional judgements and decisions are made" (p. 51). Garrison and Macmillan (1987) considered that research has to be "filtered" through teachers' implicit "theories" if it is to have an effect on practice. Similarly, Peterson (1989) expressed the opinion that ". . . for any changes in classroom practice to occur they must, ultimately, be mediated [i.e., filtered] through the minds of teachers" (p. 196). Regarding grade retention, Tomchin and Impara (1992) considered that "each retention recommendation reflects a combination of student, school, and home characteristics filtered through teacher beliefs" (p. 218).

Clark and Peterson's (1986) chapter in the third edition of Wittrock's *Handbook of Research on Teaching* represented a first attempt to synthesize studies describing the mental constructs and processes underlying teacher behavior. Their model of teacher thought and action divided teachers' thought processes into three major categories, teacher planning, teachers' interactive thoughts and decisions, and teachers' theories and beliefs. The third category was further subdivided into teachers' attributions for the causes of students' performance and teachers' implicit theories of teaching and learning.

Clark and Peterson indicated that research on teachers' " implicit theories" was the most recent part of literature on teacher thinking; however, it was also the most central to understanding thought processes used in teaching. Although various terms were used, the common assumption of these studies was that a teacher's personally held system of beliefs, values, and principles provided logic and guidance to his or her cognitive behaviors. Some of the studies Clark and Peterson reviewed focused on teachers' implicit theories about a particular part of the curriculum, such as reading. Other topics included teachers' general conceptions about their role, their beliefs about curriculum, the principles they used to explain their own behaviour, the structure and content of their practical knowledge, and the conflicting belief systems of teachers and administrators.

Based on this small set of eclectic studies, Clark and Peterson arrived at the following tentative conclusions. First, teachers apparently held implicit theories about their work that could be made more explicit by using various direct and indirect inquiry techniques. Second, there was wide variance in teachers' implicit theories even within apparently homogeneous groups of teachers. Third, only three to six principles were necessary to describe a teacher's implicit theory of teaching. These principles related to student characteristics and states, teacher states, as well as to organization of subject matter. Fourth, the correspondence between a teacher's professed beliefs and behaviour could be moderated by circumstances beyond the teacher's control, such as mandated curriculum, available time, and student abilities. Fifth, difficulties in implementing innovations could be a result of conflicting theories about good teaching held by teachers and those of administrators and curriculum developers.

Isenberg's (1990) review of the literature suggested two different conceptualizations of the connection between teachers' thinking and beliefs and classroom practice. According to Isenberg, studies by Anning (1988), Bussis, Chittenden & Amarel (1976), Conners (1978), Duffy (1977), Elbaz (1981), Ignatovich, Cusick and Ray (1979), Janesick (1978), and Yonemura (1986) suggested that teachers' thinking may be guided by a personally held system of beliefs, values, and principles. Other studies (Cruickshank, 1987; Elbaz, 1981; Shulman, 1987; Stenhouse, 1981) suggested that teacher thinking may be guided by a largely unarticulated, broad knowledge base of content and teaching strategies that inform their practice.

Isenberg cited Yonemura's (1986) study on explicating the thinking and beliefs of one early childhood teacher. According to Isenberg, Yonemura found that "the teacher's practical knowledge was central to her role as an effective teacher" (p. 324) in

that the teacher was able to articulate the thoughts that led to certain actions and that these thoughts originated from her implicit values and beliefs about children, teaching, and appropriate early childhood programs.

Malouf and Schiller's more recent (1995) discussion of research on the relationship between teacher beliefs and practice also indicated that teachers' practices do relate to their underlying beliefs. For example, they cited Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, and Lloyd's (1991) finding that teachers' beliefs about reading and reading instruction related to their classroom practices in teaching reading. In Malouf and Schiller's opinion, a promising new avenue of research in the area of teacher beliefs focuses on the relationship between teacher attitudes about their own teaching efficacy and their practice.

## Teacher Beliefs About Retention

Edson (1990), Manley (1988/1989), Tanner and Combs (1993), and Tomchin and Impara (1992) have noted the lack of studies on teacher attitudes toward grade retention. Yet, as Tomchin and Impara have pointed out, it is usually the teacher who initiates the retention process and plays a key role in the retention decision.

The collaborative efforts of Smith and Shepard (1988) and of Smith (1989) represent recent attempts to describe kindergarten teachers' implicit theories of child development and their effects on promotional practices.

Smith and Shepard hypothesized that teachers have beliefs and implicit theories regarding the development of readiness for school. According to Smith and Shepard, these beliefs and implicit theories are explicable, internally consistent, and reflect propositional theories in psychology.

Teacher beliefs about development do not always accurately predict promotional practice, however. That is, teacher beliefs about retention are inconsistent with beliefs about development. Smith and Shepard arrived at this conclusion after finding that almost all of their informants endorsed retention regardless of their beliefs about development. Smith (1989) offers three possible explanations for this inconsistency.

First, a teacher's practical knowledge is incomplete and misleading in the case of a retention. This is because the teacher may observe a student making progress during the repeated year and conclude that retention had a beneficial effect. However, the teacher lacks the abstract, but more accurate information provided by a control group. In addition, teachers often do not acquire feedback on the longterm outcomes of nonpromoted students.

Second, many teachers may reject the view of schooling that emphasizes mandated curriculum with associated testing, but feel powerless to change the teaching conditions imposed upon them. They may perceive that their only recourse is to hold back a child who does not conform to fixed standards. Thus, unreadiness or incompetence is attributed to the deficiencies of the child rather than to the institutional characteristics of the school or the inappropriateness of the curriculum.

Third, some teachers may be overwhelmed by the heterogeneity found in their classes. School admission policies and the parental practice of "red-shirting" may create a wide range in age of students. Students may also vary greatly in their abilities and backgrounds. Thus, teachers who feel overwhelmed may support programs like developmental kindergarten, advise parents to keep their children at home until they are more mature, provide unstimulating programming for "unready" children and automatically retain them, or support changes in age of legal school entry.

Smith pointed out that such strategies are ultimately futile because it is impossible to eliminate all causes of diversity within a kindergarten.

Graue (1993) arrived at the similar conclusion that "optimal" entrance age is a relative rather than absolute issue. Citing Gredler's 1975 review of studies comparing U.S. and international policies regarding entrance age, Graue observed that the 4 1/2-year-old group would be the older, more capable group in Britain, whereas in the

United States it would be the younger, less competent group.

Smith and Shepard (1988) obtained information about kindergarten teachers' implicit theories of child development using a multimethod qualitative procedure. In terms of belief type, the researchers classified 19 of their 40 kindergarten teacher informants as "nativists." "Nativism" was defined as the belief that child development, in general, and readiness for school, in particular, reflect maturational processes largely unamenable to environmental intervention. The remaining teachers were classified as "non-nativists" and fell into three subgroups, "remediationists," "diagnostic-prescriptive," and "interactionists," primarily on the basis of the type of interventions they advocated.

Smith and Shepard further analyzed their data to determine whether the teachers' retention practices were related to their beliefs about school readiness development. A test of the difference in retention rates corresponding to the belief system dichotomy (nativist versus non- nativist) was statistically significant ($t = 6.15$, $p < .01$).

Smith and Shepard's study has been cited extensively by other researchers on grade retention including Alexander et. al. (1994), Clark (1989; 1992), Gredler (1992), Tanner and Combs (1993), Tomchin and Impara (1992), and Ziegler (1992).

Not all researchers have accepted Smith and Shepard's findings, however.

For example, in a personal communication to Edson (February, 1990), Uphoff, a Gesellian, expressed the opinion that their findings have been ". . . over-generalized from a very small sample" (p. 13).

Peterson (1989) noted the absence of systematic data on the prevalence of a "nativist" philosophy among the general teaching population. She hypothesized that this conception of the child as learner may have been transmitted historically to teachers as part of the "scientific knowledge basis." For example, Peterson found statements in Palmer's (1887) pedagogy text indicating both a belief that human mental development proceeds in accordance with "fixed laws" which are unamenable to pedagogical intervention and a belief that cognitive learning proceeds from mastery of lower-order facts to higher-order cognitive skills. According to Peterson, both of these beliefs are consistent with those expressed by the "nativist" teachers in Smith and Shepard's (1988) study.

In light of Shepard and Smith's findings, Edson (1990) conducted a qualitative study to discover how kindergarten teachers' ("academic" versus "developmental") orientations, perceptions about first grade teachers, and perceptions about the psychological impact of retention were related to their promotional practices.

Edson found that 20 of her 21 informants endorsed retention as an appropriate educational practice. She also found that teachers' beliefs were based on their individual definitions of readiness for first grade. Their classroom goals and curriculum orientation reflected these beliefs. Teachers' definitions of maturity and beliefs about whether maturity develops through time or practice were central to differences in their retention philosophy and compensatory efforts. Skill-oriented teachers tended to emphasize the development of school and academic maturity and tended to believe that promotion with remediation would benefit immature children. Developmentally oriented teachers tended to emphasize social and emotional maturity and tended to believe that a second kindergarten year could benefit immature children.

Edson also found that retention decisions were influenced by teachers' perceptions about the flexibility of first grade teachers and curriculum and by their perceptions about the psychological impact of retention. Contextual factors that constrained teachers from putting their beliefs into practice included parent, administrator, and support staff disapproval as well as formal policies on curriculum, entrance age, placement, and retention.

Edson also performed a second analysis of her data in which she classified her informants' beliefs about child development according to Smith and Shepard's categories. She classified one teacher as a "nativist." Consistent with Smith and Shepard's finding, this teacher tended to believe that time rather than instruction

would benefit an immature child. This teacher endorsed retention as a way of providing additional time. Teachers who were classified as "remediationists" ($n$ = 4) and "diagnostic-prescriptives" ($n$ = 4) tended to believe that immature children would benefit from promotion with remediation, which is also consistent with Smith and Shepard's finding.

Contrary to Smith and Shepard's study, Edson's fourth group of "non-nativists," the "interactionists" ($n$ = 14), tended to believe that immature children would benefit from retention. Edson suggested that the explanation for this difference could be found in Smith and Shepard's observation that interactionists would retain children only if they believed that first grade teachers could not accommodate them. Edson stated that all 14 interactionists in her study voiced this concern.

Unlike Smith and Shepard, Edson did not examine a possible relationship between belief type and retention rates.

Tomchin and Impara (1992) employed a multimethod approach using both quantitative and qualitative methods to gain insight into 135 teachers' beliefs about retention in Grades K-7, focusing on Grades 4-7. Their quantitative findings are included in the discussion on survey findings.

In the qualitative phase, Tomchin and Impara conducted interviews with a purposive sample of 15 "high-" and "low-retaining" Grade 4-7 teachers.

Tomchin and Impara identified four different "belief sets" related to retention. Features distinguishing the four belief sets were reasons for student failure, anticipated consequences of retention, factors influencing retention decisions, and responsibilities of teachers to remediate student problems.

The four teacher types consisted of "antiretentionists," who opposed all retentions in the upper grades, "remediationists" and "standard-bearers," who approved of retention under some conditions, and "work-ethic moralists," who upheld the principle of promotion based on merit.

Comparing ranges of average retentions per year, Tomchin and Impara cautiously noted that work-ethic moralists retained more students each year than did teachers in the other categories.

Graue (1993) investigated the concept of "readiness" and its educational implications from a Vygotskian social constructivist perspective. Her data collection procedures involved parent, teacher, and student interviews, participant observation, and document analysis.

Graue contrasted her ethnographic study of the meanings of "readiness" in three different communities with Smith and Shepard's earlier research. Graue considered that, whereas Smith and Shepard's study focused on the individual teacher working within various types of school structures, her study focused on the social contexts that "shape the interactions" (p. 237) of the individual teacher.

In comparing informal school structures, however, Graue indicated that her findings were similar to Smith and Shepard's low-retaining and high-retaining schools.

Like the low-retaining schools in Smith and Shepard's study, one school described by Graue tended to hold an interventionist approach to readiness, characterized by staff collaboration and program continuity.

In contrast, a second school was similar to Smith and Shepard's high-retaining schools in following an age-based maturational model of readiness with red-shirting and retention. Academic standards were based on the performance of older students and younger, working class students tended to be perceived as "at-risk."

The third school studied by Graue had a different informal structure than the other two. Staff appeared committed to the avoidance of retention and the development of flexible performance standards. It had also evolved a separate conception of readiness for its bilingual students.

Based on her findings, Graue concluded that delayed entry, extra-year programs, raised entry age, and readiness screening are "legacies of the child characteristic orientation to readiness" whose purpose is to make "school easier for teachers and children by making students more ready" (p. 264).

In Graue's opinion, these strategies are unsuccessful because they are based on incorrect assumptions about readiness; she advocated a reconceptualization of the construct "readiness," focusing on the local meaning of readiness from the perspectives of the participants. Graue concluded that the social constructivist view of readiness has significant implications for reconceptualizing educational theory and practice.

The results of several descriptive surveys reporting teacher attitudes toward retention revealed a number of consistent findings. Methodological problems limited the utility of some of the surveys, however. For example, sample size and nonrandom selection presented problems for generalizing the findings of Faerber & Van Dusseldorp (1984). Additionally, from a design perspective, the surveys ranged from use of a single questionnaire instrument (Bell, 1985) to a multimethod approach (Tomchin & Impara, 1992), which combined a questionnaire with interviews, simulation exercises, document analysis, and direct observation. Only Tanner and Comb's findings were based on a national, randomly drawn sample. Keeping in mind these limitations, the consistent findings are presented below.

First, the majority of surveyed teachers accepted retention as an appropriate school practice (Austin Independent School District, 1983; Bell, 1985; Biegler & Gillis, 1985; Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986; Faerber & Van Dusseldorp, 1984; Haack, 1984/1985; Manley, 1988/1989; Tanner & Combs, 1993; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Manley (1988/1989) also found that older teachers had stronger attitudes toward retention whether these attitudes were positive or negative. She offered no explanation for this finding, however.

Second, in surveys comparing attitudes of groups, teachers indicated more support for retention than did parents (Austin Independent School District, 1983; Brynes & Yamamoto, 1986) or administrators (Bell, 1985; Patterson, 1996). For example, Patterson (1996) found a significant difference between principals and teachers randomly sampled from 11 southern states regarding their perceptions of the effects of retention in Grades K-5. Principals indicated that retention hindered student performance whereas teachers considered it beneficial for at-risk students. Only in Byrnes and Yamamoto's (1986) survey was the percentage of teachers who indicated that children should "usually" or "always" be retained (65%) exceeded by the percentage of principals (74%) giving the same responses.

Third, in surveys that compared attitudes of kindergarten-primary and upper elementary teachers, the former group indicated more support for retention than did the latter (Faerber & Van Dusseldorp, 1984; Pomplun, 1988). Additionally, primary teachers were more likely to recommend retention when basic skills at a particular grade level had not been mastered (Brynes & Yamamoto, 1986; Faerber & Van Dusseldorp, 1984; Tanner & Combs, 1993; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Tomchin and Impara (1992) suggest this last finding could be attributed to K-3 teachers' perception that retention may provide a solid foundation in basic skills necessary for future school achievement. Surveys of primary grade teachers conducted by Haack (1984/1985) and Manley (1988/1989) provide further support for this interpretation. Respondents in both surveys most frequently cited insufficient academic progress as the most important reason for retaining students.

Fourth, teachers of all elementary levels were more accepting of the use of retention in Grades K-3 than in the upper grades (Biegler & Gillis, 1985; Pomplun, 1988; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). This finding implies a degree of teacher acceptance for the notion that "the younger, the better, for retaining children."

Consistent with Smith and Shepard's (1988) finding, the majority of surveyed teachers considered that retention does not damage a young child's self-esteem (Bell, 1985; Biegler & Gillis, 1985; Faerber & Van Dusseldorp, 1984; Manley, 1988/1989; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Other research focusing on the self-reports of young retained children has rendered this shared teacher perception somewhat contentious, however. For example, Pomplun's (1988) retained primary subjects rated their retained year significantly more favorably than did their older counterparts. Reynolds (1992)

found that retained primary children perceived themselves to be significantly more competent than did promoted controls. In contrast, Byrnes' (1989) interviews indicated that retained primary students perceived retention as a punishment and stigma rather than as a positive event intended to help them.

A final similarity in findings is the degree to which kindergarten-primary teachers attribute importance to "immaturity" as a factor in retention decisions. "Developmental immaturity," "emotional immaturity," "social immaturity," or similar term was identified as an important reason for retention. Interview comments indicated a prevalent belief that an extra year's placement would provide "immature" students with an opportunity to develop (Biegler & Gillis, 1985; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Tanner and Combs (1993) found a statistically significant main effect for grade level on their cluster of items concerning the rationale that retention provides time to mature and grow. While both Grade 1 and Grade 5 teachers agreed, significantly more first grade teachers did so. There was also a statistically significant difference between female teachers at the two grade levels. A significant number of first grade female teachers agreed that retention gives a student time to mature whereas fifth grade female teachers disagreed.

Three of the surveys requested that teachers identify alternatives to retention (Bell, 1985; Biegler & Gillis, 1985; Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986). Byrnes and Yamamoto's Grade 1-3 teachers most often selected the option of "smaller classes/more individualized instruction," as an alternative to retention. Biegler and Gillis' (1985) K-3 teacher interviewees favored a "continuous learning program"; that is, they referred to retention as "continuing" with a program rather than as a "failure" or other negative term. Kindergarten teachers in Bell's (1985) survey most often named "transition class" as the most "desirable" alternative. It could be argued, however, that this choice does not represent a "true" alternative to retention since it involves an additional year's kindergarten placement. Indirect reference to teachers' selection of alternative practices is made in Smith's (1989) discussion of the types of interventions proposed by nonnativist teachers.

Further research is necessary in order to demonstrate a relationship between choice of alternative practices and teachers' beliefs about human development, however. For example, are teachers classified as "nativist" more or less likely to recommend "transitional maturity classes" or other options which, strictly speaking, are variations of retention?

## Teacher Utilization of Research

Green and Kvidahl (1990) suggested several ways in which knowledge and application of research can contribute to both the professional development of the individual teacher and to the professionalism of teaching. For example, an understanding of research enables a teacher to evaluate the products of research and to identify their applications and limitations, to gain greater understanding of the school as a workplace, and to develop a "technical core of teaching." Research also provides a counterpoint against which teachers can compare their personal understanding and experiences. According to Green and Kvidahl, accountability to the public has increased the need for research-based teaching and learning strategies.

Despite these apparent advantages, several studies (Garrison & Macmillan, 1987; Green & Kvidahl, 1990; Kennedy, 1997; Malouf & Schiller, 1995; McDonough & McDonough, 1990; Zeuli, 1994; Zeuli & Tiezzi, 1993) have suggested an antipathy toward research on the part of teachers.

Green and Kvidahl (1990) found that teachers with advanced degrees, those who had completed a research methods course and those who had been involved in collaborative research projects displayed more favourable attitudes toward utilization of research than did teachers in general. In contrast, Zeuli and Tiezzi (1993) concluded that "teachers' educational credentials, in general, were less associated with broader, more flexible beliefs about the influence of research" (p. 6).

Numerous explanations for the apparent underutilization of educational research by teachers have been suggested.

In Tyler's (1988) opinion, for example, "the most common factor" found historically is practitioners' belief that research innovations are irrelevant to their practical problems. Eventually, however, "one or more innovative practitioners" become aware of relevant research and independently test it out. Another problem is the lack of tradition for researcher-practitioner collaboration. This is the case because teachers and researchers have separate reference groups. According to Tyler, an additional problem is that educational innovations have been stimulated mainly by movements, such as the Montessori movement, rather than by the systematic analysis of specific problems.

McDonough and McDonough (1990) discussed both conceptual and practical problems associated with teachers' utilization of research findings.

On a conceptual level, McDonough and McDonough stated that the "classical" deductive paradigm for empirical research itself tends to perpetuate the dichotomy between theory and practice. Firstly, the "top-down" approach to research tends to view teachers as the recipients of information; consequently, teachers may feel uninvolved and unfamiliar with researchers' terms of reference. Secondly, teachers are concerned with dynamic learning processes and interactions whereas such processes are treated as "finished products" in a top-down research paradigm. Thirdly, using research on applied linguistics as an example, much research reveals unfamiliarity with actual teaching; this unfamiliarity often results in researchers' reluctance to establish explicit "linking premises (Phillips, 1980)" that would demonstrate the relevance and applicability of empirical findings.

On a practical level, McDonough and McDonough identified difficulties associated with teachers' ability, "both conceptually and physically," to access much research literature. They summarized these difficulties as follows:

> It is not easy to find or understand the research bearing on the question you are interested in: it is often couched in difficult language, conducted in situations that are not immediately familiar or relevant, presented using complex statistical devices, and hidden in publications of low circulation. (p. 107)

To explain why many teachers experience difficulty understanding empirical research literature, Green and Kvidahl (1990) pointed out that research methods are usually not part of undergraduate training programs; accordingly, many teachers do not possess the necessary skills to understand, interpret or conduct research. Furthermore, research skills are not generally considered prerequisite "survival techniques" for preservice teachers. Like McDonough and McDonough, Green and Kvidahl commented on the necessity of drawing explicit links between research and everyday classroom life. Green and Kvidahl suggested that this could be accomplished in research methods courses at undergraduate and graduate levels.

In contrast to Green and Kvidahl, Zeuli (1994) considered that teachers have many opportunities to read and discuss research in both their preservice and inservice careers.

Interviews with 13 teachers led Zeuli to conclude that teachers' beliefs about educational research exert strong influence in their understanding and use of research. He suggested that teachers' descriptions about how they read research is consistent with their beliefs about how research should influence their teaching. That is, if teachers believe research should have a direct impact, they evaluate a study solely in terms of the applicability of its findings to their own practice. However, if teachers believe research should have a more indirect impact in terms of informing their understanding of teaching, they read research more analytically and critically.

Considering the small sample size and the individual differences in teachers' conceptions of research reported by Zeuli, it could be argued that his conclusion was

rather sweeping:

> The data in this paper suggest that how many teachers read research may be no more enlightened than any consumer's approach to and interest in information that provides answers for areas in which they have little or no specialized knowledge. The problem is twofold. It is not simply what teachers read - as Frazier and his colleagues pointed out in their time - but more importantly the manner in which they read it. (p. 53)

The influence of teachers' prior beliefs and values on their reading of research literature was the focus of Kennedy's (1997) study of approximately 100 teachers, all of whom were engaged in some type of continuing education or professional development project that involved research.

Kennedy's original hypothesis was that teachers must engage in a three-step process if they are to derive any information from a research study. First, they must understand the "main message" of the study; second, they must test the validity of its message in some way; third, they must connect the message to their own practice.

Kennedy found that teachers used essentially the same criteria for evaluating the five different types of research studies on language arts topics to which they were asked to respond; these included a survey, an experiment, a disciplinary study, an historical analysis, and a teacher's personal reflection.

Teachers' most frequently used criterion for testing the validity of the authors' conclusions was their own values, beliefs, or experiences (which was also found by Zeuli and Tiezzi, 1993). This finding caused Kennedy to revise her initial assumption that teachers' making connections between a study and their own practice was the third step in the process described above; it appeared, rather, that teachers were already connecting the study to their own practice, even at the validity-testing stage.

As far as connecting the research studies to their own practice was concerned, Kennedy's data indicated that 18% of respondents considered that the studies had no influence, compared to 4%, who considered that they provided new information; 26% of respondents indicated that the studies validated their existing beliefs compared to 32%, who considered that they stimulated their thinking or challenged their beliefs, and to 20%, who considered the studies suggested new goals or changes in practice.

The influence of teachers' prior values and experiences was also demonstrated by Kennedy's finding that teachers who used their beliefs and experiences to evaluate the validity of an author's conclusions were more likely to give idiosyncratic reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with a study (14%) than were teachers who used the evidence presented in the study as their evaluation criterion (2%).

Zeuli and Tiezzi 's (1993) review of the literature revealed three distinct teacher conceptions about research.

The most prevalent teacher view rejects research as irrelevant, impractical, trivial, difficult to understand, replete with jargon, fragmented, too theoretical, contradictory, and self-serving to researchers. The second, less prevalent, teacher conception involves the belief in the scientific authority of research and the perception that research findings may be used to provide techniques and strategies, that is, "how-to's," which have immediate practical application. Teachers holding this second conception apparently exhibit a tendency to accept research conclusions uncritically and a disinclination to conduct research of their own. The third, least prevalent, view is that research provides ideas and information that can illuminate or inform practice. Teachers holding this view presumably display the opposite tendencies as those holding the second.

Zeuli and Tiezzi found that 46% of their sample of 13 teachers most closely identified with a vignette of a hypothetical teacher who typified the second conception of research described above, 38.5% with a vignette typifying the third conception, and 15.5% with a vignette typifying the first conception. This finding would tend to contradict their claim that the first teacher conception of research described above is

most prevalent.

As indicated at the beginning of the section on teacher utilization of research, Zeuli and Tiezzi found no significant differences in conceptions of research related to differences in teaching or research experience, leading them to question the influence of "cursory" graduate research methods courses in changing teachers' beliefs about its value.

Zeuli (1994) suggested that one way to enhance the educative value of research is to provide teachers with descriptions of theoretical frameworks that underlie research paradigms. In contrast, Garrison and Macmillan (1987) contended that it is precisely the *lack* of underlying theory that inhibits the conversion of educational research into practice.

According to Garrison and Macmillan, there must be a "clash" between intuitive, experientially based "theories" of teachers and objective research-based theories of teaching if research is to be converted into practice. In their opinion, most educational research is nontheoretical. Being provided with isolated facts or findings does not help teachers to develop or to challenge their personal "theories", however; it actually results in ". . . subjectively reasonable theories supported by objective facts subjectively interpreted. In other words, a great deal of nonsense and confusion" (p. 38).

From a different perspective, McAninch (1993) considered that teachers' epistemological orientation may partly explain their underutilization of research.

Extrapolating from Freidson's (1970) study of "everyday" physicians and their working conditions, McAninch used the term "clinical consciousness" to describe the world view held by teachers. Clinical consciousness is characterized by an orientation to action, a faith in the efficacy of one's actions, a reliance on firsthand experience in decision-making, a "crudely" pragmatic approach to problem-solving, and a "distrust" of generalization. Acting on the basis of this mind set does not imply that practitioners are "unscientific" or "irrational" as some researchers have charged, however. Rather, McAninch considered that it is the task of a practitioner to ". . . interpret a concrete case and determine what needs to be done. This sort of problem demands a different type of rationality than that which has been associated with inquiry in the natural sciences" (p. 5).

In McAninch's opinion, past research has indicated that clinical consciousness is characteristic of "at least a significant portion of teachers" (p. 8). McAninch argued further that student self-selection, as well as pre- and inservice contexts perpetuate this individualistic, subjectivist orientation. One consequence is that secondhand sources of knowledge are considered irrelevant. This accounts for the perpetuation of practices challenged by research and the delayed impact of research-based innovations. As well as placing great responsibility on the individual teacher, self-reliance is associated with a high risk of inferential error. Furthermore, clinically minded teachers are likely to act on the basis of unexamined ideological beliefs, which may inadvertently perpetuate social inequalities.

McAninch's last assertion is pertinent to the issue of grade retention. As discussed in the section on predictors of retention, some researchers have voiced objection to retention as a discriminatory practice.

Malouf and Schiller (1995) identified factors in teachers' work environments that are not conducive to implementation of research. These factors include externally imposed curricula and materials, relative isolation, increased workloads, ambiguous educational goals, and limited time and resources:

> The U.S. education system is paradoxical and ineffective in its approaches to knowledge dissemination and innovation. The linear model of information flow is compatible with the traditional administrative structure of schools, which favors centralized authority and the separation of leadership functions from teaching (Wasley, 1991) and which views information as originating outside the schools (e.g., in university-based research programs) and being delivered in a

> top-down process to teachers (Cohen, 1988). However, the system in which this centralized, top-down information flow must occur is in actuality complex, fragmented, uncoordinated, and subject to frequent changes in priorities and mandates (Louis, 1992), with preservice training that is brief, "subprofessional," and divorced from practice (Huberman, 1983) and inservice staff development programs that are politically weak and programmatically marginal (Little, 1984). Meaningful change often requires a minimum of 3-5 years of sustained effort (Loucks-Horsley & Roody, 1990), a level and duration of effort seldom found in education. (p. 419)

Despite their criticism of American public education, Malouf and Schiller's review of studies indicated that teachers were receptive to research-based innovations. Teacher attitudes to change were improved as a result of the successful use of new practices and procedures that helped them assimilate innovations into their existing belief systems. As an example, Malouf and Schiller cited Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman, and Schattman's (1993) study, which described the "transforming" experiences of general education teachers involved in an inclusion program. Giangreco et al. apparently found that the placement of severely disabled children in regular classrooms tended to engender more positive attitudes from the teachers about these students. This attitude "shift" was apparently facilitated by factors including shared framework and goals, the students' physical presence, validation of the teacher's efforts, and teamwork.

Citing Beyer and Trice's (1982) synthesis of relevant studies, Hultman and Hörberg (1995) stated that research is "definitely utilized," although not necessarily for the purpose or in the manner originally intended. Hultman and Hörberg made the general observation that utilization occurs gradually within an organizational-political context. In their opinion, utilization can have the following effects:

> Utilization sometimes leads to new actions; sometimes it legitimizes what has already been carried out. It supports one's own interests and obstructs others; it is usually used incompletely; and people like results that support their own positions and dislike those contrary to their own interests. (p. 343)

Hultman and Hörberg stated further that schools are not homogeneous. Rather, they are "multicultural social systems" that exist "in an environment with an external pressure of expectations and an intraorganizational environment of frames, values, and traditions, which create a special situation in each school" (p. 349). This perspective calls into question the assumption that research-based innovations can be implemented uniformly.

One alternative to the linear model with its separation of researcher and practitioner roles has been the "action research" approach. According to Belanger (1992), the concept of "teacher as researcher" has received a "moderate but consistent" interest in educational publications for the past four decades, particularly during the mid-1980s with the teacher empowerment movement and growing acceptance of qualitative methods. Belanger's review of action research indicated that the scope of research projects conducted by teacher-researchers have ranged from longitudinal national projects and establishment of graduate research communities, such as at the University of Calgary, to short-term observations by teachers in their own classrooms. The majority of these published projects involved collaborations between classroom teachers and university professors.

While the general literature provides insight into factors that enhance or militate against teacher utilization of research, teachers' knowledge and valuing of research relevant to retention has not been well-documented.

## Teacher Awareness and Attitudes About Retention Research

Regarding the effects of kindergarten retention, Smith (1989) suggested that research evidence may either not be accessible to kindergarten teachers or, based on their underlying set of beliefs, is perceived as not applicable. Likewise, Bell (1985) speculated that kindergarten teachers are either unaware or apparently uninfluenced by research evidence on the effects of retention.

Edson (1990) also found that research on retention was uninfluential in her informants' decision-making. She based this conclusion on the finding that none of her 21 informants substantiated their approval of retention by citing or referring to research. Seven teachers were acquainted with general themes in the literature. Most revealed little knowledge about retention research, although "many" appeared curious about it. Knowledgeable teachers were apparently unconcerned that retention is generally viewed with disfavour by researchers. Some teachers apparently expressed anger that research did not support their perspective on retention, however.

Edson speculated that kindergarten teachers' decision-making operates within an individual case context that disregards the generalized findings of researchers. In this regard, she expressed the opinion that "given the issues surrounding the application of general research findings to individual cases, perhaps disregarding generalized research is a sensible practice, because general findings cannot inform specific decisions" (p. 173).

Tanner and Combs (1993) surveyed a randomly selected, national sample of first and fifth grade American teachers' attitudes toward retention. Their premise was that cumulative research has concluded that research is a "questionable practice." Tanner and Combs assumed further that if teacher perceptions were found to be "in line with" research, then "the facts about retention are well known and believed" (p. 70).

Their results indicated that the majority of teachers supported retention on three of five clusters of items, for mastery of subject matter (58.8%), for providing extra time for immature students (76.2%), and for creating homogeneous classes (53.4%). Respondents' opinions were almost equally divided about the relationship between retention and self-concept, with 50.6% agreeing that retention is harmful to self-concept; 71% disagreed that the threat of retention provides motivation.

Tanner and Comb's first conclusion was that "... teachers' beliefs about retention were not related to knowledge of educational research on the topic" (p. 75).

Their second conclusion was that

> unfortunately, the bulk of literature on the subject of retention is apparently not produced and obviously not consumed by the persons who make the decisions to retain the young child. Here the gap between research and practice is evident. Either the message of research is not reaching teachers, or it is reaching them and they don't believe the findings. Research findings must be effectively, efficiently and clearly communicated to teachers, educational policy makers, and prospective educators. (p. 75)

However, it is uncertain whether any item on their questionnaire directly asked teachers about their knowledge of research or its importance as a factor in promotional decisions.

Horm-Wingerd, Carella, and Warford's (1993) study of first grade teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of transition classes revealed "overwhelming" support for transition classes regardless of the demographic backgrounds of the teachers.

These researchers considered that this level of support was in direct contrast with the negative findings reported in the literature. They offered a number of reasons for the widespread support of transition classes.

First, they cited an earlier study by Carella (1990) in which 67% of the sampled teachers reported not using professional journals as a means of keeping up-to-date. Second, they noted Carella's previously cited study as well as studies by Kottkamp,

Provenzo, and Cohn (1986) and Powell and Stremmel (1989), which indicated that early childhood educators relied on colleagues to keep up-to-date on professional issues; Horm-Wingerd et al. considered that while such collegiality may promote a positive work environment, it may also limit teachers' exposure to external sources of information. Fourth, they noted Vail's (1989) observation that teachers and other school personnel often communicate positive testimonials in favour of transition programs to other colleagues.

Furthermore, Horm-Wingerd et al. noted that only 1% of their surveyed teachers belonged to an early childhood professional organization such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children, which has disseminated literature critical of extra-year programs. They also noted that many of the conferences attended by their respondents were "profit-type lectures" rather than research-oriented, nonprofit presentations.

Horm-Wingerd et al. attributed their findings to a "lack of communication between the primary school practitioners and the early childhood research community" (p. 130). However, their findings provide only indirect evidence that early childhood practitioners are unaware of relevant research.

In fact, only one study was reviewed in which teachers' beliefs about retention were measured before and after discussion of relevant research (Doyle, 1989). Only one study was reviewed in which teachers were questioned directly about their knowledge of relevant research (Biegler & Gillis, 1985). Fifty-six percent of parents and 46% of teachers in Biegler and Gillis' sample ($N = 204$) were undecided whereas 92% of administrators disagreed that research indicates beneficial effects of retention for students with academic and social problems. Biegler and Gillis conducted only eight follow-up interviews with teachers. The three kindergarten and Division 1 teachers in this sample indicated that they were unfamiliar with research.

Yet, as Tanner and Combs stated, the extent to which teachers are knowledgeable about relevant research and are influenced by it has implications for both preservice teacher preparation (Haberman & Dill, 1993) and inservice professional development (Clark, 1992). Furthermore, Norton (1990) has argued that it is particularly important that parents be made aware of literature on retention to enable them to make the best informed educational decisions.

Further research, in which teachers are directly asked about their knowledge and attitudes towards research on retention, is necessary to shed more light onto this issue.

## Summary

Using Tomchin and Impara's (1992) overview of retention research as a framework, three "strands" of research in the literature on retention were reviewed. These strands consisted of research on the effects/effectiveness of retention, its relationship to early school leaving, and predictors of retention.

While a substantial body of research has accumulated concerning these three aspects of retention, there appears to be a fourth strand emerging in the retention literature. Beginning with Smith and Shepard's collaborations (1988, 1989) and including several descriptive surveys on teacher attitudes, this fourth strand concerns the role that teacher beliefs play in retention practices. Compared to the other three strands, research interest in this aspect of retention is the most recent and is thus the least substantial in volume.

Malouf and Schiller (1995) have noted that during the last decade the general education literature has reflected a growing interest in the practice of teaching. This interest is reflected in a growing body of literature on topics such as the dynamics of teacher development and change, processes of organizational development, the nature and use of knowledge in education, and the influence of teacher attitudes and beliefs on practice. Doyle (1989) and Pajares (1992) are two commentators who have stressed the importance of further research of teacher beliefs For example, Doyle (1989) has

voiced the opinion that "we do not seem to have advanced very far during the last century in our understanding of the formation of conviction and its role in behavior. Perhaps more of our research efforts should be inclined in this direction" (p. 219).

One aspect of retention that is not clearly understood is whether teachers are aware of research on its effects/effectiveness. Despite criticism about research design and methodology, the preponderance of the research literature does not find in favour of retention as an educational practice. Furthermore, even if teachers are aware of extant research literature, do they consider aggregate findings relevant when they make individual promotional decisions?

In response to the above two questions, researchers in a small number of previous studies have assumed or hypothesized that teachers are either unaware of research on retention or consider it irrelevant. However, only one study was reviewed (Biegler & Gillis, 1985) in which teachers were asked directly about their knowledge of research.

The general literature indicates that teachers underutilize research findings in their practice. A number of possible explanations were suggested for this. One purpose of this study was to provide further insight into the reasons why kindergarten teachers do or do not regard the findings of empirical research important when making promotional decisions.

# CHAPTER 3

# METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the purpose, assumptions, and procedures of data collection and analysis used in both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study.

The study consisted of two phases: first, the collection of quantitative data through kindergarten teacher responses to a kindergarten retention questionnaire and, second, the collection of qualitative data through follow-up personal interviews with selected respondents.

## The Purpose of the Present Study

The main purpose of the study was to increase understanding of the relationship between kindergarten teachers' beliefs about child development and their promotional practices. Specifically, it examined the extent to which "nativism" (as defined by Smith and Shepard, 1988) constitutes a philosophy of child development held by kindergarten teachers. It also examined the relationship between"nativist" belief and promotional practice. In addition, it provided information about teachers' knowledge of research literature and their perception of its relative importance in their promotional decision-making. Finally, it sought to determine whether nativist teachers may be distinguished from nonnativist teachers regarding the types of educational strategies they favour for students they consider to be "unready" for first grade.

## Major Research Question

To what extent is nativist belief regarding child development related to the practice of retaining kindergarten students?

## Minor Research Questions

1. To what extent does nativism constitute a philosophy of child development held by kindergarten teachers?
2. Are kindergarten teachers knowledgeable about research on the effects/effectiveness of kindergarten retention?
3. Do nativist and nonnativist teachers differ on the degree to which research on kindergarten retention is important in their decisions to retain students?
4. Is there a relationship between nativist belief and preferred management strategies for "unready" children?

## Method and Procedures

### Sample Design and Size

The study population consisted of Early Childhood Services (ECS) centres located in the geographical area designated as Zone 3 on the most recent listing of Alberta School Jurisdictions (Alberta Education, December 6, 1995). Zone 3 was selected for study because it provided a cross-section of urban, small urban, and rural public and private centres.

The sampling frame for the study consisted of a listing of Public and Non-Public ECS Teacher Counts as of January 19th, 1996, prepared by the Teacher Certification and Development Branch of Alberta Education. This sampling frame provided the most recent tally of all public and private ECS centres currently providing kindergarten programmes in Zone 3 in the province of Alberta with the number of ECS teachers per

centre. The kindergarten teacher(s) in each centre constituted the primary sampling unit.

With regard to sample size in quantitative studies, Best and Kahn (1993) have recommended larger samples of survey-type studies than for experimental studies for two related reasons. First, a large sample is necessary if comparisons are to be made among subgroups. Second, mailed questionnaire studies typically have a low percentage of responses. Thus, a larger initial sample mailing appeared indicated for the quantitative phase of the study. Accordingly, it was decided to sample the entire listing of public and private ECS teachers in Zone 3.

In qualitative studies, this sampling procedure is analogous to "comprehensive sampling" (Goetz & Lecompte, 1984, cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994), which refers to the sampling of every case, instance, or element in a given population.

Sampling strategies used in the qualitative phase of the study are discussed in Chapter 5.

## Methodological Assumptions of the Study

Based on the rationale suggested by Goodwin and Goodwin (1996), which was described in Chapter 1, a research design that combined both quantitative and qualitative data collection was used in order to gain a deeper understanding of kindergarten teachers' beliefs about child development and retention.

A quantitative instrument, a four-part questionnaire, was developed. It is described in more detail in the following section.

Qualitative data was collected in semistructured follow-up interviews with teachers. All informants had voluntarily consented to participate in a possible follow-up interview. This sample was purposefully drawn to represent teachers who held contrasting views on kindergarten retention. It consisted of 6 teachers who supported the practice of kindergarten retention and 5 teachers who were critical of kindergarten retention based on their questionnaire responses. Sample selection criteria are discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

## Instruments

### The Kindergarten Retention Questionnaire

A kindergarten retention questionnaire was designed to gather information about teacher beliefs concerning child development and kindergarten retention. A copy of the questionnaire is found in Appendix B.

The questionnaire was designed to provide answers to the following questions:

To what extent do respondents agree with statements about child development and kindergarten retention that are indicative of nativist belief?
Is there a relationship between nativist belief and number of recommendations for retention?
Is there a relationship between nativism and types of strategies favoured for students who are experiencing difficulties?
Are kindergarten teachers knowledgeable about research on the effects/effectiveness of kindergarten retention?
Is there a relationship between nativism and relative importance of research findings as a factor in promotional decisions?

The questionnaire was a four-part survey instrument consisting of both closed- and open-ended items. The first three parts consisted of a 4-point rating scale of Likert-like items arranged in a matrix question format suggested by Babbie (1995). The fourth part of the questionnaire solicited personal demographic information including the respondent's total number of years of teaching experience and number of years of

kindergarten teaching experience, the respondent's estimate of the number of recommendations for kindergarten retention made during the preceding 4 school years as well as an estimate of the number of children in the current school year who might benefit from retention. In addition, the questionnaire asked teachers to briefly describe any existing policy regarding kindergarten retention and to add any relevant comments on this topic. It also directly asked teachers if they considered educational research on kindergarten retention when they made promotional decisions and to explain their response.

**Item selection.** Review of the literature provided the basis for item selection. The statements in the first section of the questionnaire represented a compilation of statements regarding child development, school readiness, and kindergarten retention made by members of the Gesell Institute, the agency most closely identified with the maturationalist philosophy (Ames, 1967; Ames et al., 1985; Ilg, Ames, & Baker, 1981; Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986) as well as statements from previous questionnaires, including a statement about kindergarten retention (Bell, 1985) and statements relating to contextual factors such as school policy (Bell, 1985; Biegler & Gillis, 1985; Edson, 1990; Faerber & Van Dusseldorp, 1984; Haack, 1984/1985; Manley, 1988/1989; Tanner & Combs, 1993; Tomchin & Impara, 1992).

Cumulatively, the Gesellian literature-based statements were intended to provide an index of the variable, "nativism," which Smith and Shepard (1988) have defined as the belief in ". . . the development of school readiness as an internal, organismic process unrelated to environmental intervention" (p. 314).

Smith and Shepard's definition is compatible with Ames, et al.'s (1985) statement of the Gesellian philosophy of child development:

> As Dr. Gesell himself used to say, "Behavior is a function of structure." What this means is that people tend to behave as they do largely as a result of the kinds of bodies they have inherited and the stage of development those bodies have reached.
>
> Behavior develops, to a large extent, in a patterned, predictable way. Just as it is possible to predict the stages a person's *body* will go through as he grows older, so to a very large extent it is possible to predict the stages that *behavior* will go through. And these stages are only slightly influenced by what you do or do not do to the child. (p. 67, italics in original)

In the first section of the questionnaire (Question 1), agreement with the 2nd, 4th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 13th, 15th, 16th, 17th, and 19th statements relating to kindergarten and kindergarten retention and disagreement with the 1st, 9th, 14th, and 20th statements provided indicators of nativist belief. The latter statements were negatively reworded to produce statements contrary to Gesellian belief. The rationale for this was to reduce the possibility of some respondents' forming a "response-set," which Babbie (1995) cautioned is possible if the set of statements in a matrix format appear to follow a particular orientation.

Table 1 reports the original assertions about child development, school readiness, and kindergarten retention made by followers of the Gesellian orientation and their sources.

Table 1

Statements about Kindergarten Readiness and Success based on Gesellian Principles

| Statement | Source |
|---|---|
| Retention will not stifle a child's desire to learn. | Ames, 1967, p. 24 |
| The older child has a better chance of success. | Ames, 1967, p. 10<br>Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986, p. 11 |
| Retention is more effective in kindergarten than in other grades. | Ames, 1967, p. 22;<br>Ames, Gillespie, & Streff, 1985, p. 168<br>Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986, p. 15 |
| The best way to prevent failure is to hold the unready child out of school for a year. | Ames, 1967, p. 77<br>Ames et al., 1985, p. 81<br>Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986, p. 15 |
| Students with identified special needs should not be considered for retention. | Scott & Ames, 1969, p. 434 |
| A child who is significantly smaller than others the same age is a suitable candidate for retention. | Ames, 1967, p. 63<br>Ames et al., 1985, p. 158 |
| Children should be assessed for kindergarten readiness. | Ames, 1967, pp. 4, 11, 69<br>Ilg, Ames, & Baker, 1981, p. 238<br>Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986, p. 14 |
| Retention is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up. | Ames, 1967, pp. 24, 103 |
| Immature children who are promoted do not do as well as those who are retained. | Ames, 1967, p. 6<br>Ames et al., 1985, p. 136<br>Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986, p. 11 |
| Retention is an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in grade one. | Ames, 1967, pp. 24, 143 |
| Neurological maturity is more important than a stimulating home environment for success. | Ames, 1967, p. 17<br>Ames et al., 1985, p. 6 |
| It is more important to make sure that a child is ready to meet classroom expectations than to shift the whole curriculum downwards to meet the child's maturity level. | Ames, 1967, p. 5 |
| Developmental tests are helpful in deciding whether to retain a student. | Ames, 1967, pp. 69, 139 |
| Children should be retained. | Ames, 1967, pp. 30, 37<br>Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986, p. 15 |

With regard to the second minor research question concerning teachers' knowledge of research on the effectiveness of kindergarten retention, the first section of the questionnaire also contains items in which respondents are asked for their agreement with statements that "research indicates the significant benefits of kindergarten retention," "research indicates that repeating is not emotionally harmful to a kindergarten child," and "research indicates that retention should be discouraged at the kindergarten level."

According to Ames (1967), Ames et al. (1985), Ilg et al. (1981), Scott & Ames, (1969), and Uphoff & Gilmore (1986), research studies carried out by members of the Gesell Institute and its followers demonstrate positive academic and emotional benefits from kindergarten retention particularly for children who are "developmentally unready." For example, without citing their sources, Uphoff and Gilmore state that "many researchers believe that the earlier in school a child repeats a grade, the greater the chances for long-range success" (p. 15).

Responses to the three research statements provide not only an indication of teachers' knowledge of retention research, but also their agreement/disagreement with the nativist interpretation of research results.

The last question on the instrument specifically asks respondents to state whether or not they consider educational research on kindergarten retention when they make promotional decisions and to explain their reasons for this.

In the second section of the questionnaire (Question 3), respondents are asked to judge the importance of a number of factors, one of which is educational research, when they make a decision to promote or retain a child. Like the first part of the questionnaire, these factors represent a composite of Gesell Institute items and situational factors identified on the questionnaire instruments previously cited.

Maturationalists would be expected to attribute particular significance to factors that refer to the chronological age, size, social and emotional functioning of the *child* rather than to appropriateness or difficulty of curriculum content, instructional delivery methods, or other aspects of *programming*.

While proponents of the Gesellian approach do consider the possibility that inappropriate programming might contribute to a child's "unreadiness," they focus on the child's presumed developmental immaturity to master prescribed curriculum rather than the necessity of curriculum reform . For example, Ames (1967) states that

> curriculums admittedly do need to be improved. But since the body of knowledge which must be covered in the schools today is greater than ever, it now seems to us more realistic and effective to work on the *other* variable - the child's ability to perform. . . . [The] best solution, rather than shifting the whole curriculum downward to meet the child's immaturity, would be to check and see that each child was ready for what each of the various grades demands. (p. 5, italics in original)

Twenty-eight years later, Uphoff (1995) contends that curriculum reformers are "out of touch" with the current financial situation in public education:

> Few significant changes in educational policy happen quickly, and pressing teachers to make the changes right away is particularly ineffective. . . . In particular, teachers in this country have precious little power to change the curriculum. (p. 39)

Focusing on attributes of the child, Ames (1967) attributes two causes of unreadiness for the expectations of a given grade. The first, more obvious, cause is chronological youngness in relationship to legal school entry. The second, more insidious, cause is "immaturity," which Ames defines as a child's being "too young in behavior even though theoretically old enough in years" (p. 16).

Ames states that immaturity is not a pejorative term, but is "a warning that a

child is growing a little more slowly than the average and thus needs a little extra time to do his growing" (p. 17). Suggested methods for providing this "extra time for growth" are presented for teachers' consideration in the third section of the questionnaire, as described below.

Respondents are asked to state their approval of several options to kindergarten retention in the third section of the questionnaire (Question 4).

In addition to repeating kindergarten, followers of the Gesellian orientation have advocated raising the kindergarten entry age, entry on the basis of developmental readiness testing, pre-Grade 1 class, "red-shirting," which Holloman (1990) described as holding chronologically young children out of school an additional year after eligibility, and prekindergarten classes for "unready" 5-year-olds (Ilg et al., 1981; Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986; Uphoff, 1995). The assumption underlying these recommendations is that homogeneous grouping on the basis of "maturity" and ability leads to more effective teaching and more successful school progress than does heterogeneous grouping (Ames, 1967).

Of particular concern to Gesellians is the so-called "birthday effect," which purportedly demonstrates that younger children are at greater risk for experiencing a variety of educational difficulties than are their older classmates. For example, Uphoff (1995) cites the findings of several studies, which he states demonstrate that younger children are "far more likely" to undergo adverse experiences including being retained, dropping out, being referred for special education testing and services, being diagnosed as learning disabled, being identified as discipline problems, receiving lower grades than would be expected from their achievement scores, lagging behind their older classmates in athletic and social skills, and committing suicide. To ameliorate these presumed age effects, Uphoff recommends delayed kindergarten entrance. In response to the criticism that this strategy will result only in the creation of a new "youngest" group, Uphoff states that the readiness and maturity of the entire class will be greater and, therefore, fewer children will require retention or special assistance.

In response, the Southern Regional Education Board (1994) has pointed out that although raising the school entry age may increase the average developmental level in a class, it does not reduce the developmental *range* of the students.

**Expert review.** To confirm that the statements, promotional factors, and options to kindergarten retention discussed above actually reflect nativist belief, Questions 1, 3, and 4 were reviewed by three experts, all of whom have Ph.D.s in early childhood education and are knowledgeable about philosophies of child development.

As will be discussed in Chapter 4, twelve statements which all three reviewers agreed were consistent with nativist belief were used to construct an aggregate nativist score; the aggregate nativist score was treated as the predictor variable in the inferential statistical tests.

**Feasibility pretesting and subsequent revisions.** Shortly before mailing in spring 1996 the questionnaire was pretested with a convenience sample of eight early childhood educators in an ECE graduate course in order to assess the clarity of wording of the items and to determine the approximate amount of time required for its completion. Based on comments received during and after the pretesting, the matrix format was simplified and some items were reworded.

For example, the original question concerning promotional factors appeared particularly problematic. First, the format of the question was confusing to some individuals in the pretest group. It was, therefore, reformatted. Second, it was suggested that the original wording ("To what extent are the following factors involved in a retention decision?") might be interpreted as implying that *all* respondents had considered retaining kindergarten students at some time during their teaching career, which is not necessarily the case. To account for possible instances of teachers who had never considered retaining a kindergarten student, a contingency question was added after the first question, requesting those teachers to skip to the question on

alternatives to repeating kindergarten. Third, the original wording was so general, that is, "To what extent are the following factors involved in a retention decision?", that it could be interpreted by some respondents as calling for a general, even speculative, response. The original wording was therefore changed to the more direct, "To what extent do you consider each of the following factors important when you make a retention decision?".

A final open-ended question was added at the end of the questionnaire to give respondents the opportunity to discuss their reference to educational research literature when making promotional decisions.

One significant suggestion that was adopted during the development phase was the elimination of a fifth (undecided) response category in Questions 1, 3, and 4. The rationale for this was to encourage respondents to choose one of the four response categories; this change was made in an attempt to minimize missing data.

**Procedure.** In early March 1996 a letter of introduction as well as a summary of the study and a copy of the questionnaire and interview protocol were sent to the superintendents of schools of the 19 school divisions in Zone 3 to request permission for kindergarten teachers to participate in the study. Where necessary, follow-up Faxes were sent in late March in order to obtain consent from superintendents.

Once permission was obtained, questionnaires were mailed to schools. A cover letter and copy of the superintendent's consent were directed to principals, requesting their cooperation in forwarding the questionnaire to their kindergarten staff.

Permission for teachers in private schools and privately operated ECS centres to participate was obtained by writing directly to the principal or ECE coordinator at each site, requesting their forwarding the enclosed covering letter and questionnaire to their kindergarten staff.

A cover letter enclosed to the kindergarten teacher(s) of each school or centre requested their cooperation in completing the questionnaire and assured confidentiality and anonymity of response. Each teacher was also asked to provide his or her name, address, and telephone number if willing to participate in a possible follow-up interview.

Letters of introduction and consent are found in Appendix A.

Questionnaires were received in the schools and private centres between early March and early April, a time when teachers generally make promotional considerations for the upcoming school year.

Questionnaires were mailed to reduce the possibility of data collector bias. They were coded to perform response bias check and to facilitate mailing a summary of results to participating centres, schools, and district offices. A copy of the summary of results and accompanying covering letters are found in Appendix D.

## Teacher Interview Protocol

In addition to a quantitative survey instrument, an interview protocol was developed to guide semistructured follow-up interviews with teachers. The purpose of the interviews was to explore further teachers' perceptions of the characteristics of kindergarten children considered for retention, its perceived effects, and the relationship of retention to teachers' views about child development and learning. The follow-up interviews were also intended to obtain further information about teachers' familiarity with research on kindergarten retention and the influence that this knowledge exerts on their promotional decisions. A copy of the interview protocol is found in Appendix C.

**Assumptions.** The rationale underlying the development of the interview protocol was Smith and Shepard's (1988) assumption that teachers' beliefs are best known by inference from their "case knowledge," that is, the tacit knowledge that teachers apply in specific situations within their immediate experience. Smith and

Shepard have stated that case knowledge is revealed in the form of narrative stories told in interviews. They have suggested a less direct approach than asking each teacher to state outright her philosophy of child development. Rather, they suggest framing a set of indirect questions, such as asking teachers to recall and describe specific children they considered unready for school and to speculate on the reasons for their unreadiness. Smith and Shepard have recommended that the interview agenda progress from indirect to direct questions on the assumption that the "most valid and least reactive data are those . . . expressed in the teacher's own words, prompted by neutral, fact-oriented questions and nondirective probes" (p. 311).

**Rationale for interview questions.** The first question, asking informants to recall and describe a specific child they considered ready for kindergarten, was intended to serve two purposes. First, as discussed above, it was intended as a positively worded, unintrusive basis from which to gradually introduce the topic of kindergarten retention. Second, it was intended to provide an impression of the teacher's conception of "readiness" for kindergarten.

As Katz (1992) has pointed out, the concept of readiness has been debated by early childhood educators, administrators, and parents for over a century. In her opinion, the central issue concerning readiness is disagreement about the extent to which development and learning are functions of biological, maturational processes or the result of early experiences. According to Katz, "maturationalists" contend that internal developmental processes enable children to benefit from formal instruction. On the other hand, "interactionists" hold the position that both inherent maturational processes and experiences interact to contribute to children's learning and that virtually all human beings are born with a powerful constitutional disposition to learn.

Similarly, Kagan (1992) has provided an historical analysis of conceptualizations of the construct "readiness."

In Kagan's opinion, past conceptualization of readiness involved a "recurring theoretical and practical tug" (p. 48) between two contrasting views, readiness to learn and readiness for school.

According to Kagan, "readiness to learn" is a concept proposed by developmentalists, which refers to the level of development at which any individual is ready to learn specific material, particularly in terms of average age. In Kagan's opinion, Gagne's and Piaget's conceptualizations of readiness to learn emphasized personal variables, such as attention, motivation, and emotional and intellectual factors, whereas Bruner's conceptualization emphasized environmental influence.

This broader view of readiness contrasts with the more narrowly defined concept of "readiness for school," which has been applied exclusively to young children. Like Katz, Kagan claimed that proponents of this second view consider a child ready for school if he or she possesses prescribed physical, cognitive, and emotional skills, especially those considered necessary for reading. In Kagan's opinion, this view assumes that education is "static and fixed rather than fluid and evolving" and that "readiness is to be expected rather than fostered" (p. 48).

Kagan considered that a third conceptualization, "maturational readiness," developed in response to the previous two conceptualizations. In her opinion, the maturational readiness philosophy incorporates both the readiness-for-school view that children should have achieved a specified level of functioning before entering school and the readiness-for-learning view that children be allowed time to develop at their individual biological pace. According to Kagan, maturationalists prefer to delay school entry until children are judged to be ready for its requirements, usually on the basis of readiness testing, rather than to place them in either a supposedly overwhelming educational environment or to individualize curriculum.

Kagan stated that a fourth approach to readiness, which was based on Vygotskian principles, emerged during the 1980s. According to Kagan, this fourth approach revived the environmentalist principles that learning precedes development

and that a stimulating social environment is necessary to maximize learning. The Vygotskian approach also countered maturationalism in advocating that schools be ready to accept children regardless of their developmental level. In Kagan's estimation, the Vygotskian approach has been gaining support, although maturationalism remains the most pervasive philosophy of readiness in American public education. Kagan identified the Gesell Institute as the chief proponent of contemporary maturationalist philosophy.

With reference to the above discussion, do informants in the present study conceptualize readiness as a "within-the-child phenomenon," a term used by Meisels (1995, p. 18)? Or, do they emphasize the importance of school's responsiveness and adaptation to a wide variety of student backgrounds, experiences, abilities, and needs? Or, do they conceptualize readiness as a "relational, interactional educational construct that reflects a focus on both the child's status and the characteristics of the educational setting" (Meisels, 1995, p. 18)? Or, in fact, do they hold some other conceptualization(s) of readiness? The purpose of the first question on the interview protocol was to further explore teachers' concepts of readiness using Kagan, Katz, and Meisel's commentaries as possible frameworks for comparison and contrast among informants.

The second protocol question, asking teachers to recall and describe a child they considered unready for kindergarten, served the same two purposes as the first question. Additionally, it provided a logical and temporal bridge to the third question, which inquired whether teachers considered retention at the end of kindergarten for a real or hypothetical unready child.

The third question opened up the interview to a discussion of teachers' attitudes towards kindergarten retention in general or its advisability for a specific child, depending on the focus of responses to the preceding two questions.

The fourth question extended the previous question by asking teachers to comment on both the short-term (in the repeated year) and long-term educational or social benefits, if any, of kindergarten retention for this child.

The first part of the fifth question asked teachers to describe a specific instance in which they had recommended a child be retained in kindergarten, but the child was promoted. This question provided an additional opportunity for informants to identify and discuss important features of the social contexts in which kindergarten retention occurs.

Some of these features might be classified as within-child "predictor variables," such as age, gender, and ethnicity (e.g., Cosden et al., 1993), which were discussed in Chapter 2. Contextual factors in which kindergarten retention is embedded also include internal (within the school) and external (outside the school) factors, such as the content, methods, and goals of the kindergarten program (e.g., Edson, 1990), parental expectations (e.g., Holloman, 1990), school or district philosophy and policy (e.g., Bredekamp & Shepard, 1989), and the "bureaucratic" organization of the public education system (e.g., Smith & Shepard, 1987).

In the studies cited above, researchers have not merely identified these factors as contextual, but as causal factors in the continued use of kindergarten retention.

The second part of the fifth question provided teachers with a further opportunity to state their opinions regarding the outcomes, positive or negative, for a child who was promoted against their recommendation.

The sixth question asked teachers to describe any circumstances in which they would not consider retaining a kindergarten child. On cursory reading, the wording of this question, like the preceding one, might imply that the informant favours kindergarten retention in principle. This wording is not restrictive or leading, however, since informants were free to respond in any way they wished according to their personal opinions. Rather, the purpose of the sixth question was to explore the possibility of seemingly contradictory opinions. That is, are there any *specific* circumstances (contexts) in which teachers who favour kindergarten retention *in principle* would recommend promoting a possible retainee? Conversely, are there any

*specific* circumstances (contexts) in which teachers who oppose kindergarten retention *in principle* would recommend retaining a child?

The rationale for the sixth question was based on Strauss and Corbin's (1990) axiom that it is just as important in grounded theory research to find evidence of differences and variation as it is to find supportive evidence for the original research questions and assertions. According to Strauss and Corbin, alternative instances do not necessarily negate or disprove the original research questions and assertions; rather, they add depth of understanding and variation to the cultural description.

Question 7 asked teachers to recall a specific example in which retention had negative consequences. This provided an additional opportunity for teachers to reiterate their previous belief statements about kindergarten retention or to describe a counter example, which, as noted above, provides difference and variation to the analysis. Analysis of the contextual features also permits both within- and between-informant comparison and contrast.

The eighth question provided a transition from requiring a response based on knowledge of individual cases (tacit knowledge) to requiring that informants make a generalized statement about the relative risks of promotion versus retention (propositional knowledge).

With regard to teacher "knowledge," Smith and Shepard (1987) distinguished between "propositional knowledge," as expressed in empirical research and "tacit," or case, knowledge. "Tacit knowledge" refers to the knowledge that teachers possess about instruction, discipline, and other classroom practices based on their accumulated experience. In Smith and Shepard's opinion, the propositional knowledge that teachers know from research on retention "usually amounts to highly edited and selectively presented evidence that is cited by advocates or one or another ideology" (p. 131).

Of interest here was whether teachers would answer question eight on the basis of "propositional" or "tacit" knowledge. If teachers do cite sources of propositional knowledge, do they do so on the basis of personal research or as second-hand information, as Smith and Shepard suggest?

The ninth question asked informants to suggest alternatives to straight repeating of kindergarten. In Gredler's (1992) opinion, acceptance of a particular theory of child development results in use of particular classroom experiences for children. According to Gredler, educators who adopt the maturational model advocate a "wait and see" approach to readiness; they advocate a higher entrance age, the postponed introduction of various subjects, prereadiness and transition classes, and retention as a remediation strategy.

Questions 10 and 11 related directly to the second and third research questions stated at the beginning of this chapter. The literature pertaining to teachers' understanding and utilization of educational research was reviewed in Chapter 2.

Questions 10 and 11 asked informants to judge their own familiarity with kindergarten retention research to which they have presumably been exposed during their pre- and inservice professional development and to evaluate its importance as a factor in their promotional decisions.

To address the minor research questions of this study, it was necessary to determine if informants were familiar with relevant empirical research, to clarify their attitudes towards research, and to detect possible differences in attitude between supporters and opponents of retention.

Furthermore, like Question 8, Questions 10 and 11 provided additional information about teachers' use of propositional and tacit knowledge.

The 12th question requested that informants make any additional comments they wished regarding kindergarten retention. This gave informants a final opportunity to comment on any aspect of kindergarten retention relevant to their beliefs or practices.

## Data Analyses

Since the study involved both quantitative and qualitative data collection, it employed both statistical and content analyses of data.

### Statistical Analysis of Quantitative Data

Analysis of the survey data employed both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Data analysis was assisted by use of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 6.1 for Macintosh.

Descriptive analyses consisted of frequency counts and calculation of percentages, ordinal rankings, and measures of central tendency (means, medians, and modes) and dispersion (ranges and standard deviations).

Pearson product-moment correlations, a *t* test for independent means, and tests of statistical significance were used in the inferential data analysis.

The "predictor variable" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993) in this study was "nativist belief." "Criterion variables" were the number of recommendations for retention, consideration-nonconsideration of research, the importance of research as a promotional factor, and alternatives to kindergarten retention.

Multivariate analyses to examine the possible effects of respondent education level, number of years of teaching experience, teaching experience at other grade levels, geographical location (urban-small urban-rural) or centre type (public-separate-private) were not performed in this study.

### Content Analysis of Qualitative Data

The grounded theory approach of Strauss and Corbin (1990) was used to analyze the follow-up interview data.

According to Strauss and Corbin, the grounded theory approach is "a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon" (p. 24).

In grounded theory, the paradigm model is used to link subcategories of data to a category in a set of relationships denoting causal conditions, phenomenon, context, intervening conditions, action/interaction strategies, and consequences.

The assumptions and procedures of the grounded theory approach are discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

## Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

### Delimitations

The study was delimited

to public and private kindergarten operators located in the geographical area designated as "Zone 3" according to the most current listing on the Alberta Department of Education's Report of Active Jurisdictions.

### Limitations

The study was limited

(1) by the response rate of kindergarten teachers to a standardized questionnaire,
(2) by the participation of selected kindergarten teachers in semistructured interviews, both in terms of willingness to be interviewed and in veracity of responses,
(3) to the extent that promotional practices are affected by informal or formal

school and/or district policies.

## Ethical Considerations

This study conformed to the ethical standards prescribed by the University of Alberta General Faculties Council (1991) and to the Research Ethics Review policies and procedures of the Department of Elementary Education (1995).

As previously noted, written permission for participation of school personnel was first obtained from superintendents of education or other appropriate supervisory personnel in the case of public and separate school divisions. Following this, school principals were apprised of the study and their cooperation was requested in a cover letter with enclosed supervisory letter of permission. In the case of private schools and centres, approval for participation of kindergarten personnel was obtained directly from principals and ECS coordinators.

At all levels, personnel were informed that distribution and completion of the questionnaire were entirely voluntary. In addition, respondents were informed that questionnaires had been coded to facilitate tracking of responses, not for future identification of individuals or schools.

Only those respondents who indicated their willingness to participate in a possible follow-up interview by identifying themselves and signing the consent form appended to the cover letter to kindergarten teachers were contacted.

Every attempt was made to contact potential interviewees person-to-person by telephone at a number designated by the teacher. Once contacted, the teacher's decision to withdraw from further participation in the study was respected.

Confidentiality was ensured by conducting the interviews in a private location with only the informant and researcher present. Permission for audiotaping was obtained from each informant at the beginning of the interview. All requests to ensure anonymity were guaranteed including the request to have potentially sensitive material erased. Informants were informed that the tapes would be used for the researcher's personal transcription only.

On the understanding that her identity would remain anonymous, verbal permission was obtained from each informant to use quotations from interviews. This agreement has been strictly adhered to. The source of each quotation is identified only in generic terms, such as a "teacher who supports retention" or as a "teacher who opposes retention."

Names of individual teachers, students, centres, schools, and school jurisdictions have been deleted from quoted comments to ensure anonymity.

## Implications of the Study

As stated in Chapter 1, this study serves to increase understanding of the relationship between kindergarten teachers' beliefs about child development and their promotional practices. It provides information about the relative importance teachers attribute to biological maturation and to the social environment, including their own role, in the development of school readiness of young children and information about their preferred educational remedies for "unready" children. It also provides information about teachers' knowledge of research on kindergarten retention and their opinions about its relevance when they make promotional decisions. As previously stated, teachers' understanding and utilization of empirical research findings on retention have received relatively little attention in the literature.

For classroom practice, the findings of this study have implications for both policy-making regarding kindergarten promotion and for the dissemination of relevant research findings on kindergarten retention through teacher preparation, inservice professional development, or both.

For teacher education, the study will prove informative to teacher educators in designing and implementing pre- and inservice early childhood education programs.

# CHAPTER 4

## ANALYSIS OF SURVEY DATA

This analysis was based on 190 responses to the 5-page questionnaire on kindergarten retention (Appendix B) from kindergarten teachers in privately operated ECS centres, private schools, and 15 participating school jurisdictions in the region designated as "Zone 3" by Alberta Education on its December 6th, 1995, listing of Alberta school jurisdictions. The questionnaire was mailed to private centres, private, public, and separate schools in March and April 1996.

As indicated in Chapter 3, the sampling frame consisted of a listing of public and nonpublic ECS teacher counts for Zone 3 as of January 19th, 1996, prepared by Teacher Certification and Development, Alberta Education. For the reasons stated in Chapter 3, it was considered advisable to sample every element of the sampling frame.

Of a total of 436 mailed questionnaires, 190 completed returns were received; 8 questionnaires were returned uncompleted because the sites offered preschool programs or special needs programs only.

Out of 428 mailed questionnaires, 190 usable returns represented a response rate of 45%.

There was evidence of inaccuracies in the Teacher Counts in terms of both overreporting the number of qualified ECS teachers per site in an undetermined number of cases and underreporting, that is, omitting an undetermined number of sites from the listing, however.

Inaccuracies were revealed by telephone checks to several randomly selected private centres, public schools, and school board administrative offices after the bulk of questionnaires had been mailed. Random checks were prompted by the return of a number of uncompleted questionnaires by the recipients mentioned above or by other recipients as "extras."

It is possible that inaccuracies in the Teacher Counts were the result of two recent province-wide events, the reorganization-amalgamation of school boards and the reduction in ECS funding by the provincial government.

Regarding reduced ECS funding, random telephone checks of a number of schools did reveal in some cases that ECS personnel had recently been reduced or that personnel had been assigned to more than one school site for the current school year, or both.

One hundred and fifty schools in 15 public and Catholic school boards and 14 privately operated ECS centres and schools chose to participate in the study.

Appendix D contains the Kindergarten Retention Questionnaire Summary of Results that was mailed to participants.

### Descriptive Statistical Analysis

#### Characteristics of Respondents

Regarding highest completed level of education, 153 respondents (81%) stated that they had a Bachelor's degree; 23 (12%) a Graduate Diploma; 12 (6%) a Master's degree; 2 respondents (1%) did not answer this question.

One hundred and forty-four respondents (76%) indicated that they had specialized training in early childhood education compared to 46 respondents (24%) who did not.

The total number of years of teaching experience ranged from less than 1 year to 30 years with a mode of 10 years and a mean of 12.6 years. Many respondents indicated that their teaching had been on a part-time or half-time basis.

Number of years of kindergarten teaching experience ranged from .5 to 24 years with a mode of 1 year and a mean of 7.3 years. This included half-time teaching.

Eighteen respondents (10%) indicated that they had taught at the kindergarten

level only: 170 respondents (90%) indicated that they had also taught at other grade levels. Experience ranged from prekindergarten to postsecondary teaching; Grade 1 was the most frequently taught grade (52%).

Respondents were asked to provide their year of birth, not current age, so that mean, median, and modal ages were not calculated. All but 1 respondent supplied this information; of 189 respondents, 26% (49) were born before 1950 (approximate ages 46 and older), 43% (82) between 1950-9 (approximate ages 36-46), 25% (47) between 1960-9 (approximate ages 26-36), and 6% (11) between 1970-9 (approximate ages 26 and younger).

## Policies and Guidelines Regarding Kindergarten Retention

One hundred and eighty-five respondents (97%) answered this question. The following percentages are based on this total of 185 responses.

Twenty respondents including 1 respondent who was uncertain (11%) indicated that their schools or centres had policies prohibiting kindergarten retention.

Of those respondents who provided information, 3 cited district policy and 2 cited school or administrator policy; 4 respondents indicated that students were promoted with their age group and program modifications; 2 respondents referred to testing for special placement; 3 respondents suggested that their site had an automatic promotion policy except for cases in which parents insisted on retaining their child; 2 respondents described nonretention policies that had apparent exceptions, such as for children within a specific birthdate range, or K-1 placement for children identified as unready for a Year 1 program.

Eighty-eight respondents (48%) indicated that their schools or centres had no policies prohibiting kindergarten retention or procedural guidelines for kindergarten retention.

The remaining 77 respondents (42%) indicated that there were guidelines regarding kindergarten retention, although it was not possible to determine whether these guidelines were formal or informal.

Respondents' comments indicated that procedures for retaining kindergarten students included one or more of the following features (with frequencies in parentheses): parental consultation or consent (55), student assessment including informal assessment by the teacher, testing, consultation with resource personnel or other involved teachers (39), administrator involvement or approval (14), formal parental request (9), programming considerations for the next year (4), and only one retention permitted in K-Division 1 or in K-6 (2).

## Number of Students Considered for Retention

Respondents were asked to complete a chart which indicated the number of children they considered would benefit from retention for each of the previous 4 school years (1991-2, 1992-3, 1993-4, 1994-5) and which also indicated the number of children who were actually retained for each of those years. Respondents were also asked to indicate how many children they considered would benefit from retention for the current school year, 1995-6.

One hundred and 72 respondents (91%) answered this question, at least in part.

Fourteen respondents (7%) omitted the question and a further 4 questionnaires (2%) were excluded from analysis because respondents indicated it was either their first year of teaching or first year teaching kindergarten. Additionally, these 4 respondents did not indicate if they were considering students for retention for the current year.

Based on responses that provided specific numbers of retentions ($n$ = 167) and not just estimates of retentions ($n$ = 5), such as "1 to 5 a year," "several," or "usually 3 or 4," a total of 271 kindergarten students were retained during the school years 1991-92 to 1994-5. This total must be considered only an estimate, however, because it is

based on resondents' recall of specific cases dating back 4 school years and in some cases may include retention recommendations at higher grade levels.

Table 2 compares the number of students considered for retention and actual number of retentions. The total includes students recommended for K-1 classes after completing an initial year of kindergarten. For the previously stated reasons, these totals must also be considered estimates. Differences in recommended and actual numbers of retentions are likely the result of nonretention policies, administrator disapproval, or parental refusal.

Table 2

An Estimate of Total Recommended-Total Actual Retentions with Number of Respondents: 1991-2 to 1995-6

| Year | Recommendations for Retention | Actual Retentions | Number of Respondents |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1991-2 | 76 | 39 | 39 |
| 1992-3 | 90 | 56 | 46 |
| 1993-4 | 116 | 65* | 58 |
| 1994-5 | 182 | 89** | 87 |
| 1995-6 | 302 | N/A | 126 |

* includes 2 cases in which retention was not recommended by teacher
** includes 3 cases in which retention was not recommended by teacher

## Statements of Opinion Regarding Kindergarten Retention

According to Babbie (1995), a common problem in analyzing survey data is deciding whether to include or exclude "don't know" responses. Babbie has suggested that it is often appropriate to report the data *in both forms* so that the reader may draw his or her own conclusions (p. 384).

In Question 1, respondents were asked to indicate if they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with 20 statements about kindergarten and kindergarten retention.

Following Babbie's advice, Table 3 summarizes response percentages and frequencies for each of the 20 statements on the 4-point scale with "don't know" responses included in the totals. That is, all percentages are based on a constant denominator of 190 responses. Percentages are reported to 1 decimal place.

Table 3

Percentage of Responses to 20 Statements about Kindergarten or Kindergarten Retention with No Response Category and Frequencies (in parentheses) ($N$ = 190)

| Statement | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | No Response | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Retention will stifle a child's desire to learn. | .5 (1) | 8.4 (16) | 55.8 (106) | 33.7 (64) | 1.6 (3) | 100 (190) |
| The older child has a greater chance of success. | 26.8 (51) | 50.0 (95) | 17.9 (34) | 3.7 (7) | 1.6 (3) | 100 (190) |
| Retention decisions in kindergarten are strongly influenced by school practice in grades one to six. | 12.1 (23) | 45.3 (86) | 30.0 (57) | 8.9 (17) | 3.7 (7) | 100 (190) |
| Retention is more effective in kindergarten than in other grades. | 20.5 (39) | 42.6 (81) | 27.9 (53) | 6.8 (13) | 2.1 (4) | 100 (190) |
| Research indicates significant benefits of kindergarten retention. | 3.2 (6) | 25.3 (48) | 35.3 (67) | 7.9 (15) | 28.4 (54) | 100 (190) |
| The best way to prevent failure is to hold the unready child out for a year. | 16.8 (32) | 37.4 (71) | 33.7 (64) | 8.9 (17) | 3.2 (6) | 100 (190) |
| Students with identified special needs should not be considered for retention. | 10.5 (20) | 36.8 (70) | 42.1 (80) | 6.8 (13) | 3.7 (7) | 100 (190) |
| A child who is significantly smaller than others the same age is a suitable candidate for retention. | 0 (0) | 4.7 (9) | 47.9 (91) | 47.4 (90) | 0 (0) | 100 (190) |
| Children should not be assessed for kindergarten readiness. | 11.6 (22) | 41.6 (79) | 33.7 (64) | 11.6 (22) | 1.6 (3) | 100 (190) |
| ESL students will learn more English if they are retained. | 1.1 (2) | 16.3 (31) | 63.2 (120) | 12.7 (24) | 6.8 (13) | 100 (190) |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Research indicates that repeating is not emotionally harmful to a kindergarten child. | 4.2 (8) | 26.3 (50) | 32.6 (62) | 10.0 (19) | 26.9 (51) | 100 (190) |
| Promotion should be based on achievement of learner expectations in the kindergarten program statement. | 14.2 (27) | 52.7 (100) | 25.3 (48) | 5.8 (11) | 2.1 (4) | 100 (190) |
| Retention is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up. | 27.4 (52) | 56.3 (107) | 8.9 (17) | 5.3 (10) | 2.1 (4) | 100 (190) |
| Immature children who are promoted do as well as those who are retained. | 1.6 (3) | 13.2 (25) | 59.5 (113) | 18.4 (35) | 7.4 (14) | 100 (190) |
| Retention is an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in grade one. | 20.5 (39) | 53.2 (101) | 20.5 (39) | 4.7 (9) | 1.1 (2) | 100 (190) |
| Neurological maturity is more important than a stimulating home environment for success. | .5 (1) | 11.1 (21) | 63.7 (121) | 17.4 (33) | 7.4 (14) | 100 (190) |
| It is more important to make sure that a child is ready to meet classroom expectations than to shift the whole curriculum downwards to meet the child's maturity level. | 8.9 (17) | 40.0 (76) | 36.3 (69) | 7.9 (15) | 6.8 (13) | 100 (190) |
| Research indicates that retention should be discouraged at the kindergarten level. | 5.3 (10) | 33.7 (64) | 34.2 (65) | 5.8 (11) | 21.0 (40) | 100 (190) |
| Developmental tests are helpful in deciding whether to retain a student. | 5.8 (11) | 60.0 (114) | 24.7 (47) | 5.8 (11) | 3.7 (7) | 100 (190) |
| Children should never be retained. | 3.7 (7) | 4.2 (8) | 50.0 (95) | 40.0 (76) | 2.1 (4) | 100 (190) |

Based on Table 3, in descending order and with percentage agreement in parentheses, 50% or more of respondents agreed/strongly agreed with the following statements about kindergarten retention: Retention is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up (83.7%); [In kindergarten] the older child has a better chance of success (76.8%); Retention is an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in Grade 1 (73.7%); Promotion should be based on the achievement of learner expectations identified in the kindergarten program statement (66.9%); Developmental tests are helpful in deciding whether to retain a student (65.8%); Retention is more effective in kindergarten than in other grades (63.1%); Retention decisions in kindergarten are strongly influenced by school practice in Grades 1 to 6 (57.4%); The best way to prevent failure is to hold the unready child out for a year (54.2%); Children should not be assessed for kindergarten readiness (53.2%).

In ascending order and with percentage disagreement in parentheses, respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the following statements: ESL students will learn more English if they are retained (75.9%); Immature children who are promoted do as well as those who are retained (77.9%); Neurological maturity is more important than a stimulating home environment for success (81.1%); Retention will stifle a child's desire to learn (89.5%); Children should never be retained (90.0%); A child who is significantly smaller than others the same age is a suitable candidate for retention (95.3%).

Table 3 indicates that there was less than 50% majority of opinion regarding the following five statements (agree/strongly agree-disagree/strongly disagree): Research indicates significant benefits of kindergarten retention (28.5%-43.2%); Students with identified special needs should not be considered for retention (47.3%-48.9%); Research indicates that repeating is not emotionally harmful to a kindergarten child (30.5%-42.6%); It is more important to make sure that a child is ready to meet classroom expectations than to shift the whole curriculum downwards to meet the child's maturity level (48.9%-44.2%); Research indicates that retention should be discouraged at the kindergarten level (40.0%-39.0%).

Table 3 reveals a substantial percentage of nonresponse for each of the three statements that refer to the findings of research on kindergarten retention: Research indicates significant benefits of kindergarten retention (28.4%); Research indicates that repeating is not emotionally harmful to a kindergarten child (26.9%); Research indicates that retention should be discouraged at the kindergarten level (20.1%). In addition to cases in which none of the four response choices was selected, this category includes cases in which respondents indicated their lack of knowledge about research findings by placing question marks, or making comments such as "don't know" beside these statements, or both.

Table 3 also reveals substantial minority disagreement with two of the statements regarding the findings of kindergarten retention research; 43.2% of respondents disagreed with the statement "Research indicates significant benefits of kindergarten retention" and 42.6% disagreed with the statement "Research indicates that repeating is not emotionally harmful to a kindergarten child." Respondent opinion was almost equally divided over the third research statement, "Research indicates that retention should be discouraged at the kindergarten level"; 40.0% agreed and 39.0% disagreed with this statement.

For comparison, Table 4 presents the same data excluding "don't know" responses; all percentages are based on the actual number of respondents who responded to each statement. Percentages are reported to 1 decimal place.

Table 4

Percentage Agreement/Disagreement with 20 Statements about Kindergarten or Kindergarten Retention based on Actual Number of Cases

| Statement | *n* | Strongly Agree/ Agree | Strongly Disagree/ Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|
| Retention will stifle a child's desire to learn. | 187 | .5<br>8.6 | 34.2<br>56.7 |
| The older child has a greater chance of success. | 187 | 27.3<br>50.8 | 3.7<br>18.2 |
| Retention decisions in kindergarten are strongly influenced by school practice in grades one to six. | 183 | 12.6<br>50.0 | 9.3<br>31.1 |
| Retention is more effective in kindergarten than in other grades. | 186 | 21.0<br>43.5 | 7.0<br>28.5 |
| Research indicates significant benefits of kindergarten retention. | 136 | 4.4<br>35.3 | 11.0<br>49.3 |
| The best way to prevent failure is to hold the unready child out a year. | 184 | 17.4<br>38.6 | 9.2<br>34.8 |
| Students with identified special needs should not be considered for retention. | 183 | 10.9<br>38.3 | 7.1<br>43.7 |
| A child who is significantly smaller than others the same age is a suitable candidate for retention. | 190 | 0<br>4.7 | 47.4<br>47.9 |
| Children should not be assessed for kindergarten readiness. | 187 | 11.8<br>42.2 | 11.8<br>34.2 |
| ESL students will learn more English if they are retained. | 177 | 1.1<br>17.5 | 13.6<br>67.8 |
| Research indicates that repeating is not emotionally harmful to a kindergarten student. | 139 | 5.8<br>36.0 | 13.7<br>44.6 |
| Promotion should be based on achievement of learner expectations on the kindergarten program statement. | 186 | 14.5<br>53.8 | 5.9<br>25.8 |
| Retention is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up. | 186 | 28.0<br>57.5 | 5.4<br>9.1 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Immature children who are promoted | | 1.7 | 19.9 |
| do as well as those who are retained. | 176 | 14.2 | 64.2 |
| Retention is an effective means of | | | |
| preventing students from facing daily | | 20.7 | 4.8 |
| failure in grade one. | 188 | 53.7 | 20.7 |
| Neurological maturity is more | | | |
| important than a stimulating home | | .6 | 18.8 |
| environment for success. | 176 | 11.9 | 68.8 |
| It is more important to make sure that a child is ready to meet classroom expectations than to shift the whole curriculum downwards to meet the | | 9.6 | 8.5 |
| child's maturity level. | 177 | 42.9 | 39.0 |
| Research indicates that retention | | | |
| should be discouraged at the | | 6.7 | 7.3 |
| kindergarten level. | 150 | 42.7 | 43.3 |
| Developmental tests are helpful | | 6.0 | 6.0 |
| in deciding whether to retain a child. | 183 | 62.3 | 25.7 |
| Children should never | | 3.8 | 40.9 |
| be retained | 186 | 4.3 | 51.1 |

Comparison of Tables 3 and 4 reveals that excluding "don't know" responses presents a different perspective of the 5 statements in Table 3 that showed less than 50% agreement/disagreement, particularly the 3 statements concerning retention research.

After excluding nonresponses, 60.3% disagreed that research indicates significant benefits of kindergarten retention, 58.3% disagreed that research indicates that repeating is not emotionally harmful to a kindergarten student, and 50.6% disagreed that research indicates that retention should be discouraged at the kindergarten level (i.e., 49.4% agreed that research indicates that retention should be discouraged at the kindergarten level.)

## The Most Important Factors in Promotional Decisions

To the question "Have you ever considered retaining a student in kindergarten?", 171 respondents (90%) indicated that they had considered retaining a student in kindergarten; 19 respondents (10%), including one first year teacher, indicated they had never considered retaining a kindergarten student.

Respondents who had considered retention were then asked to indicate the importance of 15 factors when they made retention decisions using a scale of 1 to 4 where 1 meant not at all important and 4 meant very important.

Response percentages and frequencies for each factor on the 4-point scale are reported in Table 5. A no response category was added. Percentages are reported to 1 decimal space. Percentages are based on a constant denominator of 171.

Table 5

Percentage of Responses to the Importance of 15 Promotional Factors with No Response Category and Frequencies (in parentheses) Added ($n$ = 171)

| | Not At All Important | | Very Important | | No Response | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Factor | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | |
| Poor socialization skills: does not interact well with other children | 4.7 (8) | 18.7 (32) | 46.2 (79) | 28.7 (49) | 1.8 (3) | 100 (171) |
| Insufficient progress in readiness skills | 2.3 (4) | 12.9 (22) | 47.4 (81) | 36.3 (62) | 1.2 (2) | 100 (171) |
| Chronologically young in comparison to classmates | 10.5 (18) | 39.2 (67) | 33.9 (58) | 16.4 (28) | 0 (0) | 100 (171) |
| Poor gross and fine motor skills | 5.8 (10) | 28.7 (49) | 47.4 (81) | 18.1 (31) | 0 (0) | 100 (171) |
| Immature language development: poor vocabulary and concepts | 1.2 (2) | 6.4 (11) | 49.1 (84) | 42.7 (73) | .6 (1) | 100 (171) |
| School's continuous progress policy | 23.4 (40) | 34.5 (59) | 24.6 (42) | 11.1 (19) | 6.4 (11) | 100 (171) |
| Poor work habits due to short attention span | 2.3 (4) | 22.2 (38) | 51.5 (88) | 23.4 (40) | .6 (1) | 100 (171) |
| Emotionally unready for school situation: overly shy, easily upset, crying, frequent tantrums | 1.2 (2) | 11.1 (19) | 42.7 (73) | 45.0 (77) | 0 (0) | 100 (171) |
| Small in size compared to classmates | 67.3 (115) | 27.5 (47) | 4.1 (7) | 0 (0) | 1.2 (2) | 100 (171) |
| Parental request or refusal | 2.3 (4) | 8.8 (15) | 45.0 (77) | 42.1 (72) | 1.8 (3) | 100 (171) |
| English as a second language | 28.7 (49) | 56.1 (96) | 11.7 (20) | 1.2 (2) | 2.3 (4) | 100 (171) |
| Research on the effectiveness of kindergarten retention | 15.8 (27) | 42.1 (72) | 24.0 (41) | 7.0 (12) | 11.1 (19) | 100 (171) |
| Poor attendance | 18.1 (31) | 50.3 (86) | 23.4 (40) | 6.4 (11) | 1.8 (3) | 100 (171) |
| Low motivation | 10.5 (18) | 44.4 (76) | 33.3 (57) | 11.7 (20) | 0 (0) | 100 (171) |
| School entry late in year | 24.0 (41) | 46.8 (80) | 20.5 (35) | 7.6 (13) | 1.2 (2) | 100 (171) |

Table 6 shows the ordinal ranking of factors with the mean score of each ($n$ = 171)

Table 6

Ordinal Ranking of 15 Promotional Factors with Mean Score ($n$ = 171)

| Factor | Mean Score (/4) |
|---|---|
| Immature language development | 3.32 |
| Emotional unreadiness | 3.32 |
| Parental request or refusal | 3.23 |
| Insufficient progress in readiness skills | 3.15 |
| Poor socialization skills | 2.95 |
| Poor work habits due to short attention span | 2.95 |
| Poor gross and fine motor skills | 2.78 |
| Chronologically young in comparison to classmates | 2.56 |
| Low motivation | 2.46 |
| Poor attendance | 2.15 |
| School's continuous progress policy | 2.11 |
| School entry late in year | 2.09 |
| Research on the effectiveness of kindergarten retention (non-response 11.1%) | 2.00 |
| English as a Second Language | 1.81 |
| Small size compared to classmates | 1.35 |

With mean scores of 3.32 respectively, immature language development and emotional unreadiness were selected as the most important promotional factors followed by parental request or refusal (3.23) and insufficient progress in readiness skills (3.15). Poor socialization skills and poor work habits due to short attention span were considered equally important (2.95). The remaining factors in descending order of importance were poor gross and fine motor skills (2.78), chronological youngness in comparison to classmates (2.56), low motivation (2.46), poor attendance (2.15), the school's continuous progress policy (2.11), school entry late in the year (2.09), research on the effectiveness of kindergarten retention (2.00), English as a second language (1.81), and small size compared to classmates (1.35). It is noteworthy that 19 respondents omitted the item on research on the effectiveness of kindergarten retention.

Table 7 shows the rank ordering of the 15 promotional factors with means and standard deviations by actual number of cases.

Table 7

Ordinal Ranking of 15 Promotional Factors with Number of Cases, Means, and Standard Deviations

| Factor | *n* | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Immature language development | 170 | 3.35 | .66 |
| Emotional unreadiness | 171 | 3.32 | .72 |
| Parental request or refusal | 168 | 3.30 | .72 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Insufficient progress in readiness skills | 169 | 3.20 | .75 |
| Poor socialization skills | 168 | 3.01 | .83 |
| Poor work habits | 170 | 2.96 | .75 |
| Poor motor skills | 171 | 2.78 | .81 |
| Chronologically young | 171 | 2.56 | .89 |
| Low motivation | 171 | 2.46 | .83 |
| Research on kindergarten retention | 152 | 2.26 | .84 |
| School's continuous progress policy | 160 | 2.24 | .96 |
| Poor attendance | 168 | 2.18 | .81 |
| School entry late in year | 169 | 2.12 | .86 |
| English as a Second Language | 167 | 1.85 | .66 |
| Small size | 169 | 1.36 | .56 |

When nonresponses are excluded, research on kindergarten retention moves up from the 13th to the 10th most important factor.

An open-ended question also asked respondents to identify factors that they considered most important when making promotion decisions; 170 respondents (90%) answered this question. The number of factors considered important varied from respondent to respondent. In all but the following cases (with the single factor in parentheses), respondents named two or more factors: 4 (parental support), 3 (academic readiness), 2 (emotional maturity), 1 (student age), 1 (immaturity).

In descending order of frequency (in parentheses), respondents cited the following as the most important factors: social or interpersonal skill development (78), "maturity" or "maturational readiness" (57), academic readiness skills (56), emotional development (54), work habits including attention span, listening skills,following directions or routines, completing a task (48), chronological age (32), gross or fine motor skills (27), parental wishes or approval (26), the development of speech or language skills (24), "interest in learning," motivation, self-initiative, or "attitude" (13), intelligence or intellectual development (12), self-confidence or self-esteem (10), independence (10), the advisability of retaining special needs students (9), the type of following year placement including the availability of support personnel and programs (8), "physical development" or "physical endurance" (7), "over-all development" or "general readiness" (7), the home background (6), the progress made in kindergarten (6), the "ability to cope" (6), the child's probable success in Grade 1 (4), creativity (3), the child's gender (3), the teacher's wish to avoid retention by adapting the child's program (3). Each of the following factors was mentioned twice: attendance, "personality" or "personal skills," the child's physical size, the results of testing, the attainment of Alberta Education's (1995) *Draft Kindergarten Program Statement* learning outcomes, the teacher's wish to have a child remain with age-peers. Each of the following was mentioned only once: cooperativeness, frustration level, problem-solving skills, the teacher's perception of the effects of retention on the child, shyness, "problems in more than one area," school board policy, the "goals to be met through retention," and the Division 1 teachers' philosophy.

## Alternatives to Kindergarten Retention

Respondents were asked whether they strongly favour, favour, disfavour, or strongly disfavour eight alternatives to straight repeating of kindergarten. This question received an overall response rate of 100%.

Table 8 shows the response percentages and frequencies for each of the eight alternatives on the 4-point scale. A no response category was added. Percentages are reported to one decimal place and were calculated using a constant denominator of 190.

Table 8
Percentage Response to Eight Alternatives to Repeating Kindergarten- No Response Category and Frequencies (in parentheses) Added (N =190)

| Alternative | Strongly Favour | Favour | Disfavour | Strongly Disfavour | No Response | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Raise kindergarten entry age | 42.7 (81) | 28.9 (55) | 17.4 (33) | 10.5 (20) | .5 (1) | 100 (190) |
| Individual progress through an ungraded primary (K-3) unit | 11.6 (22) | 35.8 (68) | 37.9 (72) | 10.0 (19) | 4.7 (9) | 100 (190) |
| Kindergarten entry on the basis of developmental readiness testing | 6.8 (13) | 25.3 (48) | 42.6 (81) | 24.2 (46) | 1.1 (2) | 100 (190) |
| Transition (pre-grade one) class between kindergarten and first grade | 25.8 (49) | 39.5 (75) | 21.6 (41) | 10.0 (19) | 3.2 (6) | 100 (190) |
| Promotion with remedial assistance | 18.4 (35) | 51.1 (97) | 22.1 (42) | 7.4 (14) | 1.1 (2) | 100 (190) |
| Keep child close to entry cutoff age at home an extra year | 24.2 (46) | 38.9 (74) | 25.8 (49) | 6.3 (12) | 4.7 (9) | 100 (190) |
| Developmental Pre-K for unready five-year-olds | 23.7 (45) | 47.4 (90) | 22.1 (42) | 4.7 (9) | 2.1 (4) | 100 (190) |
| Smaller classes with increased individualized and remedial instruction | 55.3 (105) | 31.1 (59) | 11.1 (21) | 2.1 (4) | .5 (1) | 100 (190) |

In Table 9, each alternative was rank-ordered from most to least favoured. Frequencies were converted to a 4-point scale where strongly favour = 4, etc. and the mean score was based on the total sample of 190 teachers.

Table 9

Ordinal Ranking of Eight Alternatives to Kindergarten Retention with Mean Score (*N* = 190)

| Alternative to Repeating Kindergarten | Mean Score (/4) |
|---|---|
| Smaller classes with increased individualized/remedial instruction | 3.38 |
| Raise kindergarten entry age | 3.03 |
| Developmental Pre-K for unready five-year-olds | 2.86 |
| Promotion with remedial assistance | 2.78 |
| Transition (Pre-Grade One) class between K and Grade One | 2.75 |
| Keep child close to entry cutoff age at home an extra year | 2.72 |
| Individual progress through an ungraded primary (K-3) unit | 2.39 |
| Kindergarten entry on the basis of developmental readiness testing | 2.13 |

With a mean score of 3.38, smaller classes with increased individualized-remedial instruction was the most preferred alternative to kindergarten retention. In descending order of preference, the remaining alternatives were selected as follows: raise the kindergarten entry age (3.03), developmental prekindergarten for unready 5-year-olds (2.86), promotion with remedial assistance (2.78), transition (pre-Grade 1) class between kindergarten and Grade 1 (2.75), keep a child close to the entry cutoff age at home an extra year (2.72), individual progress through an ungraded primary (K-3) unit (2.39), and kindergarten entry on the basis of developmental readiness testing (2.13).

Table 10 shows the ordinal ranking with mean score and standard deviation for each of the eight alternatives after nonresponses have been omitted. The order of the 4th, 5th, and 6th ranked alternatives (i.e., keep a child close to the cutoff at home an extra year, transition class, and promotion with remedial assistance) changed, but the differences in means remains negligible.

Table 10

Ordinal Ranking of Eight Alternatives to Kindergarten Retention with Number of Cases, Means, and Standard Deviations

| Alternative | *n* | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Smaller classes/individual/remediation | 189 | 3.40 | .77 |
| Raise kindergarten entry age | 189 | 3.04 | 1.01 |
| Developmental Pre-K | 186 | 2.92 | .81 |
| Keep child close to entry cutoff at home | 181 | 2.85 | .88 |
| Transition class | 184 | 2.84 | .94 |
| Promotion with remedial assistance | 188 | 2.81 | .82 |
| Ungraded primary unit | 181 | 2.51 | .84 |
| Developmental readiness testing | 188 | 2.15 | .87 |

## The Importance of Educational Research on Kindergarten Retention

Respondents were asked to indicate yes or no to the question "Do you consider research when you make promotional decisions?". All but 12 respondents (6%) answered this question.

Ninety-two respondents (48% of the total sample) indicated that they did consider educational research on kindergarten retention, at least to some extent, when making promotional decisions; 5 respondents stated that they would like further information on research through increased research output or inservice presentations; 3 respondents stated that they have conducted their own reviews of the research literature on retention.

In descending order, the reasons given for the importance of research were that it can be used to support teacher decisions, particularly to parents (9), provides a wider perspective on the topic of retention (4), provides up-to-date information, particularly for parents (4), provides information based on a "larger scale" (3), has been proven effective or valid (3), indicates that retention does not result in significantly improved student achievement (2), indicates that retention is related to later dropping-out (2), informs professional practice (2), is the basis for board policy (1), provides a guide in the absence of ECS training (1), can substantiate one's own beliefs (1), shows that immaturity is an acceptable reason for retention (1), and shows the importance of social skills for future success (1).

Some respondents added the following qualifying comments about the importance of research in promotional decisions: the teacher's "gut feeling" or experience also plays a significant role in promotional decisions (12); in contrast to research findings, respondents' personal experience demonstrates positive short- or long-term effects of retention (9); research is only one factor in promotional decisions (6); research results vary (6); respondents have been too busy to keep up-to-date on research (4); despite research findings to the contrary, respondents believe that students' self-esteem will suffer in an "overwhelming" first grade classroom for which they are not ready (2); the uniqueness of each situation must be taken into account (1); research is considered only if it is applicable to the teacher's own students (1); and, research often conflicts with school practices (1).

Eighty-six respondents (45%) stated that they did not consider research. Stated reasons were that promotional decisions should be made on the basis of individual circumstances (35), on the basis of teaching experience (22), or in consultation with other teachers and parents (14); 16 respondents indicated that they were either unaware of current research or it was unavailable to them; 8 respondents stated that research results were either inconclusive or contradictory; 6 respondents indicated that educational research did not apply to their actual practice. That is, sample characteristics were dissimilar to those of their own students.

## Inferential Statistical Analysis

As discussed in Chapter 3, all three expert reviewers agreed that 12 statements in Question 1 of the questionnaire were indicative of nativist belief regarding child development and kindergarten retention. These 12 variables were combined to construct a variable, which will be referred to as an "aggregate nativist score" in the following analyses.

The 12 statements identified by all three expert reviewers were: 1. Retention will stifle a child's desire to learn. (Nativists would be expected to disagree with this statement); 2. The older child has a better chance of success. (Nativists would be expected to agree.); 3. Retention is more effective in kindergarten than in other grades. (Nativists would agree.); 4. The best way to prevent failure is to hold an unready child out of school for a year. (Nativists would agree.); 5. Children should not be assessed for kindergarten readiness. (Nativists would disagree.); 6. Retention is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up. (Nativists would agree.); 7. Immature

children who are promoted do as well as those who are retained. (Nativists would disagree.); 8. Retention is an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in Grade 1. (Nativists would agree.); 9. Neurological maturity is more important than a stimulating home environment for success. (Nativists would agree.); 10. It is more important to make sure that a child is ready to meet classroom expectations than to shift the whole curriculum downwards to meet the child's maturity level. (Nativists would agree.); 11. Developmental tests are helpful in deciding whether to retain a student. (Nativists would agree.); 12. Children should never be retained. (Nativists would disagree.)

The values of response categories for each statement were calculated as follows: if the statement was worded such that nativists would be expected to agree, such as, "The older child has a better chance of success", a strongly agree response was scored as 4, agree as 3, disagree as 2, and strongly disagree as 1; the reverse weighting procedure was used for statements with which nativists would be expected to disagree, such as, "Retention will stifle a child's desire to learn", i.e., strongly agree = 1, etc.

Figure 1 shows the frequency distribution of aggregate nativist scores for 136 respondents, omitting 54 cases for which data was missing. Nativist scores ranged from 14.00 to 46.00 with a standard deviation of 5.02. (The possible minimal score was 12 and the possible maximal score was 48.) The mean, median, and modal scores were 34.19, 35.00, and 35.00 respectively.

A statistically significant correlation between respondent age and aggregate nativist score ($r = .28$, $p = .00$) was found.

A statistically significant correlation between the number of years of kindergarten teaching experience and aggregate nativist score was also found ($r = .20$, $p = .02$)

The aggregate nativist score was designated as the predictor variable (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993) in the following relationships.

## The Relationship Between Nativist Belief and Retention Recommendations

In Question 6 respondents were asked to complete a chart indicating the number of children they considered would benefit from retention for each of the school years, 1991-6.

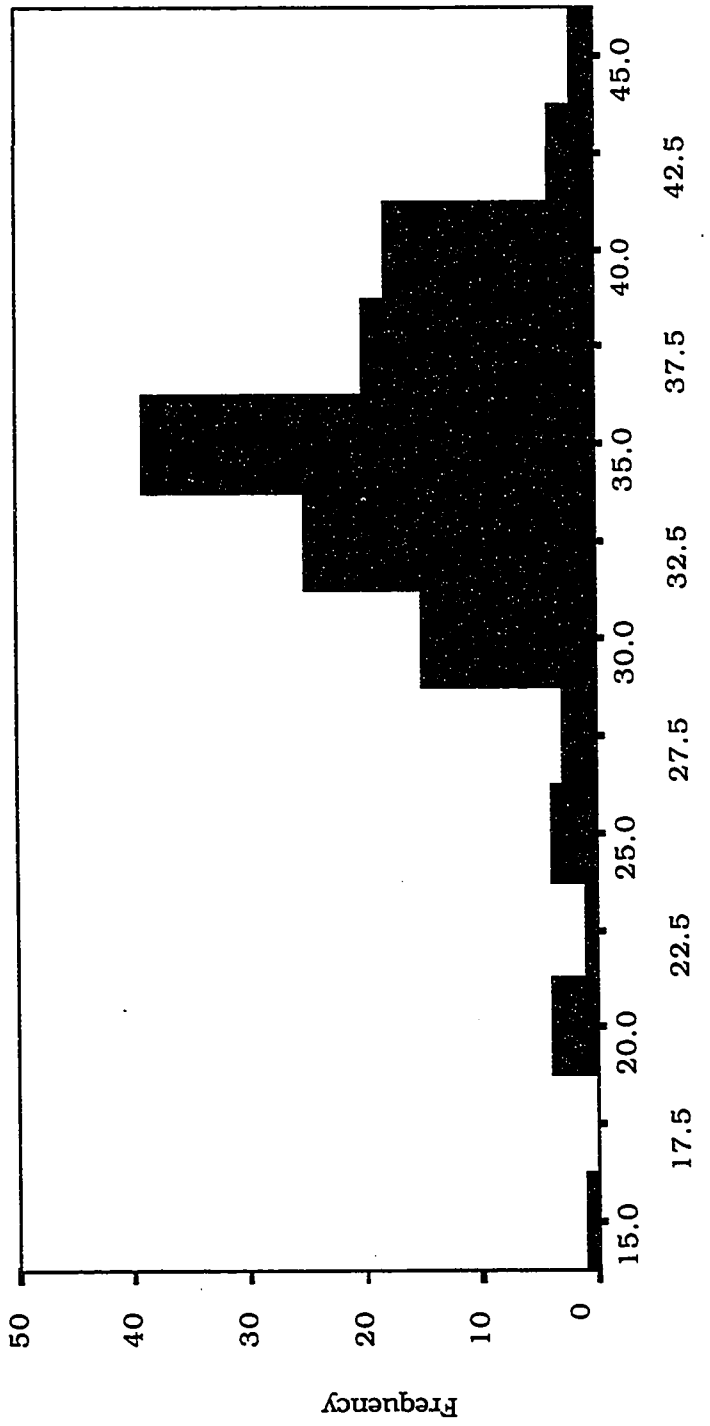
To eliminate the possibility of errors resulting from respondents' including previous recommendations for retention in grades other than kindergarten, or from faulty recollections about number of retention recommendations in the preceding 4 school years, or both, only data for the current school year, 1995-6, was used in the analysis.

As indicated in Table 2, respondents indicated that a total of 302 kindergarten students would benefit from retention, including those recommended for K-1 grade placement.

Based on 122 cases, a significant positive correlation between aggregate nativist score and the number of recommendations for retention for the current school year, 1995-6 was found ($r = .46$, $p = .00$).

Figure 1

Frequency Distribution of Aggregate Nativist Scores (n = 136)



## Nativist Belief and Favoured Strategies for "Unready" Children

To avoid possible negative correlation coefficients between aggregate nativist score and alternatives to kindergarten retention (Question 4), response choices for alternatives found in the nativist literature, such as raise the kindergarten entry age, were weighted as strongly favour = 4, favour = 3, disfavour = 2, and strongly disfavour = 1; other alternatives similarly weighted were kindergarten entry on the basis of readiness testing, transition class, keep a child close to the cutoff age at home an extra year, and developmental prekindergarten. Alternatives antithetical to nativist belief, such as promotion with individual assistance, were weighted as strongly favour = 1, favour = 2, disfavour = 3, and strongly disfavour = 4. Similarly weighted alternatives were individual progress through an ungraded primary unit and smaller classes with increased individual instruction.

Table 11 shows cell sizes, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients, and levels of statistical significance for aggregate nativist score and each of the eight alternatives to repeating kindergarten.

Table 11

Aggregate Nativist Score Correlated with Eight Alternatives to Repeating Kindergarten

| Alternative | *n* | *r* | Alpha Level (2-tailed) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Raise kindergarten entry age | 135 | .29 | .00 |
| Individual progress through an ungraded primary (K-3) unit | 131 | .23 | .00 |
| Kindergarten entry on the basis of developmental readiness testing | 135 | .31 | .00 |
| Transition (pre-grade one) class between kindergarten and first grade | 135 | .06 | *ns* |
| Promotion with remedial assistance | 134 | .29 | .00 |
| Keep child close to entry cutoff age at home an extra year | 132 | .36 | .00 |
| Developmental Pre-K for unready five-year-olds | 135 | .14 | *ns* |
| Smaller classes with increased individualized and remedial instruction | 135 | .17 | *ns* (.052) |

Statistically significant positive correlations between aggregate nativist score and the following alternatives to kindergarten retention were found: raise the kindergarten entry age, individual progress through an ungraded primary unit, kindergarten entry on the basis of developmental readiness testing, promotion with remedial assistance, and keep a child close to the entry cutoff age at home an extra

year. The relationship between transition class and nativist score and between developmental prekindergarten and nativist score were nonsignificant.

## Nativist Belief and Kindergarten Retention Research

An Independent Samples Test was used to determine if there was a relationship between nativist belief and consideration of research in making promotional decisions.

Group statistics revealed a mean aggregate nativist score of 32.91 for the 68 respondents who answered yes to the question "Do you consider research when you make promotional decisions?" (*SD* = 5.45, *SEM* = .66); the mean aggregate nativist score for the 62 respondents who gave a no response was 35.63 (*SD* = 4.30, *SEM* = .55). A *t* test for equality of means yielded a statistically significant *t* value, $t(128) = 3.14$, $p = .00$.

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was also computed to determine the strength of relationship between nativist belief and the importance of research as a promotional factor. With an alpha level of .05, the negative correlation between these two variables approached statistical significance, $n = 114$, $r = -.17$, $p = .08$.

## Summary

Chapter 4 summarized the data obtained from 190 responses to a kindergarten retention questionnaire completed by kindergarten teachers in public and private centres and schools in Alberta Education Zone 3 of central Alberta in spring 1996.

The overall response rate, number of participating centres/schools, and demographic characteristics of respondents were reported.

The following categorical data on school retention policies and procedures were obtained: 11 sites had prohibitive policies, 88 sites had no prohibitive policies or procedural guidelines for kindergarten retention; 77 sites had some guidelines, although it was not possible to determine if these were formal or informal; guidelines most frequently included parental consultation, consent, or request, informal or formal student assessment, and administrator approval.

An estimate of the number of students considered for retention each year for the preceding 4 school years was made and the totals were compared with the annual number of retentions. Although the totals were only approximations, it was noted that recommendations for retention always exceeded the actual number of retentions; differences were attributed to retention policies, administrator and/or parental refusal.

Descriptive statistics consisted of percentage agreement-disagreement with 20 statements regarding child development, kindergarten practices and retention, mean scores and ordinal rankings of 15 promotional factors, and mean scores and ordinal rankings of eight alternatives to kindergarten retention.

Categorical data was obtained by asking respondents to list their most important promotional factors, to indicate whether or not they considered retention research when they made promotional decisions, and to list their reasons for considering/not considering research.

A composite score comprised of 12 nativist belief statements was computed and used as the predictor variable in correlations with number of retention recommendations, alternatives to kindergarten retention, and retention research as a promotional factor.

A frequency distribution of aggregate nativist scores for 136 respondents was constructed and measures of central tendency and dispersion were calculated.

A *t* test was performed to determine whether the difference in mean nativist scores of respondents who considered retention and those who did not was statistically significant.

These findings are summarized, compared, and contrasted with those of the qualitative, follow-up phase of the study in Chapter 6.

# CHAPTER 5

# THE INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Chapter 5 presents the views on kindergarten retention expressed by the 11 interviewed kindergarten teachers. As indicated in Chapter 3, Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data derived from these interviews.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the philosophical assumptions that underlie this cultural description and the uses of research literature in grounded theory studies.

This discussion is followed by a description of the rationale and methods used in the sample selection, the demographic characteristics of the interviewed teachers, and the data collection procedure.

The remainder of Chapter 5 presents the grounded theory approach and the grounded theory that was derived from it.

## Epistemological Assumptions

Spradley and McCurdy (1972) have defined culture as "the knowledge people use to generate and interpret social behavior" (p. 8). According to Spradley and McCurdy, this knowledge is learned and, to a degree, is shared by members of a society. Cultural knowledge is coded in complex systems of symbols, the most powerful of which are linguistic. These symbols convey meaning. Through the process of socialization, a child learns to organize his or her perceptions, concepts, and behavior according to society's definitions of situations. In other words, children come to acquire what Spradley and McCurdy have termed a "tacit theory of the world," which is based on the knowledge that members of society have found useful in coping with life. This "tacit world-view" then functions to organize behavior, to anticipate the behavior of others, and to "make sense" out of the world.

Spradley and McCurdy considered that their definition of culture as "social knowledge" has implications for both the nature and goals of research and, accordingly, for the roles of both the investigator and the people whose culture is being investigated.

From this perspective, the focus of research is shifted from a description of "objective" facts about a society and its members to a systematic attempt to discover the knowledge a group of people have learned and are using to organize their behavior. The ultimate task of ethnographic research is to decode cultural symbols and to identify the underlying coding rules. In order to do this, the relationships among cultural symbols must be discovered (Spradley, 1979).

This shift in focus therefore affects the role of both the researcher and the people whose cultural knowledge is being investigated. The researcher is no longer a detached observer of behavior, but becomes a discoverer of cultural meanings used by a particular social group. Similarly, those being studied are no longer viewed as "subjects" or "respondents," but as "informants" who share their cultural knowledge with the investigator.

Spradley and McCurdy (1972) have stated that this orientation towards research represents "a radical change in the way many [social] scientists see their work. Instead of asking, "'What do I see these people doing?' we must ask, 'What do these people see themselves doing?'" (p. 9).

According to Packer and Addison (1989), naturalistic inquiry does not proceed from the canons of empirical science or logic. Instead, it proceeds from the investigator's participatory understanding of people and events. Packer and Addison stressed that this preunderstanding, or "forestructure," is simply a tentative starting point from which increasingly greater understanding of a phenomenon emerges and evolves. For Packer and Addison, this preunderstanding embodies a "particular

concern, a kind of caring" (p. 277).

Personal and professional interest in the subject matter of the inquiry raises the possibility that the researcher's "unrecognized assumptions" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 49) may influence analysis of the data.

In the naturalistic paradigm, Guba (1981) identified this possibility as a concern related to the "neutrality" aspect of the "trustworthiness" of a study, which is discussed in more detail later. In Guba's opinion, "naturalists are especially aware of this problem because they understand the multiple realities that one encounters (including multiple value systems) and the role that their own predispositions can play when they use themselves as instruments" (p. 81).

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), confidence in research findings can be increased, however, if a priori theoretical explanations, categories, and hypotheses are considered provisional until supported by, or "grounded in," the actual data. In their opinion, the standards by which procedures employed in the grounded theory approach are judged are just as rigorous as those used in valid and reliable quantitative studies.

### The Use of Research Literature in Grounded Theory Studies

The orientation described above does not preclude the use of empirical research literature based on a priori theory in naturalistic studies, however. Strauss and Corbin (1990) have suggested several functions for "technical," or published, literature in grounded theory research. These functions, which are described below, were instrumental in informing this study.

According to Strauss and Corbin, the first possible function of technical literature is to stimulate "theoretical sensitivity" (which refers to the researcher's perceptivity in recognizing meaning in the data) by providing evidence of significant, recurring concepts and relationships. A second potential use is to stimulate questions. For example, the technical literature can provide ideas for the formulation of research questions or for generating questions to ask respondents at the data collection and analysis stages of the study. In addition, the technical literature can provide secondary sources of data. Technical literature may also guide "theoretical sampling," which is described in more detail in the following section. Finally, the technical literature can provide supplementary validation of the researcher's own findings.

Use of the research literature on kindergarten retention as a guide in the formulation of specific questions for the interview protocol was described in detail in Chapter 3.

## Sampling Procedure

### Selection of Kindergarten Teachers for Interview

### Issues Relating to the "Trustworthiness" of the Study

Guba (1981) has stated that there are four major concerns related to the "trustworthiness" of the findings of a research study, whether it follows the rationalistic or naturalistic paradigm. These four concerns refer to the "truth value," applicability, consistency, and neutrality of the findings. In the naturalistic paradigm, the terms appropriate to these four aspects of trustworthiness are "credibility," "transferability," "dependability," and "confirmability." Analogous concepts in the rationalistic paradigm are "internal validity," "external validity" or "generalizability," "reliability," and "objectivity."

As Guba has noted, one of the goals of rationalistic inquiry is to develop truth statements that are nomothetic, generalizable, or "context-free." In contrast, naturalistic inquiry assumes that social phenomena are embedded in specific contexts

so that derived truth statements are idiographic, or "context-relevant."

To gain deeper understanding of the "multiple realities existing in the minds of people" (p. 80) in a naturalistic study, Guba has suggested employing the procedure of "theoretical/purposive sampling." The purpose of this form of sampling is not to achieve generalization, but to maximize the "range of information" obtained. One of Guba's suggested methods was to select a sample by asking each interview subject to nominate another individual who has a contrasting viewpoint to his or her own. Citing Kuzel (1990) and Patton (1992), Miles and Huberman (1994) have referred to this strategy as "maximum variation" sampling.

**Sample Selection Procedure**

The preceding method of interview sample selection was not feasible given the design of this study. The study design did facilitate the strategy of "dimensional sampling" advocated by Johnson (1990, cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994), however.

According to Miles and Huberman, dimensional sampling involves the researcher's predetermining the dimensions on which variability is sought, then selecting representative informants for each contrasting dimension. In this study it was possible to identify teachers with contrasting opinions regarding kindergarten retention from their questionnaire responses.

Seventy-five respondents had indicated their willingness to participate in a possible follow-up interview. Of these 75 potential volunteers, only 5 had agreed or strongly agreed with the questionnaire statement "Children should never be retained." Logically, agreement with this statement would indicate opposition to the practice of kindergarten retention, at least in principle. This selection criterion was corroborated by each teacher's written negative comments regarding retention and by the fact that each had recommended "zero" children for retention in each of her years of kindergarten teaching during the school years 1991-2 to 1995-6. These 5 respondents were accordingly contacted by phone and all agreed to be interviewed.

Selection of interviewees to represent teachers favoring kindergarten retention was more problematic because the remaining 70 respondents had all indicated their support of this practice to one extent or another. In fact, several respondents had made additional comments on the questionnaire or attached personal notes explaining why they strongly supported kindergarten retention.

As in the selection of "antiretention" teachers, the criterion of number of recommendations made for retention in the preceding 5 school years appeared to provide a reasonable indication that the teacher possessed a positive attitude towards retention.

Parenthetically, it should be noted that the number of recommendations for retention was judged to be a more valid index of the teacher's attitude than the actual number of retentions because a child's actually *being* retained involves not only the teacher's judgment, but also parental consent as well as administrative approval.

The decision to "narrow down" the sample further to include only those teachers who had reported retention recommendations for the past 5 years was based on the assumption that the "aim of [dimensional sampling] is to find people who are more knowledgeable, reliable, and accurate in reporting events that are *usual, frequent, or patterned* [italics added]" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 29).

Following this, the next level of sampling strategy consisted of "quota selection," which involves the identification of major subgroups and the selection of an arbitrary number from each (Goetz & Lecompte, 1984, cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Selecting only those teachers who had reported retention recommendations for the past 5 school years, it was possible to rank order approximately 20 teachers regarding the total number of children considered for retention. With regard to total numbers, this sample appeared to subdivide further into 3 groups. The first group consisted of 3 teachers, each of whom had considered a total of 21-25 children for

retention. The second group was comprised of teachers who had considered 8-11 children for retention. And the third group consisted of teachers who had considered 4-6 children for retention.

Teachers were contacted by phone and the resulting interview sample consisted of 5 teachers whose number of retention recommendations ranged from a total of 8- 25 children. A sixth teacher from the 4-6 recommendations group was chosen at random and added to the sample to provide a "cross-section" of retaining teachers. This was not done in an attempt to demonstrate a "positive correlation" between degree of favorability towards kindergarten retention and number of recommendations for retention, however. Rather, the aim was to provide added depth to the study. "Random purposeful" sampling that was used to select the sixth informant has been advocated in order to add credibility to the sample in situations in which a potential purposeful sample is too large, as is the case in this study (Kuzel, 1992; Patton, 1990, cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994).

No prior assumptions were made about the philosophical beliefs of the informants regarding child development or kindergarten retention. It was anticipated that belief statements would "emerge" during the course of the interviews.

For ease of reading, the term "retaining teachers" will be used throughout this chapter to refer to the 6 informants who expressed positive opinions regarding kindergarten retention and the term "nonretaining teachers" will be used to refer to the 5 informants who expressed negative opinions regarding kindergarten retention. It will be argued later in the chapter that these designations are somewhat simplistic, however.

## Demographic Characteristics of the Interviewed Teachers

All informants were female.

Their total years of teaching experience ranged from 1 3/4- 28 years, including part-time or half-time teaching. Their experience teaching at the kindergarten level ranged from 1-22 years, including half-time teaching. All but one informant had additional experience teaching at other levels. In Division 1 (Gades 1-3), six teachers had taught Grade 1, six Grade 2, and four Grade 3; one had taught in Division 2 (Grades 4, 5, and 6); one in junior high school, and one had done occasional teaching in Grades 1-12; 3 informants had experience in special education.

Regarding their highest level of education, 6 teachers had a bachelor's degree and 5 had an additional post-graduate diploma in early childhood education.

Four taught in the City of Edmonton, 5 in smaller urban centres, and 2 in rural communities.

Eight were employed by public or separate school divisions and 3 by privately operated Early Childhood Services (ECS) centres.

## Data Collection Procedure

Interviews were conducted in May and June 1996. These are the months in the school year during which teachers are completing their final evaluations of student progress for the school year.

Telephone contact was made with each teacher to arrange a personal interview. At this time the teacher was informed that the purpose of the interview was to obtain further information about the statements regarding kindergarten retention that were made on her questionnaire return.

Interviews were conducted at a time and in a place mutually convenient to the informant and researcher. They were conducted in the privacy of the informant's home, school conference room or classroom, or in the researcher's home. Each informant was interviewed on one occasion only.

Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to over 2 hours in length; the average length was 1 to 1 1/2 hours.

The interviews were taped and the transcripts were typed by the researcher as soon as possible afterwards.

## The Grounded Theory Approach

Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory approach was used to derive understanding of the phenomenon of kindergarten retention. Strauss and Corbin have defined a "grounded theory" as follows:

> A **grounded theory** is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge. (p. 23, emphasis in original)

According to Strauss and Corbin, data analysis in qualitative research consists of three main types of coding. These are open, axial, and selective coding. Strauss and Corbin described each type separately, while emphasizing that their demarcations are often "artificial."

First, "open coding" involves the analysis, comparison, conceptualization, and categorization of data. Second, "axial coding" involves synthesis of the data, focusing upon relationships among the categories. Strauss and Corbin used a "paradigm model" to connect subcategories to a category of data. The paradigm model describes the connection between subcategories and their category as a set of relationships consisting of causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, action/interactional strategies, and consequences. Finally, "selective coding" is "the process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development" (p. 116). Selective coding results in the identification of a core category, or "story line," which provides the basis of a theory "grounded" in the data.

### Open Coding

To some extent, the interview protocol questions themselves provided a priori categories for open coding, such as descriptions of characteristics of ready and unready children. Other categories emerged during the data analysis process, such as the categorization of teachers' opinions regarding parental authority to veto their promotional recommendations.

Open coding of the teacher interview data suggested the following categories along with their subcategories:

Characteristics of children considered ready for kindergarten
- age, gender, academic, language proficiency, social competence:

Characteristics of children considered unready for kindergarten
- age, gender, academic, language proficiency, social competence;

Factors contributing to perceived readiness for kindergarten
- biographical to student, biographical to teacher, institutional;

Factors contributing to perceived unreadiness for kindergarten
- biographical to student, biographical to teacher, institutional;

Suggested remedies for unreadiness for kindergarten
- admit student, hold out of school and/or recommend alternative preschool programs, raise entry age, advise parents to make their own decision;

Characteristics of children considered ready for Grade 1
- age, gender, academic, language proficiency, social competence;

Characteristics of children considered unready for Grade 1
- age, gender, academic, language proficiency, social competence;
Factors contributing to perceived readiness for Grade 1
- biographical to student, biographical to teacher, institutional;
Factors contributing to perceived unreadiness for Grade 1
- biographical to student, biographical to teacher, institutional;
Suggested remedies for unreadiness for Grade 1
- promote student, repeat kindergarten, alternative programming;
Perceived short-term effects/effectiveness of kindergarten retention
- academic, affective, social;
Perceived long-term effects/effectiveness of kindergarten retention
- academic, affective, social;
Risk factors associated with promoting "unready" children
- academic, affective, social (short-term);
- academic, affective, social (long-term);
Risk factors associated with retaining "ready" children
- academic, affective, social (short-term);
- academic, affective, social (long-term);
Specific contexts that negate teachers' propositional statements about kindergarten retention
- types of negative instances;
Attitudes towards educational research on kindergarten retention
- knowledge, lack of knowledge, relevance, irrelevance;
- relationship to teacher's position regarding kindergarten retention.

## Axial Coding

Axial coding is a set of procedures for reconstituting the data, which focuses on relationships between a category and its subcategories. As described by Strauss and Corbin:

> In axial coding our focus is on specifying a category (*phenomenon*) in terms of the conditions that give rise to it; the *context* (its specific set of properties) in which it is embedded; the action/interactional *strategies* by which it is handled, managed, carried out; and the *consequences* of those strategies. These specifying features of a category give it precision, thus we refer to them as *subcategories*. In essence, they too are categories, but because we relate them to a category in some form of relationships, we add the prefix "sub". (p. 97, italics in original)

Strauss and Corbin suggested using the following "paradigm model" in order to conceptualize the relationships between categories and subcategories of data:

(A) CAUSAL CONDITIONS → (B) PHENOMENON → (C) CONTEXT → (D) INTERVENING CONDITIONS → (E) ACTION/INTERACTION STRATEGIES → (F) CONSEQUENCES. (p. 99)

## Readiness for Kindergarten

Using the paradigm model, it was possible to identify main categories and their related subcategories. One major category involved statements teachers made about readiness for kindergarten. These statements are represented in the following logic diagram:

(A) CAUSAL CONDITIONS

Biographical to Student:
- gender
- chronological age
- environmental
- physical

Biographical to Teacher:
- type of teacher training
- previous experience teaching kindergarten
- previous experience teaching other grades

Institutional:
(Education System)
- entry cutoff date

(B) PHENOMENON
Readiness for Kindergarten

Specific Properties of Readiness:
- maturity - emotional, social, academic
- attentiveness
- concentration
- interest and effort
- oral communication skills
- independence - from adults, peers
- self-motivation
- peer relationships

(C) CONTEXT OF RESPONSE TO INADEQUATE READINESS FOR KINDERGARTEN:
Will vary according to the specific set of properties and conditions that exist in a particular situation. One or more of the following strategies may be employed:

(D) STRATEGIES FOR MANAGEMENT OF INADEQUATE READINESS FOR KINDERGARTEN:
Admit child to kindergarten program by virtue of child's being of legal age to attend.
Advise parents to keep child at home an additional year on the basis of teacher's estimate of child's probable success in kindergarten program.
Recommend alternative group experiences such as play school, etc. (May be in association with holding child out of school.)
Advise parents to decide for themselves whether child should enter kindergarten.
Support raising kindergarten entry age.

(E) INTERVENING CONDITIONS:
Teacher advice to parents, which is based on his or her explicit or implicit philosophy of child development.
Parental decision to enter or to withhold child from kindergarten program.

(F) CONSEQUENCES FOR CHRONOLOGICALLY YOUNG, NON-SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD:

If enters kindergarten:

| Intended | Unintended |
|---|---|
| child makes satisfactory progress, resulting in recommendation for promotion to Grade 1 | may be perceived by teacher as "developmentally unready" |
| teacher may modify program and/or institute interventions | parental withdrawal of the child if fails to make acceptable |
| | teacher may continue to make unfavourable comparisons with older classmates, possibly resulting in consideration for retention |

If held out of kindergarten:

| Intended | Unintended |
|---|---|
| child acquires an additional year of "developmental maturity" to prepare for expectations of kindergarten program | may be promoted to Grade 1 by virtue of age and size rather than progress |
| | may miss opportunity for success in kindergarten program during year of legal eligibility |

## Specific Properties of Readiness for Kindergarten

Do kindergarten teachers conceptualize "kindergarten readiness" as the possession or demonstration of specific characteristics, attributes, or behaviours? In other words, do kindergarten teachers have an implicit (or explicit) preconception of a child who is "ready" or "unready," for kindergarten?

When asked to describe an actual or hypothetical example of a child considered ready for kindergarten, 7 of the 11 teachers described a highly consistent profile of a "ready" or "unready" child; 3 teachers referred to a ready child as female and an unready child as male.

**Characteristics of ready children.** Regarding specific dimensions of readiness, 7 teachers ascribe the following attributes to ready children: emotional stability, independence from adults, from peers, or both, intellectual inquisitiveness, the ability to concentrate on completing a task, good verbal communication skills, willingness to take risks, self-motivation, the ability to follow directions and routines and, most importantly, the ability to socialize well with adults and peers.

While some teachers held the expectation that children already possess academic knowledge or skills, others considered that being "ready to learn," that is, being willing to learn "new things," was more important than demonstrating specific, "reading and math readiness" knowledge or skills at the beginning of kindergarten.

The following example epitomized the 7 teachers' collective description of the ideal ready child:

> Actually, I taught my own daughter in kindergarten. . . . She was ready maturally [sic]. . . . She could handle any of the tasks that I gave her to do. She could sit for long periods of time and attend, such as she would be required to do in a Grade 1 class. . . . Socializing, she was able to make friends easily and socialize with all the children in the class. . . . And she was . . . [a] very independent worker, very responsible for herself and for her belongings and helpful too as far as working with the other people . . . and the other children around her, ready to give and take with them. . . . She had good relationships with her peers and very strong rapport with the kindergarten staff as well.

As illustrated below, some teachers also considered a child's chronological age an important aspect of readiness:

> [A ready child] is able to self-direct herself very well. She's able to stay on task. She's able to follow directions real well. She's older. Her birth date will be . . . the first part of March, so she will turn 6 in March, which bears a factor. She entered kindergarten with a lot of awareness of story, verses, fairy tales. She's able to retell stories, detail, characters, what's happening. She's able to predict. She was aware of the shapes, colors, . . . same, different, big, little, all those kinds of things, which I call reading readiness skills. [In] her work habits, she's able to apply herself real well. She's able to take the information or the concepts that we [are] dealing with and apply them . . . on her own, working individually, then independently. . . . She knows the routine well. She can establish what's going to happen next or what's expected of her.

**Characteristics of unready children.** In contrast, these 7 teachers described the social-emotional characteristics or behaviours of unready children as being inconducive to successful functioning in a group learning environment.

Teachers attributed "unreadiness" to inadequacies in a child's emotional and social skills more often than to deficiencies in "academic readiness skills," such as emergent reading skills or understanding of numbers, although 2 teachers commented that unready children often also have poor fine motor or representational skills.

According to 3 teachers, an unready child demonstrates difficulty separating

from parents, such as, "the second and third week [an unready child] is still coming teary-eyed and still clinging." This behaviour indicates to the teacher that "they're [sic] not ready at that point still to let go and be away from Mom or Dad for half a day."

These teachers described an unready child as one who continues to be emotionally dependent on the teacher both for attention and for specific prompts in order to follow classroom routines. As one teacher put it, "[an unready child] still in October can't decide where they want to work and is waiting for the teacher, for me, to tell them suggestions"; as another teacher put it, an unready child is unable to "gear himself into the routine that we have. He's not able to formulate what's going to happen next and next and next. He needs to be reminded. He needs to be guided. He needs to have cues and cues all the time."

According to several teachers, an unready child is emotionally incapable of the "basic listening, let alone the more academic learning skills"; an unready child is incapable of listening for even brief periods because "his focus skills and his concentration skills maybe aren't up to par"; in short, an unready child has a "very short attention span."

Several teachers commented that an unready child prefers to "play" rather than to engage in more structured classroom activities, such as completing an art project or a printing activity. The following comments of one teacher reflected a general concern that unready children "just want to play":

> If a child . . . shows no interest in [certain activities that I have] and *just wants to play* [emphasis in original], that, to me, is the first clue. Not that the child wouldn't be able to do it. This has nothing to do with the intelligence of the child. This is basically that the child is not ready. *He just wants to play* [emphasis in original].

This teacher and 2 others stated that a child's being in a "strong play mode" is more characteristic of boys than of girls, as the above gender references imply.

According to one teacher, if an unready child is prevented from engaging in a preferred activity, such as playing at the sand or block centre, his or her customary emotional reaction is to "jump up and down and cry a little bit and stand there and pout until they [sic] finally decide maybe 20 minutes later they should try somewhere else."

Several teachers commented that if an unready child does engage in a structured activity, she (or, more frequently, he) may be expected to be "not very responsible" and to therefore put "very little effort" into completing the task, to become "easily distracted," and to exhibit a "very high frustration level" if the task proves difficult.

Seven teachers associated "unreadiness" with a child's inability to interact well with peers, such as being incapable of listening to classmates, of co-operating, or sharing ideas or possessions with them. One of these teachers attributed the poor social skills of unready children to their egocentricity: "Their world is so focused on them [sic] to the exclusion of their friends and their peers. They can't calm themselves down even to listen to another child share about a book they've brought or a bug or whatever."

In contrast, 2 nonretaining teachers attributed unreadiness to the type of program or personality of the teacher. The first teacher stated that

> the kids I would be concerned about would be the children that I don't think would be able to handle a classroom situation . . . that is very structured and where it is a sit-down situation for the whole day and the teacher is presenting teacher-directed materials for the whole day. I feel that the school needs to prepare for the child.

The second teacher expressed the opinion that

> it's such a personal thing, teaching. It's . . . like just the way that we react with children, the rapport we have with children. It is very much a personality. And you have some people who just sort of meld with the students and others that are there as just sort of the dictator in front of the class. . . . It'd be interesting to see, but you'd find [sic] a lot of people who believe in retention, this is the only way to do it, are the ones who are standing up at the front of the room just telling the kids exactly what they're going to be doing, and the ones that are really not sure about it are the ones [sic] are so concerned about the child all around, in the whole person.

Two retaining and 2 other nonretaining informants expressed no expectations about desirable, preexisting student characteristics. There were obvious differences in the recommendations they made for unready children at the end of kindergarten, however.

The first retaining teacher stated that

> [a child who is ready for kindergarten] has been able to separate himself from mom for a period of time and is able to interact with other children at some level. And from there we take it in kindergarten and try to develop the social and intellectual skills he'll need for Grade 1. . . . But I don't know if I've ever had a child who wasn't ready for kindergarten because I feel we can develop the necessary skills throughout the year, but he may have to repeat another year of kindergarten if he doesn't pick up those skills during the year.

The second retaining teacher also stated that she had no preconceptions about student entry skills. She might recommend retention for a child who does not display the anticipated "growth" during the kindergarten year, however:

> I believe that as long as they're toilet-trained, I can take them from there. . . . I don't like the term "unready for kindergarten"! . . . [We're] not saying they have to know any specific things before they're allowed to come in. They don't have to have a set of skills. They have to be a certain age.

The two nonretaining teachers indicated that legal eligibility to attend kindergarten was their sole criterion for readiness. According to the first teacher,

> the purpose is not for the child to come into the program being ready. The purpose of the program is to have all the children come into the program and look at all the individual levels. It's our job to make them "ready" *in* [emphasis in original] the program. So if they have to come into the program having . . . "x-number" of skills, I think that's inappropriate. I think we get kids when they come in; we take a look and evaluate where they're at and then we go from there. . . . And there again I would never consider a child who's not ready for kindergarten because we take those kids. I mean, they're 4 1/2, 5. They're of age to be in the program and then it's up to us to look at where their skills are and do the next step for them. So we just have to just say, "What's the next step?" And that's what they attain in their ECS year to me.

The second teacher asserted that

> any child that is 5 by March 1st of the school year would be what I consider is a child that's ready for kindergarten. [A child unready for kindergarten] . . . would be too young . . . would be before [legal entry] age.

## Causal Factors in Readiness for Kindergarten

Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined causal, or antecedent, factors as the events or incidents that bring about the occurrence or development of a phenomenon.

The causal conditions that influence a teacher's perceptions of kindergarten readiness fell into three general, interrelated areas: factors arising from the biographical history of the teacher, factors arising from the biographical history of the child, and institutional, or system, factors.

**Teacher factors.** Factors related to the biographical history of the teacher refer to her preservice training as well as previous and current professional experience.

Seven informants stated that their type of teacher training, years of kindergarten teaching experience or experience teaching higher grades provided the bases for their judgments about children's readiness for kindergarten.

Of these 7 informants, 4 retaining teachers credited their teaching experience as providing the knowledge of developmental stages and the expectations of higher grades on which they based their decisions about which students to recommend for retention. For example, two teachers emphatically stated that

> I have worked with *hundreds* [emphasis in original] of children. You learn to recognize certain traits and certain things that go on and I'm not saying I can't make a mistake, I'm not saying I wouldn't make a mistake in some aspects, but I am the the professional. . . . I have taught Grades 1, 2, 3. And personally I think every teacher should do the route a bit rather than just staying in one grade the whole time.

> I feel quite often if they're young chronologically that extra year in kindergarten will enable the child to be able to cope in Grade 1 just through maturity and I believe very, very strongly in that because if a child is young . . . quite often there are problems and frustrations among the parents, the teacher, the child and, if the child just stayed back in order to have that extra year of kindergarten, those problems will vanish. I'm a really strong believer in that . . . just through experience. This is my ninth year of teaching kindergarten.

In contrast, 3 nonretaining teachers credited their teaching experience, particularly in special education, with increasing their awareness and acceptance of individual differences and making them less inclined to evaluate all students by the same standards.

One of these teachers also credited the type of teacher training she received with making her less judgmental about students' abilities:

> Just looking at the people on staff, the people who have the special ed. background, the people who have early childhood background look at it so much differently than the ones who came out of the generalist education program. And I don't know if it's because we did more work on developmental courses . . . and more observations where we did strictly observations and there was no judgment . . . [That] was the best training I could have had as an early childhood teacher . . . because then I tend to be more objective as I'm looking at children and not labeling them.

**Student factors.** The following discussion focuses on the shared perceptions of informants as well as on differences in perceptions between retaining and nonretaining informants regarding the significant student factors that contribute to kindergarten readiness.

Four informants identified intellectual and socializing experiences in the home and elsewhere as important prerequisites to readiness for kindergarten. For example,

one retaining teacher considered that

> children who seem to come very, very socially or intellectually really handicapped, I say there's a family problem. . . . [When] you do parent interviews, you don't often have to look too far. So, you know, it's usually the home and the background, there's no doubt about it.

In describing a child whom she had considered retaining a second teacher stated that

> he came to school. . . . [Then] he again went every day with his parents to their business. . . . He would just go there with his trucks and toys and push them around. . . . There [was] no routine scheduling and so . . . when he first began. . . school, this was so foreign to him, needing to fit into routine, needing to be quiet, needing to be concentrating. . . . And so after all these months of *really* [emphasis in original] trying to get him into some rigid kind of thinking patterns, to be on focus . . . he's naturally has [sic] missed out on a lot of things at the beginning because he wasn't in tune with us *then* [emphasis in original].

The same teacher attributed problems in children's language development and general readiness for kindergarten to parental lifestyles and lack of knowledge about normal development:

> Generally, I would say that in the last 6 years that I'm seeing children entering the school system a little differently. . . . [Some] children in general are just not as prepared and they're having more of a difficulty to cope. . . . They don't seem to *come* [emphasis in original] with some of the bases. [A] lot of parents are working. I'm not saying that that's a factor. But, generally, it's the, "Get dressed! Go here! Quickly put your shoes on! Go here!" It's the rush, rush, rush, rush kind of situation that the child doesn't have time [to] settle and concentrate and have a quiet time that he . . . he or she . . . needs to focus. And the speech situation I'm finding . . . there are situations where children are able to pronounced [sic]. *But* [emphasis in original] when a child gets to be 3 1/2 or 4 and is still speaking in that fashion and is still not using the words in any kinds of degree and is not aware of "he, she, they, it," then I'm finding that . . . first-time parents are coming to me and going, "I didn't . . . ," you know. I would say to them, "When your child was 3 1/2, going on 4, and still not speaking in the kind of fashion . . . , didn't it occur to you that maybe you could get it checked out at the health unit . . . ?" And they'd say, "Oh, no, I just thought they'd grow out of it." . . . And I . . . think . . . maybe with the younger sets of parents now, they didn't have the modeling or . . . they . . . don't seem to have the resources of thinking through what the child should be doing . . . or where they should be at.

Ten informants referred to the chronological age of a child when discussing readiness for kindergarten.

All 6 retaining teachers expressed concerns about a child's age at entering kindergarten such as "children who come in with their birthdays after Christmas are just not ready by the end of the year," "any child [born] after . . . January-February I would . . . watch quite carefully to see how they function within a group," and "as soon as they come in, you can tell the ones that are 4 and the ones that are 5, 5 1/2." Two of these teachers commented that children should be "just 5" when starting kindergarten or have a birth date between "March and September where they're turning 5" in order to be "chronologically ready for kindergarten."

One of these teachers considered that being chronologically young compared to

classmates was particularly detrimental to boys' success in kindergarten. In her opinion, older girls experience greater success by virtue of their superior maturity:

> Personally, many times I've seen a younger male child come back to repeat kindergarten. One year I had five of them come back and their birthdays were all January, February. . . . If someone does repeat, generally their birthdays are in December, January, February, and generally they're male. So . . . after all these years it sort of repeats itself and it's such a common occurrence that I can't help but think there's some basis behind that. . . . Generally, I find that the girls will tend to develop far more quickly and . . . meet those requirements more quickly. Maybe when they're halfway through Grade 1 there can be the maturity sort of coming in a spurt . . . but I don't find it as generally with younger male students.

Another teacher stated that a child's ordinal position within the family also has a bearing on kindergarten readiness; a child's ordinal position may also create a conflict between parents' and teachers' perceptions of the child's progress:

> Quite often it depends where the child is in the family. If the child is the oldest and there are two babies, yes, they are very mature compared to the babies because the parents are comparing the child to the siblings, but in school where you have a very, very young child and the child is not emotionally mature, you're comparing that child to the other children, and that makes a difference.

**Institutional factors.** The effect of kindergarten entry cutoff date on readiness or unreadiness may not be immediately apparent. Yet the comments of both supporters and opponents of kindergarten retention suggested how entrance cutoff date might interact with chronological age, placing academic pressure on the younger children.

For example, one nonretaining teacher expressed the opinion that society in general is "rushing" young children into the educational institution, for which they are unprepared. This situation is exacerbated by an arbitrary cutoff date, which "by 2 days' difference," allows one child to enter at a "young age and [forces another] to wait"; in consequence, the older child is "just more settled and they've had another year of life experience under their belts and they're more able to do things a lot easier and they seem to catch onto things faster." Similarly, a second nonretaining considered that a cutoff date of March 1st "sets students up for failure by pushing them into school at a younger age."

Two retaining teachers also disapproved of a March 1st cutoff, claiming that it has encouraged some parents to hold their chronologically young children out of school, which increases further the age spread in a classroom.

A third retaining teacher was also critical of the March 1st cutoff, stating, "when I look at [this 4-year-old] boy in my classroom and he's *so* [emphasis in original] frustrated and I think, Oh, you poor wee thing, you should be home pushing a truck around! That's the developmental stage you're at."

One nonretaining teacher described a situation in which different entry cutoff dates among school districts had caused confusion and controversy regarding children's eligibility to attend. Rather than holding out their chronologically young children, parents had demanded that their legally ineligible children be admitted to kindergarten so that they would not be older than their classmates should they move to Edmonton. This teacher indicated that, as a result, she had considered some of these children for retention "because of age only and nothing to do with the academics or their social skills or anything else."

## Strategies for Managing Readiness for Kindergarten

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), grounded theory is an "action/interactional oriented method of theory building" (p. 104). That is, the theory assumes that, on an individual, group, or collective level, action/interaction is directed at managing, actualizing, or responding to a phenomenon that exists in context or under specific perceived conditions. Action/interaction is assumed to be "processual"; this attribute permits the study of its evolution. The action/interaction process is also assumed to be "goal oriented" in that its purpose is to respond to or to manage a phenomenon. Failure on the part of the participants to act or interact is also an important aspect of management strategies.

The following section describes strategies discussed by teachers in response to, or in order to manage, perceived unreadiness for kindergarten.

**Raising the kindergarten entry age.** As a remedy for perceived unreadiness for kindergarten due to chronological youngness, several teachers advocated raising the kindergarten entry age.

Three of the 6 teachers who supported kindergarten retention raised the issue of the kindergarten entry date during the course of their interviews.

The consensus of opinion was that March 1st, which is the cutoff date in the City of Edmonton and some of the neighbouring school jurisdictions, was too late in the school year.

As previously noted, teachers were critical of the March 1st cutoff because they believed that it resulted in some parents holding out younger children, thus widening the age gap of students.

For example, one retaining teacher recommended that

> raising the entry age I think would be really good. When they have the entry age, especially March 1st, that's so late. You're looking at children who are a whole year older because some parents choose not to send their January or February babies until the following year. And so you have a child who's turning 6 . . . say . . . in January, along with a child who's going to turn 5 in January. And I mean I don't have the same expectations of those children, but I mean when they start taking curriculum in first grade there are some very specific expectations. So I think definitely knocking back the entry age, even giving a deadline of January 1st, would be a nice start.

Similarly, one nonretaining teacher also advocated raising the entry age to 5 years for the following reasons:

> I think that children should be 5 before they come to kindergarten, definitely 5. I don't think we need to rush them. I think we need to give them more time to be children and to play and to not have to go to work because, even though it's called school and even though we play at centres, it's their job and they go to their job for 13 years and I don't think there's any need for any rush at all. And I don't think it hurts kids to be a little older and to be a little more grown up an and to be more independent. . . . I think sometimes we do children an injustice by rushing them into a group setting right away. And again it also does depend on what is going on at home. Some children are better off at school and some children would be just fine at home because people are talking with them and answering their questions and spending time with them and being with them. And that you can't legislate.

Two other nonretaining teachers pointed out that there would always be a younger, comparatively less capable group of children regardless of any arbitrary cutoff entry date, however. For example, one of these teachers observed that

> no matter where you move the age, . . . there's always going to be somebody who's at the borderline. There's always going to be somebody who's at the cutoff. And there's always going to be somebody who's not quite up to where everybody else is. So, even if you moved it up to . . . 7, there are still kids that are not going to be as far ahead as somebody else. I think . . . they could possibly move it to the end of the year. Instead of having February, [have it] the end of that particular year, the end of December. But, again, it's still going to affect the kids that were born in November or October. So, I don't think it changes anything. It's just a different set of kids that will be affected.

**Parental "red-shirting".** Another suggested remedy for kindergarten unreadiness is for parents to hold out until the following school year a child who, although close to the cutoff age, is legally eligible to attend. The rationale for this practice, colloquially termed "red-shirting," is to allow a 4-year-old an additional year for maturity before entering school. As discussed in Chapter 3, proponents of red-shirting consider this practice particularly advisable for a young male child (e.g., see [Holloman, 1990]).

The opinions of retaining teachers varied regarding the degree to which they would advise parents to hold chronologically young children out of school.

Their recommendations ranged from providing information to parents and then allowing them to make up their own minds to strongly advocating holding out and possibly providing the child with other socializing experiences, particularly if the child is a boy.

All 5 nonretaining teachers generally supported having a child close to the cutoff date start kindergarten, although only one was unequivocally in favour of this. For example, one teacher expressed some reservations about an individual child:

> I have a little boy this year . . . who is very young all-round and his mother asked me in March, "Should I have kept him out for another year?" And I thought, "Oh, now is an interesting time to ask me." He has grown an awful lot. . . . but if he were my child, I would have kept him out. But I am a teacher so I think more about it, or I know more about it just from what I do. . . . In her case, [holding out] could have been [a solution]. She could have had him home another year or I think, if she wanted to put him in a group setting, playschool would have been an easier introduction for him. It would have been more of a . . . gradual weaning away from having an adult there for you all the time.

A second teacher qualified her recommendation about putting a young child into kindergarten on the basis of gender. In general, however, she favoured having a younger child enter kindergarten.

A third teacher discussed the example of her own daughter and concluded that entering a younger child is a decision that parents should make after weighing both its advantages and disadvantages.

Similarly, a fourth teacher stated that the decision should be made on an individual basis. She would provide parents with information to assist them in making an informed decision for themselves. Her personal preference was that younger children enter kindergarten because it would give them an additional year of socializing experience.

A fifth teacher strongly opposed both raising the kindergarten entry age and holding out younger children on the grounds that these practices contribute to three interrelated problems. First, they disrupt what she termed the "natural distribution" of age in a kindergarten class. Second, they result in teachers' raising their curriculum expectations since they now have older, presumably more capable, students. Third, heightened expectations cause teachers to make inequitable comparisons between older and younger children.

This teacher proposed the following "experiment" to provide support for younger students:

> It would be interesting to have a pilot program to have a classroom of students from July on and that would be one classroom and to have another classroom of perhaps all the older students. . . . It would be sort of dividing them. . . . We're talking a range here of 18 months and that's what I've got in my classroom, October to March. . . . That's quite a range and if we can't do that successfully for students . . . why can't we take a look at some programs where we could do July and have the younger age group and the older age group so that the younger age group can have a support group? [They] can have actually [sic] teachers who look at them positively . . . because that's not happening enough. . . . [The] parents are getting this negative, negative, negative message about their child, who's developmentally appropriate for their age. . . . I don't know how parents would feel about [it]. . . . [It] would be an interesting scenario.

**Intervening Conditions**

In Strauss and Corbin's (1990) paradigm model, intervening conditions refer to "the broad and general conditions bearing upon action/interactional strategies" (p. 103). These include culture, economic status, career, history, biographical features and philosophical or ideological positions of the participants. Such intervening conditions may either facilitate or constrain action/interactional strategies. If possible, intervening conditions themselves also require management.

The previous sections have highlighted similarities and differences of opinion about readiness for kindergarten based on the views of the informants themselves towards retention.

When discussing readiness for kindergarten, another important intervening condition is parental perception of their child's probable success.

As Cantalini (1987) pointed out, teachers make decisions about readiness in the contexts of referral for special services and retention once a child has entered school. Before a child enters school, however, teachers may only advise parents on the basis of their philosophy and experience; they cannot approve or prohibit a child's entry into school since district or provincial policy dictates the legal entry age.

In the absence of mandated kindergarten, parental decision determines whether the child will enter or continue in kindergarten during the year they are legally eligible to attend.

In the following scenario, for example, a mother's perception of her son's lack of readiness led to a prompt course of action:

> A couple of years ago I had a little guy who came in and the mother says, "I don't think he's ready. Let me know." . . . [Before] the end of September I always call all of the parents to let them know how their child has been adjusting and this child within 2 weeks I could see . . . he just wasn't interested much in being there. And I phoned the mother and she says, "Oh, that's all I wanted to hear. I'm taking him out. I suspected he wasn't ready. I'll take him out and put him back next year." And that's exactly what she did.

In this example, the teacher supported the mother's decision to remove and hold the child out of school. Indeed, the majority of teachers expressed support for the parent's right to act as final arbiter in determining whether the child should begin kindergarten when legally eligible to do so.

Willingness to defer to parental judgment about a child's readiness, particularly when the teacher lacks information about a child, was illustrated in the following comments of one nonretaining teacher:

> I've had parents come to me in April and May and I've never met them or their children and they're asking me whether they should keep their child out another year. And one of the things that I say to them is, "You tell me why you're asking me this. You must have some reason and, if you're that seriously concerned enough to come down here and talk to me about it and I don't even know your child, maybe you've already answered your own question." It's especially difficult; I can't form an opinion on a child I don't know.

Two retaining teachers questioned parents' ability to judge their children's readiness for kindergarten, however.

While critical of the current kindergarten entry cutoff date of March 1st, the first teacher defended the necessity of an admission cutoff date in order to prevent parents from entering "immature" children:

> If there weren't cutoff dates and there was a test you could have your child take in order to start kindergarten, then all sorts of parents would be coming in with 3 1/2- and 4-year-olds to start kindergarten because they have stimulating home environments and they do so much with their child and their child is *ready* [emphasis in original), but emotionally a child is not ready.

The second teacher indicated that she would like limits set on the amount of influence parents exert in educational decisions because "what's happening with a lot of school boards and schools is that they are giving up and they're allowing parents to make decisions, be the deciding force."

This teacher recommended that school boards provide parents with information about curricular expectations so that they are better informed when deciding whether or not to enter their child in school.

**Consequences of Management Strategies**

According to Strauss and Corbin, certain outcomes or consequences follow action/interaction strategies that occur in response to or in order to manage a phenomenon. Consequences may not always be predictable or the ones intended by the participants. Failure to take action/interaction in order to manage a phenomenon also has consequences.

It seems reasonable to assume that one consequence of admitting "unready" children to kindergarten is that some who are perceived as unready at the outset will continue to be perceived at the end of kindergarten as unready for Grade 1.

Four retaining teachers indicated that they considered subsequent unreadiness for Grade 1 highly probable in the case of a chronologically young, immature child of presumed normal intelligence.

Two of these teachers consider that parents' or teachers' efforts to improve a child's skill development will achieve only limited success because

> you can't force a child to grow back teeth. You can't speed up a kid. You can't speed up certain kinds of development. If that fine motor is so poor that a child just can't hold a pencil, he's not going to be terribly successful in Grade 1 doing too much. And you can provide activities to strengthen those, but only to a certain degree. You know, some aspects just can't be speeded up.

As discussed in previous chapters, a major assumption of the maturationalist philosophy is that "nature cannot be hurried"; that is, pedagogical intervention is assumed to have minimal effect in facilitating developmental maturity. This belief is evident in the teacher's comments above.

In contrast, 2 other retaining teachers stated that it is not possible to predict

outcomes for individual children and that programming can facilitate the progress of even the youngest children.

The intended consequence of red-shirting is protection of the unready child from possible difficulties in kindergarten. This is presumably the well-intentioned reason why some parents opt for, and some teachers support, this practice.

There also appear to be unintended consequences that are not foreseen by parents when they decide to red-shirt their chronologically young, eligible child.

One unintended consequence is that held-out children are at least a year older than classmates who were not held out; this creates further heterogeneity within a kindergarten class.

Another unintended consequence is that older, held-out students may be physically larger than their younger classmates. Their larger size may be a significant factor in their subsequent promotion even though they may display learning or social problems. This possibility was illustrated by the following two examples:

> I have one girl that is quite mature, very responsible, will sit, listen, do all that kind of stuff, but her reading skills are very, very weak, but she's still one that I think I'm going to put on [into first grade] basically . . . because of her age, her size, and her maturity.

> I had a parent last year who wanted to hold her [held-out] son back and our honest opinion was that it would do him more harm than good. He was a big boy. He tended to be very aggressive. And we thought that another year in kindergarten would just fuel that aggression because he'd have all these little bodies to pick on.

While teachers appeared aware that parental red-shirting ultimately results in widening the age gap among students, only one expressed the opinion that this practice should be discouraged, however. As noted previously, her objections were that red-shirting results in three detrimental consequences: the disruption of what she termed "the natural distribution of age," raised academic expectations, and inequitable comparisons of younger and older children. Additionally, she expressed the opinion that parents and teachers have been either unaware of or have denied the negative consequences of red-shirting, which she referred to as a "myth." As a result, parents have been "closing big windows" of learning opportunities at an important time in their child's development.

A second nonretaining teacher also mentioned that she allowed what might be termed a "settling-in period" before she evaluated a child's readiness for kindergarten.

Only the informant who termed the presumed positive effects of red-shirting a "myth" alluded to a potential unintended consequence of both red-shirting and of the precipitous removal of a seemingly unready child from kindergarten, which is that the child might have actually achieved success had he or she been allowed to complete the program.

## Readiness for Grade 1

Through the process of axial coding, the second major phenomenon that emerged was related to statements that informants made about readiness for Grade 1.

As with readiness for kindergarten, the conceptual framework suggested by the paradigm model was used to explore the phenomenon of readiness for Grade 1. That is, it was possible to categorize informants' comments into statements about specific dimensions of readiness or unreadiness for Grade 1, causal factors, proposed management strategies, intervening conditions that either facilitated or constrained proposed management strategies, and perceived short- and long-term consequences of proposed management strategies.

## Specific Properties of Readiness for Grade 1

Like readiness for kindergarten, teachers also had clearly defined criteria for readiness or unreadiness for Grade 1.

**Characteristics of unready children.** Retaining teachers tended to focus on within-the-child characteristics that indicated a lack of readiness. Again, the consistent profile of an unready child that emerged was one who possessed "normal" intelligence, but who was chronologically young and judged as less mature emotionally, socially, or physically compared to classmates.

The following was a typical description of a child who would be considered for repeating kindergarten:

> I wouldn't hold back a child simply because they're young, or simply because they're tiny, or simply because their fine motor skills are weak, or simply because their social skills are poor, though I don't like to say "simply" with social skills. But when you get a child with *all* [emphasis in original] of that, poor social skills, poor fine motor skills, young, you need to give them a chance. And I think the best chance is to give them another year in kindergarten especially if they have an average IQ. You're talking about a child who just needs to grow up a little bit. So, I wouldn't hold them back because of one or two things. But when they're all working together and you've got a child who you know is just going to flounder in first grade, it's not fair.

Only one retaining teacher indicated that formal psychological assessments are performed before students are recommended for retention. In fact, 4 retaining teachers indicated that they made promotional decisions primarily on the basis of their "intuition," "gut," observation, or previous teaching experience.

In contrast, 3 nonretaining teachers stated that their only criterion for promotion was that a child be of legal age to attend Grade 1. All 3 teachers expressed the opinion that the school should "prepare for the child and that if the child has gone through the kindergarten program, then . . . as long as their age is appropriate, they should be able to . . . move into a Grade 1 situation [which] should be able to adapt to the kindergarten child."

A fourth nonretaining teacher pointed out that kindergarten is not a mandatory program. Although she might be concerned about children's future academic success in Grade 1, she was satisfied if "they have had a good year of being away from home and [were] beginning at least to learn how to learn in a group, . . . how to take directions, . . . to make decisions, to be responsible for their own actions."

Additionally, all 5 nonretaining teachers indicated that they took initial individual differences in readiness and individual growth over the year into consideration when they made promotional decisions.

According to one teacher, for example, it was possible for even the youngest children to experience growth in their abilities over a short period of time:

> Because children in kindergarten have the widest range of abilities, I do *not* [emphsis in original] think that's a time when we should retain them. You see so much growth over even the two months in the summer [between kindergarten and Grade 1], so much maturing. And I imagine that it happens even with the chronologically young children too that . . . start out as the youngest in their kindergarten class. And I do know of children that . . . it's been suggested that they be retained and the parents . . . hadn't made a firm decision by September and *such* [emphasis in original] maturing had happened over the summer and they were ready for Grade 1. And if . . . that maturing hadn't happened, I would have still believed they should have been in [Grade 1].

Another teacher stated that whereas she had previously believed that students needed to be "more closer" in abilities going into Grade 1, she had come to evaluate students solely in terms of their individual growth over the the kindergarten year: in her opinion, individual growth was the best indicator that a child had potential for continued growth in learning in Grade 1.

**Causes of Readiness for Grade 1**

As indicated previously, retaining teachers tended to attribute sources of unreadiness for Grade 1 to constitutional factors, that is, to effects resulting from a child's age and attendant lack of "developmental maturity."

For example, one teacher indicated that she would "automatically promote an older child" because the problems of an older child, such as "hyperactivity," "need to be dealt with in Grade 1," such as having the child put on medication "in order to be able to cope with the demands and stresses of Grade 1" whereas "that extra year in kindergarten will enable the [younger] child to be able to cope in Grade 1 just through maturity."

Two of the retaining teachers also attributed "problems in the home," such as parental lifestyle or inappropriate role-modelling, as contributing to unreadiness.

The comments of nonretaining teachers tended to focus exclusively on factors within the child's social environment, particularly the family context, that may contribute to "unreadiness" for Grade 1.

In fact, these 2 teachers questioned whether the school could effect much improvement by retaining children if their life circumstances remained unchanged. In the words of one teacher, "as teachers we can bang our head against that wall for a really long time, but if other people in the children's lives aren't going to change what they're doing, . . . we just maybe need to carry on."

**Intervening Conditions**

As Graue (1993) has pointed out, educational decisions made on behalf of children are made within a social context that includes other decision-makers besides the teacher, most importantly parents and administrators, and frequently other teaching staff and support personnel.

Influences exerted by these other participants, whether actual or anticipated, may facilitate or constrain the teacher's recommended course of action for a particular child. Their degree of influence obviously varies with the specific context. Nevertheless, it was possible to make the following general observations based on the informants' comments.

**Influence of parents in promotional decisions.** According to retaining teachers, parental acceptance of their recommendation that the child be retained in kindergarten was the prerequisite for a "successful retention." Retaining teachers therefore stressed the importance of providing an appropriate rationale to parents, and, in turn, the importance of parents' putting what one teacher termed a "positive spin" on their explanation to the child. This opinion is summarized as follows:

> I think if the parents are accepting and understanding, then just continue to try and help the child rather than really coming down on them and the same thing with the teacher, making them feel like they don't know or really upset or annoyed, that they still can't get it, I think that probably affects them more. I think if they're told and there's understanding that we all have our own speed of grasping onto things and it's accepted, then I think there won't be so much of a problem, but I think if the child is looked down on and made to feel incompetent that's where the damage is done. . . . I think the teacher has to be accepting of it. I think the parents have to be accepting of it and then, in turn, the child

would be accepting of it.

Three retaining teachers indicated that they tried to maintain regular communication with parents throughout the year and recommended retention only after consulting with them. According to one teacher, parents have returned several years later, expressed their happiness that the child repeated kindergarten, and indicated that the child was now "doing great."

According to some informants, parents offer a variety of reasons for differing with their recommendations; for example, a parent may have a different evaluation than the teacher of the child's performance or may consider it more beneficial for the child to remain with current classmates.

Three informants commented on parents' devaluing the importance of the kindergarten year itself as a reason for refusing to have their child retained. As the illustrated below, these parents considered kindergarten only a "play program" and preferred to have their children retained in Grade 1 if necessary:

> Last year . . . there were 3 of them and the parents didn't want them retained. Basically, their comment to me was they felt that if they had to repeat anything they'd want them to repeat Grade 1 because that's where . . . the reading and the math is [sic] taught. And they felt that . . . if they didn't get it the first time, it would be a repeat and it would be a lot easier for them. And that's the sort of reasoning and excuse that I get from the parents when I say I would like to retain them. . . . I suppose . . . part of the kindergarten teacher's problem is I really don't think kindergarten is taken as seriously as it should be by a lot of parents. And I really don't think they understand what goes on and perhaps *it is* [emphasis in original] our fault, like maybe we aren't explaining it well enough, like with them learning their social skills and working with us and how important play is and stuff like that. So it could be part of our problem. . . . I mean I have had [other] kindergarten teachers say to me [sic] the parents, when they switched from [teaching] kindergarten to another grade, they have asked if they are qualified to teach it.

Informants' comments revealed a variety of reactions regarding parental veto of their promotional recommendations.

While some informants expressed their willingness to defer to parental wishes because parents "know their kids best," others took a more critical attitude. For example, 2 of the retaining teachers suggested that if parents were to spend time observing in the classroom they would gain a more realistic evaluation of the child's performance in comparison to classmates.

In the opinion of a third retaining teacher, parents should not have the "final say" in promotional decisions; she expressed the following reservations about parental involvement in educational decision-making in general:

> I think [that in] the educational system . . . we're relying more on other people making our decisions for us almost like with the parents sort of coming in and having the parent group. Not that I disagree with that. I mean I definitely think we should have parent input and stuff like that, but I'm the professional. . . . *I am* [emphasis in original] the professional. I have worked with *hundreds* [emphasis in original] of children. You learn to recognize certain traits and certain things that go on. And I'm not saying that I can't make a mistake . . . but I am the professional. And I think with a lot of school boards and schools what's happening is that they are giving that up and they're allowing parents to make decisions, be the decision-making force. . . . [Our] ECS is basically a parent-run group and I've been very fortunate, you know. I've pretty well had good parents, but . . . you can [get] some that are very, very vocal and very, very domineering and it's sort of what they sort of want and that's the same thing

> with how a school is run. I think you can get a certain little group . . . and they have their own ideology and, if the school or the principal isn't strong enough, it'll go that way. And that's why . . . I really, really question a lot of this coming in with parent involvement . . .

This teacher also suggested that parents who are "sitting on the fence" about retaining their child might be swayed if they are given information about the academic and behavioral expectations of Grade 1. As part of her year-end orientation, this teacher has had the Grade 1 teacher make a presentation to parents regarding the first grade curriculum and expectations. As a result, many parents have admitted to her that they didn't realize "how much" children have to learn in Grade 1. In this teacher's opinion, school boards must also take greater responsibility of making parents better aware of curricular expectations.

**School policy, administrator philosophy, and programming considerations.** Official district or school policies, the school administrator's approval of the teacher's recommendation, and available programs are all aspects of the formal organization of the school that influence a teacher's placement decisions.

One of the nonretaining teachers credited two previous principals with challenging her beliefs about kindergarten retention, which motivated her to question their validity and to subsequently change her promotional practice:

> I've been fortunate. I've worked under two principals in particular who have not been afraid to challenge me . . . I was challenging myself about my beliefs and how I thought especially about the retention aspect. That was one major change in my teaching career. I always felt it was better to have them repeat when they were younger and I just had a major change that one year. A lot of it was discussion and arguing and I was swayed dramatically. . . . Personally, it was very exciting to have these conversations and to be challenged like that. I really grew an awful lot that year. I'd find little things in my mailbox to read.

In contrast, one retaining teacher commented on the philosophical differences between herself and her current administrator regarding kindergarten retention; she indicated that her opinions had not been "swayed" by the administrator's rhetoric or antiretention literature. In fact, she cited a recent example in which the administrator recommended promotion for a kindergarten child; this promotion had the following longterm results:

> I have one English and one [bilingual] program. And I had recommended this child be held back and our administrator talked with the parents and she thought the child could go on. So the child was put into Grade 1 and there were some problems emotionally and academically. That's this year. And the child was then pulled out of the [bilingual] program and put into the neighbourhood school. But there were also some personal problems [there as well].

In contrast, a nonretaining teacher described the effects of her central administration's recent adoption of a policy supporting onsite decision-making; in her opinion, the collegial approach to staffing that was encouraged by the central and school administration has resulted in improved placement and programming, as illustrated by this example of one student:

> Our Grade 1 classes are smaller. Well, they tend to shrink even smaller. That was sort of our school philosophy a few years ago when they polled the staff and asked them what they felt was necessary as far as how to put staffing in the school. We had a principal who was very open to our ideas. And Number 1 on the list was to keep the Grade 1 classes small. So we're at 18-19 in those

> classes and probably no more than 20 or 21 in each of those classes, which is a nice size, you know. Plus the class that [the above-mentioned student] is going into will have a teacher-aide working with another child, but that child won't require the aide all the time anyways. So there's that opportunity there for . . . some help . . . for him as well.

While nonretaining teachers discussed exploring various Grade 1 program options and modifying programs to meet student needs, retaining teachers expressed concerns about chronologically young students' capacity to meet the expectations of traditionally structured Grade 1 classrooms.

For example, the nonretaining informant and retaining informant quoted respectively below expressed totally opposite opinions about whether it is the child or the Grade 1 program that needs to adapt:

> Grade 1 programs need to move back more towards the early childhood ideas with centres and letting the children move around the classroom rather than having to sit in desks and being stationary because it's certainly not the way early childhood children are learning [sic]. . . . As far as I'm concerned, it should go all the way up into high school having the children moving around them from centre to centre and hands-on learning rather than teacher-directed and teacher-presented information.

> I think there are possibly some schools where the Grade 1 classrooms are set up totally on a centre basis where the child can learn on an individual basis, but I don't believe there are a lot of classrooms like that in effect and so they still are in a very structured situation. So they have to be ready for that.

**Staff philosophy, or "atmosphere of the school."** The perspectives of other members of the teaching staff, either individually or collectively, may also exert an informal influence on kindergarten teachers' proposed management strategies.

For example, one nonretaining teacher considered that kindergarten retention remains a "big controversy" among teachers. She indicated that she was the only member of the current school staff who believed in promoting chronologically young children. She was prepared to withstand her colleagues' criticism because she believed that she had fulfilled her responsibility as a professional, which was to help a child attain his or her "next steps":

> [Students are] chronologically of age to move on and I think it's our job as professionals to make the program appropriate for that child's next steps. That's my view. It may not happen. I may send off some students this year who may be young and may be with a teacher in Grade 1 who really does not get it and who really believes that we have done that child wrong by moving them on. I'm prepared to know that that's going to happen. I'm not unrealistic. . . . But what can I do? I mean, you know, I've done my job . . .

This informant called for the teachers in her community to promote acceptance of "individual differences," particularly in younger kindergarten students:

> I think it needs to start with teachers because teachers then become parents and they have a big impact in their community in regards to other parents. They're seen as leaders. . . . "Well, this is a parent, but she's a teacher. She must know what the right thing is." And their opinion is very well-noted. It's very respected. . . . I'm in those same groups and it's my opinion against 30! Who do you think [parents] are going to believe, you know?

On the other hand, a retaining informant used the term "traditional" to

describe the reluctance of her school staff to adopt "faddish" educational methods:

> I really feel that if a child is unable to do the work that they should not simply be promoted like we have been doing with continuous learning. . . . [A] number of schools have bitten into this fad so-to-speak. Our school seems to be a little more traditional and we don't tackle something like a brand-new concept which is just out in a big way. We might perhaps start with doing one whole language project, where dinosaur books are brought in, and maybe one month of whole language will be done in the year, but we wouldn't do the whole year as a whole language kind of approach. Now that's the way our teachers are. I think academically our school is quite high as a result. And our numbers seem to go up a little bit each year because parents have heard this is quite a traditional school.

Another nonretaining teacher also commented that retention is an "emotional topic" among her school staff:

> It's [a] very emotional topic too. And it is on staff. And we had a strategic planning group five years ago and one of the things we were looking at was retention and it was very hot, the topic as it was discussed and the emotions that got going. And even on our staff it tends to be the same way. It's very, very emotional. We have some people who feel you've got to retain them . . . if they don't achieve a certain grade-point equivalent on the CTBS or CAT-2, then they've got to be retained. And we've got other people [who think] we need to look at these other factors as well. So it's a very hotly debated topic and I think it has been for years.

The teacher quoted above considered that a teacher's acceptance of individual differences in student abilities is largely due to type of teacher training: in her opinion, teachers with early childhood or special education training are less judgmental than those with generalist training, perhaps because of their greater exposure to developmental and observational courses.

One retaining teacher indicated that she would take the personality of a Grade 1 teacher into consideration when making promotional decisions in "maybe very, very extreme cases" in which the teacher had "very, very high" academic expectations; this teacher did not consider excessive expectations of the Grade 1 teachers with whom she had contact a concern for the following two reasons, however:

> At the present time it's not a major factor and I think part of the reason . . . is that I have taught Grades 1, 2, 3. . . . I sort of feel I know what kindergarten is about. I know what I feel was expected of me to work with that child and, if I feel that child has sort of covered most of that, then I will promote them. . . . I mean most of the ones I've had in Grade 1 have always been very, very helpful and if I ask, you know, how so-and-so is doing and stuff like that, they've all been fairly good, but I think if I had . . . somebody in Grade 1 who was very, very strong and very, very dominant and had very, very high expectations, then that probably would [make a difference].

This is the one retaining teacher who expressed some doubts about the efficacy of kindergarten retention; she was also the only one who expressed the opinion that kindergarten teachers "just have to accept" the range of developmental maturity displayed by their students and, accordingly, not be "very harsh" in their judgments.

**Parent volunteers.** Two informants reported that they utilized parent volunteers in their classrooms on a regular basis.

In addition to aides and smaller classes, the nonretaining teacher quoted in

the previous section considered parental volunteers valuable resources for providing struggling kindergarten students, who might otherwise be considered for retention, with individual or small group assistance.

One retaining teacher indicated that students with identified special needs received small group instruction by parent volunteers, aides, and timetabling arrangements in which half-classes went to music so that the teacher could work with small groups. This teacher did not indicate whether parent volunteers and other resources were employed in assisting nonspecial needs but otherwise struggling kindergarten students, however.

**Educational research on kindergarten retention.** It will be recalled that Strauss and Corbin defined intervening conditions as "the broad and general conditions bearing upon action/interactional strategies" (p. 103). Intervening conditions included the "ideologies and philosophies" of participants regarding a phenomenon and its possible management.

In this regard, it seems reasonable to assume that teachers would have formed some opinions regarding the practical value of the retention research they have become acquainted with during the course of their professional development. It also seems reasonable to assume that these opinions could be considered part of teachers' "ideological" or "philosophical" positions on kindergarten retention.

Garrison and Macmillan's (1987) discussion of the relationship between teachers' subjective educational "theories" and their utilization of educational research is particularly relevant when considering the impact of kindergarten retention research on teachers' promotional decisions.

It will be recalled from Chapter 2 that Garrison and Macmillan referred to a teacher's implicit pedagogical "theory" as a "filter" through which research findings were mediated. Garrison and Macmillan contended that teachers would implement research findings only if they believed them to be relevant to their practice.

Before discussing informants' attitudes towards retention research, two related questions must first be considered. First, was kindergarten retention itself ever presented as a discussion topic during the course of the informants' professional preparation? Second, how familiar do informants consider themselves with educational research on kindergarten retention?

As far as kindergarten retention itself is concerned, only 2 informants recalled this topic being discussed in their preservice programs; in both cases, this discussion occurred in the context of special education courses. To the best of the remaining 9 informants' recollections, the topic of retention in general, or kindergarten retention in particular, was not discussed during their preservice curriculum or early childhood education (ECE) courses.

At the ECE graduate diploma level, one retaining informant recalled being taught that "retention was detrimental to the child because their development should be on a continuum and taught individually"; 2 nonretaining informants recalled choosing kindergarten retention as an individual research topic because of their own professional interest; a third nonretaining teacher indicated that she had conducted her own personal research on the topic in order to better inform her discussions with parents and other professionals.

Informants' responses varied concerning the degree to which they considered themselves familiar with research literature on kindergarten retention.

Four informants, 3 retainers and one nonretainer, admitted to only limited familiarity with retention research; these informants recalled reading "a couple of studies," "a few articles," "just a bit, not a great deal at all," and not being "very familiar with it" unless the topic of kindergarten retention research had been introduced at staff meetings or inservice presentations. As discussed below, however, the one nonretainer in this group claimed that even her limited exposure to retention research had had significant impact on her opinions and practice.

The remaining informants, both retainers and nonretainers, stated that they

considered themselves familiar with retention research.

When asked to elaborate, one retaining informant stated that she had read "a wide variety of things," although she did not lend much credence to the findings because the studies were primarily American; a second retaining informant recalled reading "a binder of materials," which did not "sway [her] over to the no-retention side"; a third retaining informant remembered reading "some a good few years ago"; these informants provided no other details.

Of the nonretaining informants who considered themselves familiar with research, one estimated that she had not read any research for "about 3 or 4 years" since completing some postgraduate papers on the topic of kindergarten retention. Her recollections of most of the research findings she read at that time were that "by Grade 3 they're all basically back to the same level again whether they have been retained or not and the effects on their self-esteem is pretty devastating to the kids that have been retained."

A second nonretaining teacher indicated that she had tried to remain current on the literature regarding kindergarten retention; she guessed that she probably read "something about it a couple of times a year" in the "half a dozen journals" she followed. According to this teacher, the "solid research shows that retention really never does benefit a child." She also regarded research as instrumental in forming and continuing to inform her pedagogical beliefs and practice:

> I've read a lot of research and when I first started this position I was right out of university. I had just finished my education degree, so I was still looking for a lot of theoretical bases to develop my beliefs on. And two people that I met at this organization had been to . . . a conference that was specifically about retention. And . . . all of the information that they brought back supported children going on, that retention never really has any longterm benefits. . . . So I then collected all this information the people brought back from the conference they went to and it presented pros and cons and all the same arguments that teachers and parents and many of the general public will bring to the discussions about, "What about this? What about that?" And . . . the really . . . solid research shows that retention really does never benefit a child. So I based my beliefs on that.

A third nonretaining teacher did not indicate either the frequency or recency of her reading of the research literature. She did express the opinion, however, that parents and teachers who support kindergarten retention "lack appropriate data where you could take a look at numbers" and should have their beliefs challenged by "very good research data." This teacher contended that "not enough research" has been made available to teachers; and what is available is too "technical" for teachers to understand. In her opinion, faculties of education and school boards have the responsibility to provide parents and teachers with research findings that "could really get on their level." At the same time, this informant was skeptical that most teachers would adopt a more open-minded attitude even if they were presented with research findings that challenge their beliefs:

> If [the teachers' conferences] would have a session on retention, I can't even say that most teachers would respond. I think they would read it and, if it's within their view, they might go. If it's not in their view, they don't even want to tackle it because retention is something that I find in teachers it's ingrained. They have an opinion and they stick with it and it's so difficult to have an impact on that and teachers who are parents are even worse! You take a look at any teacher that I know who are parents now moving their children into the ECS program. They are the worst in regards to advocating to their friends, to their neighbors, to their peer group that retention is appropriate for late babies and, if a child has not been successful in ECS, retention is the way to go.

A fourth nonretaining teacher estimated that she had read "tons" of research literature on retention while completing graduate courses, had attended "tons" of inservice sessions on retention, and was aware of "the amount of research you can get." She named of a few of the researchers (e.g., "Shepard and Smith") whose studies she had read and summarized the viewpoints of presenters whose workshops she had recently attended. Like the third informant, she was aware that research literature on both sides of the retention issue was available, "depending on what you're looking for." Like the third informant, she also considered that retention is a "philosophical sort of thing," which depends more on emotion and training rather than on "how much you read."

None of the 6 retaining teachers considered educational research findings particularly relevant when making promotional considerations. These teachers indicated that their promotional decisions were made on an individual basis and that they relied primarily on subjective impressions based on observation and previous professional or personal experience. Aggregate findings, therefore, had minimal, if any, utility for the practice of these 6 teachers.

The following comments epitomized the collective attitude that experience or, in the words of one informant, "going from the gut," was a better guide than research in making promotional decisions:

> Personally, I don't think [research is] that applicable to me because I basically look at the individual child and I think it's just such an individual thing that I think it's really, really hard . . . to generalize in this aspect, like when you know the child and then you can see what they can or can't do or how they try or if they give up right away. Like, it's really the child. . . . So, I mean . . . you use [research findings] as guidelines. There's no doubt about that. You certainly have guidelines like they have to . . . know at least some of their alphabet and be able to recognize it, and some of the . . . phonetic sounds and things like that but overall . . . you'd have to look at each child individually and so that's why I wouldn't rely that much on research. It would basically be the birthday, how well they handled things, just all that stuff that I mentioned at the beginning.

Other reasons for disregarding research findings included the perception that research literature was biased against retention and the concern that "there are always exceptions" of individual students who had benefited from retention; these exceptions were usually the teachers' own children or former students. Two teachers questioned the credibility of retention research because it was primarily conducted by Americans: one of these teachers considered it unfair to compare American and Canadian kindergartners because American students were older and therefore capable of greater achievement; in contrast, the other teacher devalued American findings because she considered American public education inferior to that of Canada, Germany, and Japan.

In contrast, nonretaining teachers indicated that research findings did influence their promotional decisions and advice to parents. Furthermore, the influence of research apparently did not depend on either the amount or the recency of research literature read by a teacher.

The influence of research was most strikingly illustrated by the comments of the teacher quoted below. This teacher did not consider herself particularly familiar with research and recalled reading only " three different articles quite a while ago" by authors whose names she did not remember. Nevertheless, she attributed a "dramatic" change in attitude towards kindergarten retention after her exposure to these research articles:

> I was given some research to read by a principal that I worked for and that changed my opinion. The things I was given to read showed that a child's self-esteem is more damaged by having them be retained in the Division 1 level and

> that it doesn't outweigh the learning that goes on. Their growth in learning doesn't improve as much by the end of Grade 3 or enough to outweigh what can happen to them if they are retained. It seems children are very smart. They know that they aren't with the friends they were with last year and I really believe that it does affect them enough to have them start thinking they can't do it. . . . [The three different articles I read were about] self-esteem and having them be retained versus having them go on. It was mainly Division 1 and how, if children needed to be retained for academic reasons, if I remember correctly, the researchers showing it was better to have them be retained after Grade 3. Learning then and the reason that you could give a child then, everything just seemed to go more smoothly for the children that were retained in Division 2 whereas Division 1 what they most got away [sic] from being retained was that they weren't good enough and that really hinders the learning that would go on for the following few years. . . . [What] really swayed me was reading research I had been given. In a way, it's like having that proof that I can say it's not just a belief that I have. Here are studies that have been done that I can say to parents if they have questions.

The other nonretaining teachers held similar views about the importance of retention research in informing their promotional recommendations; all 5 teachers regarded themselves open-minded enough to consider research on "both sides" of the retention issue; most indicated that they disseminate research articles, both favourable and unfavourable, to parents so they could make their own decisions about retaining their child.

As mentioned previously, one teacher also expressed the opinion that teacher education programs and school boards should take responsibility for doing a "better job" of familiarizing teachers with research on kindergarten readiness and retention. She advocated that the following measures be taken:

> We need to . . . get a hold of some research that teachers will understand. . . . There has to be research data that is easy for parents and teachers to understand that could really get on their level. And there has to be more in-services available too, not necessarily at the choice level, [so] that the district says, "Here, we're doing a half-day in-service on retention for ECS and Division 1. You're going to be there so we can have discussions." Like, this is not a halfday inservice thing. This is something that is going to take a long time to change and it may never change, but if we can't change it, let's see what we can do about the kids now.

## Perceived Consequences of Kindergarten Retention

Informants were asked to state their opinions about both immediate and long-range consequences of kindergarten retention. Specifically, they were asked to recall outcomes for individual children, which involved their "case knowledge," and to comment on the comparative risks of promotion versus retention in general, which called for a general judgment based upon their "propositional knowledge."

**Short-term consequences of kindergarten retention.** Without exception, the 6 retaining teachers described noticeable improvements in a child's academic, emotional, and social skills during the repeated kindergarten year:

> A child that I held back last year now this year has had a totally different outlook on kindergarten. He is able to stay on task. His motor skills have developed to the point where he can print now whereas last year he could not because he just did not have the fine motor control. He is interested in learning words, colours, numbers, the alphabet, and so on, whereas last year it was just

> not in his world at all to have that desire. So I really feel and his parents too are very thankful that they held him back for another year.

Only one teacher qualified her positive comments after recalling a specific child whose behaviour changed minimally during the repeated year:

> I do know that the one that I did hold back that had sort of a personality problem, a very bossy little girl. [It was] sort of her way or no way at all. [She] improved a bit, but not much. I mean it was just a personality quirk and I think that's just the type of child she was. . . . Socially she was very immature, but it didn't really improve that much. I mean there were other things like her reading readiness and stuff like that was [sic] really, really low too, but some of it improved and some of it stays [sic] basically the same.

According to another retaining teacher, any negative effects associated with kindergarten retention are only transient:

> I think one of the years one of the girls sort of wanted to be with her classmates and all kinds of stuff. *But* [emphasis in original] they *soon* [emphasis in original] get to know the other children and . . . within two months they feel *so* [emphasis in original] good about themselves, they would go "Yeh, I can really do that!" So that passes very quickly.

In contrast, all 5 nonretaining teachers ascribed detrimental effects to repeating kindergarten including the lowering of self-confidence, boredom, the development or exacerbation of behaviour problems through exposure to younger role-models, and the development of a sense of failure, as in this example:

> I'm thinking of one particular boy. . . . I think that he didn't feel very comfortable coming back into the kindergarten year and felt that he had failed. We kept him back for academic reasons that year. His behaviour was not very good at the beginning of the year and it took us a while for us to get him back into the routines and back into understanding what the expectations were of him and his words would be that he failed kindergarten. And that's the way he viewed it. And no matter what we said to him or what we talked about, how sometimes it would take children more than a year to finish a program, sometimes they just need more time. It didn't matter how we worded it, he felt very, very negative about it.

One of the nonretaining teachers suggested an alternative explanation for the apparent growth observed during the repeated kindergarten year:

> [Teachers will] have a child repeat kindergarten or repeat Grade 1 and they'll say, "Oh, but look, they came from there to there in their development." And it was all positive. Well, of course, it's going to be positive! A child's going to continue to grow any way you look at it. A child is going to grow each year. And so the myth continues only because parents and teachers continue to give a positive message about retention.

Another nonretaining teacher stated that "there is no way of measuring or knowing" whether a child might have "blossomed" if he or she had been promoted and placed with another teacher or in a less demanding program "especially when we look at the K-3 years where they take off at different times."

This teacher also questioned whether progress observed at the beginning of a school year, when material from the previous year is reviewed, would continue throughout the rest of the year, when new material is presented.

Two nonretaining teachers stressed the importance of having "at-risk" children "move along" with their chronological peers in order to be exposed to appropriate role models.

A third teacher stressed the importance of a fullday program for "unready" children, particularly those with unstimulating social environments. In her opinion, such children required intellectual stimulation and consistent management in a "more structured setting":

> I'm finding a difficult time believing that retention is the best thing for a kindergarten child. I still think that we need to look at other options for them. And I honestly think that we need to have ongoing stimulation for those children. And to take them from a halfday program and stick them back in a home where they're going to be sitting in front of a TV for their whole afternoon is not as beneficial as adapting possibly a Grade 1 program for *them* [emphasis in original] and moving them into it and then giving them resource or putting them into Grade 1 with that resource room time at the beginning of the year.

This teacher suggested that the "unready" child not only accompany peers to Grade 1 but that the kindergarten teacher also accompany the class:

> I would especially be in favour . . . if a teacher could follow . . . a particular class through for 3 years. I would love to do it. . . . This is my first year because I'm going from kindergarten. . . . So this is the first year that I'm going to be able to follow a class of children that I *know* [emphasis in original] because some of them came up from our fullday program. . . . And it'll be exciting for me because I've never been able to do that and I *know* [emphasis in original] that it works. . . . We went to a workshop with . . . those Bureau of Education ones that come to Edmonton quite often out of California. One of the teachers said they . . . take a class and move to Grade 1, then go back to kindergarten and take that class and move to Grade 1 and follow that cycle through every year and they've been doing it for 20 years. To me, it makes sense especially at that young age, you know, because we're talking about 5- and 6-year-olds who emotionally change so much because they've come in and they're still very dependent, a lot of them, and you're trying to promote that independence. And some of them aren't going to do it at the end of June in kindergarten. They need more time to become as independent as they can. So, yeh, definitely I'd . . . love to try it as a teacher.

**Short-term consequences of promoting "unready" children.** All 6 retaining informants believed that parental veto of their recommendations for retention would probably result in the child's having to repeat Grade 1 the following year; all retaining informants reported cases similar to the following:

> There was one little boy [last year] I thought should be held back in kindergarten and his parents wanted him to go on to Grade 1 and so we did put him on. And he is really struggling this year and the Grade 1 teacher is probably going to recommend that he repeat this year because he just hasn't been able to learn the skills that he's needed in Grade 1. . . . He was just developmentally not as ready as some of the other children.

**Long-term consequences of promoting "unready" children.** Similarly, all 6 retaining teachers made a pessimistic long-range prognosis including future retention and associated social stigmatization for chronologically young children who were promoted before they were "ready" for first grade:

> I know when I first started teaching, because children were well-behaved - some

> of them were really young, February birthdays - . . . trying hard to do the work. I did promote them to the next grade, and then teachers who had the child - in Grade 5 I can remember in one instance - did recommend retention. And, to me, that is really, really hard if they're retained even between Grade 2 and Grade 5, I think that's really hard. And that has happened in our school. . . . And one child had a birthday in February and the other one in November. And the teachers retained these children in Division 2. And I felt bad because I thought to myself had I retained them in kindergarten they wouldn't have had this struggle and then they wouldn't have gotten to Grade 3 or Grade 5 or whatever grade they were in and then it is really embarrassing to be retained because children are so aware socially. And, if they had been retained earlier, then there wouldn't have been the social stigma, because in kindergarten there is no social stigma. I always talk to children at the end of the year and I'll say to them, "Susan is really, really young and she was only 4 when she started kindergarten- and, of course, this is the truth - and she's just not old enough to to go into Grade 1, so Susan gets to spend another year in kindergarten with me."

Provided parents were in agreement, however, retaining teachers were optimistic about immature students' future success following kindergarten retention:

> I think that now he'll go into Grade 1, for one thing, with self-confidence whereas if he'd gone in last year he'd just be struggling through Grade 1 but now he's got the skills he needs to feel very competent in Grade 1 and to develop more self-esteem in his own abilities to succeed. I think that also when you look further than Grade 1 and through his school career he'll have that confidence that he can do the work whereas if he had gone into Grade 1 really weak he might already developed [sic] in Grade 1 the attitude that "I'm stupid" and "I can't do the work" and be really down on himself for his whole school career. Also, as he gets into the older grades, he would have been very young for his class. Even as they're going through puberty he would have always been behind the others because he was so young.

As mentioned previously, only one retaining teacher expressed reservations about the long-term benefits of kindergarten retention. This teacher has observed that some children who had been retained were "still struggling" in higher grades; she attributed their continued difficulties to "many variables" that are beyond the control of the kindergarten teacher, such as their future teacher and the amount of assistance they receive.

Two nonretaining teachers also questioned the longterm benefits of retention. One teacher considered that a retained student, whom she has followed to Grade 5, still remained "immature in many ways." The second teacher related a personal example of a family member who was retained as a child; her impression was that, even in adulthood, this family member continued to experience "a feeling of really never having caught up and always feeling left behind."

It is debatable whether all informants have access to information about the later progress of their former kindergarten students, however.

In fact, 2 informants admitted that they had no opportunity to observe the long-term progress of students after kindergarten because of the short time they had been teaching at the kindergarten level. A third teacher indicated that retained students, whom she had discussed as examples, had either transferred out of her classroom or moved away, preventing tracking of their progress.

Three retaining and one nonretaining informant indicated they had some contact with retained students or their parents in later school years.

One retaining teacher indicated that parents have returned to thank her for retaining their child and to report they were doing well; the second retaining teacher

has been told by Division 1 teachers that she did students "a favour" by retaining them because they are "*so* [emphasis in original] strong now and they're so self-assured now . . . as compared to maybe someone who did carry on."

On the other hand, the third retaining teacher has observed a narrowing in the range in students' abilities by Grade 3. This "catching up," which she attributed to maturity, apparently occurred whether students had been retained or not:

> I have taught Grades 1, 2, 3. . . . [In kindergarten] . . . you've got ones that are ready. They can . . . print their names. You've got those who don't even know how to hold a pencil. Same thing happens in Grade 1. You've got the ones that are starting to read. . . . and then you've got those that are just tootling along and struggling. . . . [Then in Grade 1] I find they get a little bit closer and then by Grade 3 I find you've got that main middle group. Sure, you'll always have the bottom few, but I find by Grade 3 is when it seems to click for most of them. . . . If they have problems and it's worked on at home and stuff like that, they . . . seem to all sort of catch up in that big middle group in Grade 3 . . . whether they had been retained or not . . .

One nonretaining teacher considered that 11 Grade 6 students who had been placed in a transitional class between kindergarten and Grade 1 did not benefit in the long-run from this extra year:

> Those ones are in Grade 6 right now. And, if you talk to the Grade 6 teachers, they say it was really, really good for the children. But if you talk to the children, they don't feel it was so good for them. . . . They're quite a bit bigger than their peers even at Grade 6 where there's quite a discrepancy between the children. . . . They basically went into a program that year, a transition we called it. It was like [a] Grade 1 year anyways. They did workbooks and sat down and did worksheet-type things and there was not very much hands-on for them at that time anyways. So I don't know . . . if they really worked for them. They still ended up having resource room all the way up to Grade 6.

**The relative risks of promotion versus retention.** Informants were asked to make a hypothetical judgment about which decision would be associated with more "risk," that is, detrimental consequences, for the child's future success: to promote a child who, in the teacher's opinion, should be retained, or to retain a child who could possibly be promoted.

All but one retaining teacher considered it would be "riskier" to promote a child who should be retained. Their concerns are summarized in one teacher's comment that "somewhere along the line [children] have to accomplish what they need to accomplish to go on, so [unreadiness] catches up to them somewhere."

Retaining teachers predicted that an unready, promoted child would eventually encounter academic difficulties, which would probably result in later retention:

> I'd say that if you do put on a child who should have been retained in kindergarten, they will probably have to be retained within their first 3 years of school, from my experience anyways. And I think it's more detrimental for them to be retained later on than in kindergarten. They have more of an idea that they're repeating, whereas in kindergarten they're just staying to play for another year and they seem to enjoy it.

They also predicted that an unready, promoted child would experience a lowering of self-confidence, develop a dislike of school, and exhibit acting-out or other behavioural problems:

> To me it's more devastating for them to go on and put in a year that's very

> frustrating and confusing and they know. They know without anybody even saying anything. Children know very quickly how they're coping and how they're not coping. . . . There's behaviors that crop up. There's how they feel about themselves. You can just see it. Boys tend to be showy. They're under their desks. They're everywhere. They tend to get silly and goofy whereas girls tend to be reserved and withdraw within themselves.

One retaining teacher made an incidental comment that "there's been a few . . . that have come to my room [from another school] that the teacher said should repeat . . . and I'd be quite surprised, thinking, "Oh, you know, they can do quite a bit."

This casual observation raises the possibility that the same student, considered unready for Grade 1 by one teacher, may be considered ready for Grade 1 by another, resulting in being recommended for retention by the first teacher and being recommended for promotion by the second.

The sixth retaining teacher would "rather take the chance" on promoting a questionable student and possibly having him or her repeat Grade 1; her reason was that she needed to feel assured that the child would not succeed in first grade; she considered that her promotional decisions were usually fair because she consulted with the parents and other professionals.

In contrast, all 5 nonretaining teachers considered that retaining a student who could possibly be promoted was more detrimental than promoting one who should be retained; they stressed the importance of individualized programming for students experiencing difficulties, particularly in Grade 1:

> It's much more risky [to retain a student who could possibly be promoted] to my mind. I mean, the research shows that in the longterm it is risky to retain a person who could be promoted. And every person could be promoted. Every student could be. We're expected to provide individualized programming for all the children in our classrooms. That's what my expectation as a teacher is on myself and I expect that of other teachers too. I mean all the literature that you read talks about treating people as individuals and I just don't understand why we wouldn't just do that.

One nonretaining informant expressed the view that the teacher presents the greatest risk factor to a child's future educational success:

> When a child is developmentally ready for a fullday program and, if we've retained them and left them in kindergarten for two years, then we have denied that child the opportunity to take advantage of a fullday program. . . . But the biggest risk factor is the teacher because, if the student moves on, but the teacher does not appropriately modify the program for that child in order to meet their needs, then . . . the child will not progress as much or receive as much support that they could have that they need. And so I think the biggest factor is not the child or the parents, it's the teacher and how the teacher develops the program to meet all of those children's needs.

According to a second nonretaining informant, retention "sets students up" to be "so much older" than their peers in later teenage years. In her opinion, " to promote them with support" is the "key"; that is, before at-risk students are promoted, it is important to carefully select their teachers and programs, to engage the support of mental health, speech or occupational therapy or other resources, and to make any necessary program modifications.

A third nonretaining teacher considered it futile to retain a kindergarten child if there was no support from the home. She considered that in many instances the teacher's efforts amount to "trying to change a situation that often we don't have any control over." This belief has not prevented her from continuing her intervention

efforts, however. On the contrary, she described her typical approach to providing individual assistance to a child experiencing difficulties. This approach involved the parents' participating in at-home readiness activities:

> If I have concerns by November, I generally know what academic skills kids have also as well as how they are getting along socially and emotionally in a group. And . . . my approach . . . to the parents from November until February [has been], "I'm going to work specifically with your child to help them name colours, count objects. If . . . there isn't any growth by February, I'm going to send home activities that I want you to work on with them. And I want you to make sure they're still fun because, if it's not fun for your child, it's not going to be fun for you and you're not going to want to do it. And then let's look in March and April and see how things are going." And if you don't get any support just with that, I'm not sure how supportive things would be to have the child repeat another grade or to have the child repeat kindergarten for another year.

This teacher stated that she has also become more comfortable about offering advice to parents and about seeking advice from counselors and other professionals than she was at the beginning of her teaching career.

A retaining teacher expressed the opposite view regarding lack of parental support:

> Maybe if they're not going to be getting any help and you know what the family background is like, maybe it is [emphasis in original] better to retain that child. . . . If I know a parent is going to be working with this child and really willing to work with this kid, then you probably would promote them, while someone that you know isn't going to get much help at home, it would be best to retain them because then you know they would maybe just try and catch up and be helped out a little bit more rather than just being *totally, totally* [emphasis in original] frustrated.

The 2 nonretaining teachers quoted above alluded to another risk factor associated with kindergarten retention.

These 2 teachers raised the possibility that some of their previous students, who were considered unready for Grade 1 because of "immaturity" and were therefore recommended to repeat kindergarten, may have actually had an undiagnosed special need, for which a specialized intervention would have been more helpful.

Using the terminology of the paradigm model, these teachers have come to acknowledge previously unrecognized causal factors in unreadiness for Grade 1:

> Unfortunately, I think the children that I even myself have asked to be retained had physiological problems. There was something physically wrong with them and having them retained didn't change that. Having them do another kindergarten year or a kindergarten in the morning and Grade 1 in the afternoon didn't fix it because it wasn't a problem that could be fixed by them having more time. What they needed to have was someone who was more skilled and had more specific training than I had and more specific experience in working with learning disabilities and finding out what they were and what to do about them.

## Proposed Alternative Management Strategies

Informants' recommendations for alternative management strategies have the following implications for the confirmation of grounded theory hypotheses.

## The Implications of Negative Cases in Grounded Theory Studies

Strauss and Corbin (1990) stressed the importance of verifying one's research questions by finding supportive evidence, incidents, and events within one's data.

If a research question is supported by data, it can then be changed into a general or hypothetical statement of relationship.

Based on informant responses, this study postulates the following unqualified hypotheses: Under conditions of perceived student unreadiness for Grade 1, kindergarten teachers will employ strategies for management of the perceived unreadiness. And: Kindergarten teachers' management strategies are based on their beliefs about the causes of the unreadiness and the appropriate measures for its management.

With reference to the original research questions of this study and to the existing literature, it is possible to derive the following qualified hypotheses:

1. A nativist kindergarten teacher will recommend kindergarten retention for an unready child based on the belief that the provision of extra time alone will attenuate the effects of chronological youngness/developmental immaturity.
2. A nonnativist kindergarten teacher will recommend promotion for an unready child based on the belief that the causes of unreadiness may be attenuated by deliberate pedagogical intervention.

Strauss and Corbin stressed that it is equally important that the researcher look for negative or alternative cases that are not supportive of hypothetical statements of relationships.

As previously noted, Strauss and Corbin stated that:

> It is just as important in doing grounded theory studies to find evidence of differences and variation, as it is to find evidence that supports our original questions and statements. The negative or alternative cases tell us that something about this instance is different, and so we must move in and take a close look at what this might be. **Following through on these differences adds density and variation to our theory.** (p. 109, emphasis in original)

It was therefore necessary to analyze the interview data in order to identify contexts in which the above specific hypotheses did not hold. That is, it was necessary to describe the contexts of unreadiness for which kindergarten teachers who supported kindergarten retention in principle *did not* recommend it as a management strategy. Conversely, it was necessary to identify the contexts of unreadiness for which kindergarten teachers who opposed kindergarten retention in principle *did* recommend it as a management strategy. In short, it was necessary to describe the circumstances in which teachers' proposed strategies that would not be predicted by the nativist/non-nativist teacher dichotomy.

## Negative Cases Relating to Student Characteristics

Some opinions expressed by retaining and nonretaining teachers that were contrary to their espoused views on kindergarten retention were related to characteristics of students.

**Special needs students.** Some contexts in which the qualified statements of relationship above did not hold involved kindergarten students with identified, or at least highly suspected, "special needs."

As illustrated below, all 6 retaining teachers believed there was no benefit in having a special needs child spend a second year in kindergarten because a child with an obvious learning difficulty, such as mental retardation, autism, a learning

disability, delayed speech development, required specialized management rather than just extra time to mature:

> If we've done the IQ screening and find that their IQ just is not very high, I don't see any point in holding them back because they're going to struggle all along anyways. Let's get some help in place for them. . . . Sometimes we're looking at a special placement or at least special programming for them and very often these children are the kids that are that little bit older anyways. . . . Generally, these children qualify for adaptation funding. So we're looking at writing up individual education plans. We work very closely with the parents. The parents are involved in the IEP and are consulted regularly on that. Hopefully they'll be able to get some small-group instruction whether through parent volunteers, through aides, through the way our school programs for instruction. We do have half-classes going to music so that the teacher has a half-class back at a time to work with small groups.

Two of the nonretaining teachers also advocated management strategies other than retention for special needs students.

One teacher described the example of a current student who had been retained in another school system at his mother's request. After assessment by the school psychologist and reading specialist, it was discovered that "besides having a low IQ, he's possibly fetal alcohol syndrome, possibly attention deficit and a few other things." In the teacher's opinion, another year in kindergarten would not change this student's problems; rather, the situation must be accepted and an appropriate placement found for him or "do we expect the Grade 1 teacher to take 25 children and 3 or 4 special needs children and manage for the year?"

The second nonretaining teacher preferred that special needs students be promoted as much as possible in order to develop social skills through exposure to age-appropriate role models rather than exposure to the behaviours of younger children. This teacher also favoured Grade 1 placement with aides or specialized programming, such as a low-enrollment program.

In contrast, the other 3 nonretaining teachers suggested that kindergarten retention may result in some benefits for certain special needs students, at least in the short-term.

The first teacher considered that kindergarten retention offered special needs students who still qualified for a third year of early childhood program unit funding an additional opportunity to receive special services for which they would not be eligible in Grade 1; she has occasionally recommended that parents keep their child in kindergarten to take advantage of this funding, although she did acknowledge that it was a difficult decision in which parents must "weigh what's more important, a social network for those kids, or yet to take advantage of another year of intense early intervention programming."

The second nonretaining teacher described the example of a former student who "had qualified under program unit grant as mild to moderate on each of the areas." This teacher considered that kindergarten retention might have helped the student in the short-term because returning to a familiar staff, classroom, and themes "might have done a bit to boost her confidence." She doubted whether retention had helped the student in the long-term, however, because the student had required resource room assistance up to Grade 5; in addition, "she's quite a bit bigger than the rest of the kids" and "socially, she hasn't seemed to have branched out anyways."

A third nonretaining teacher recalled having a student repeat kindergarten in the morning and attending Grade 1 in the afternoon. She considered that the student did benefit from another year of playing in a social setting, but did not benefit from doing the Grade 1 work, which he found "very difficult and very tiring," although he did benefit from working with a very experienced Grade 1 teacher who was "able to discover what was wrong with him and what we needed to do for him."

**Nonspecial needs students.** There may be other extenuating circumstances in which a retaining teacher will recommend promotion even though she may have some reservations because of the child's chronological age or maturity.

Conversely, a nonretaining teacher may occasionally recommend a child for retention for precisely the same reasons as those given by retaining teachers, namely the child's chronological youngness and immaturity.

For example, one retaining teacher indicated that a child's physical size relative to classmates was an important factor when deciding placement for the following year:

> I had a parent last year who wanted to hold her [late December-born] son back. And our honest opinion was that it would do more harm than good for him. He was a big boy. He tended to be very aggressive. And we thought that another year in kindergarten would just fuel that aggression because he'd have all these little bodies to pick on. He was also a very lazy little boy who has a good average intelligence because we did have him screened. And we kind of encouraged the mom to let him go into first grade and see what happened. And, as it was, he's come along. He's still having some difficulties, but they're more social behaviors dealing with his bullying rather than his ability to cope with schoolwork.

According to a second retaining teacher, even a chronologically young child's emotional reaction to being retained must be taken into account. If a child with "really low self-esteem and low confidence" is promoted in order to avoid possible emotional trauma, then the parents must be willing to do a "whole lot more work with them at home."

A third retaining teacher stated that a family's financial circumstances must also be considered when making promotional decisions. If keeping the child back would result in further financial hardship for the family, this teacher would choose to promote even a chronologically young, "immature" child despite her misgivings.

Two nonretaining teachers had taught kindergarten for more than 5 years, whereas the other 3 nonretaining teachers had 4 or fewer years of actual kindergarten classroom teaching experience.

Each of the more experienced teachers had retained kindergarten students previously, although each indicated that she had refrained from doing so in recent years.

One of the newer teachers, who had taught kindergarten for only 2 years, described the one instance in which she recommended a child be retained. Her reasons for doing so were similar to those cited by the retaining teachers:

> I've had one child that we were very concerned about that we suggested to Mom that she might want to consider moving him into another kindergarten program rather than put him into Grade 1. . . . This one particular child was the one time that we suggested it might be a consideration. And the parent felt that the child just needed to be told what to do and he needed to learn to do what he was told and therefore he should continue on in grade at the next level. . . . Again, it was the social skills. He was a very young child. . . . He just made the cutoff for kindergarten when he started kindergarten. [He] had a very hard time focusing on tasks at any time. He didn't focus for more than 5 minutes at any activity whether it was one that he had chosen for himself or one that he was directed to go to, had a very difficult time interacting with the other children, usually played with younger children, was with younger children more often than with his own age. That was basically the reason we did not feel that he would be able to function in a regular Grade 1 classroom. . . . And also I guess the situation at home made us concerned. He was pushed a lot at home to succeed. So there were I think some emotional problems there too. And we were very concerned and felt that Mom needed to take a second look.

**Negative Cases Relating to Systems Characteristics**

Other statements made by some retaining teachers that were contrary to their espoused views on kindergarten retention related to perceived inadequacies in the current educational system; teachers attributed these inadequacies to cutbacks in educational funding.

For example, one retaining teacher stated that retention was "often" related to the availability of funding for individualized instruction. She would prefer that "developmentally young" children progress individually through an ungraded primary unit rather than be retained in kindergarten; however, she considered this alternative unrealistic given current educational funding:

> If we could have an ungraded primary unit where a child could move in and take the time they required to move through it in an individualized program whether it required 4 years, or 2 1/2, or 3, if a child could move without restriction, it would be great. However, the system as it stands with the economics the way they are, there is no provision for this individualizing, or not as much. We are losing teaching assistant time. Schools are faced with this school-based budgeting. We are losing our learning assistance teachers. That is a major factor in not being able to provide this individualized routing for children. And, because of that, if we see a child is not developmentally ready, I would much more readily see that child held back in kindergarten and then put into the regular system where they can go through Grade 1, 2, 3, and be successful. . . . We're struggling with funding for those that have special needs and we shouldn't have to . . . or there isn't the funding to provide for those that are developmentally young.

One nonretaining teacher stated that she favoured promoting students only if teachers were provided with the "support [from their administrators, taxpayers, all of us] to be able to do it properly," which involves providing them with professional development to show them how to individualize instruction and with time for planning and meeting with families.

**Negative Cases Relating to a Teacher's Definition of "Retention"**

Three teachers who voiced opposition to having students repeat kindergarten raised no objections to students' partially repeating kindergarten in so-called kindergarten/first grade split programs.

One teacher, who strongly criticized kindergarten retention, considered this type of placement neither a "negative [nor] a positive thing," but one which, like any other program, was dependent on the skills of the teacher:

> My feeling is that you can have any program you want, but it's all in how it's done. And I think that is the difference is that how that program is going to be developed and run and the teacher and how she is going to respond to the students will determine how successful that program is for any student. So, I'm not going to say that it's a negative thing or a positive thing. I think it all depends on how the program is developed and implemented by the teacher. And that's like any grade level. You can have a Grade 1 program or Grade 2 program, but that program is only as successful as that teacher can make it.

Two other nonretaining teachers indicated that they would definitely consider halftime kindergarten placement an option for a child they had some concerns about going into Grade 1. For example, one stated that:

> I would prefer to do a lot of talking to the parents, find out where the child is

> going or where they're thinking of putting the child into the Grade 1 program, finding out what programs are available because I know that there's lots of Grade 1 programs, low-enrollment Grade 1 programs, where a child would be able to get extra help, but still move on into a Grade 1 program and possibly do a half-kindergarten/half- Grade 1 and then, after having a year of that, look again to see whether they're ready to continue on.

## Selective Coding

Selective coding is the third, and most abstract, level of data analysis in the grounded theory approach. Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined "selective coding" as the process of "selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development" (p. 116).

According to Strauss and Corbin, the process of selective coding involves several recursive steps. First, it is necessary to explicate the "story line." Second, the paradigm is used to relate "subsidiary categories" around the "core category." Third, categories are related at the "dimensional level." Fourth, these relationships must be "validated" against the data. Fifth, it may be necessary to develop or refine some subcategories.

### Describing the "Story"

As the first step in data integration, Strauss and Corbin recommended that a "story" about the central phenomenon of the study be identified and described. This step involves the formulation of a "general descriptive overview" about the central phenomenon (p. 119).

Using Strauss and Corbin's summary of Corbin's (1987) study of the pregnancy management strategies of chronologically ill women as a model, the story that emerged from the comments of the 11 interviewed teachers was conceptualized as follows:

> The main story apparently concerns how kindergarten teachers manage or propose to manage the risks they perceive to be associated with "unready" students. Teachers' management strategies may be proposed or implemented prior to, during, and at the end of the kindergarten year. Kindergarten teachers manage perceived risks associated with "unreadiness" in order to maximize students' future success in Grade 1. Prior to students' entering kindergarten, teachers may propose management strategies for perceived "unready" students only if their advice is solicited by parents. Once students enter kindergarten, however, teachers play an active, central role in determining students' educational management. Teachers monitor students' progress and make important recommendations for their future educational placement. Teachers base their recommendations for management strategies both on their conceptualization of "readiness" in general and on the individual circumstances of each student.

This description focuses on management of perceived risk factors associated with "unreadiness," as it is conceptualized by teachers, because management was the primary issue raised in all of the interviews. Each teacher had a conceptualization of "readiness" and opinions about appropriate strategies to manage perceived "ready" and "unready" students.

### Conceptualizing the "Story Line"

Readiness was selected as the core category, story line, or central phenomenon, in the following grounded theory for two reasons.

First, readiness was a sufficiently abstract category under which to subsume all other categories of data. Level of abstraction is one criterion suggested by Strauss and Corbin (p. 120) for the selection of a core category.

Second, grounded theory is an "action/interactional oriented method of theory building." As such, the theory assumes that the participants' actions/interactions, which are conceptualized in terms of strategies and tactics, are "purposeful, goal oriented" and are undertaken in response to or in order to manage a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 104).

The paradigm model of data analysis provided an analytic framework to elucidate the relationship between kindergarten retention and readiness, in which kindergarten retention was conceptualized as a management strategy for a child's perceived unreadiness to proceed to the next grade level.

The following story describes the attempts of informants to minimize the risks that they associated with unreadiness, as they conceptualized this phenomenon. This story was based on the assumption that the singular goal underlying the efforts of all informants was to maximize the likelihood of their students' future educational success. The purposeful nature of informants' actions and proposed actions was reflected in the conceptual label chosen for the story, which was "Managing Readiness."

## Managing Readiness

### Readiness for Kindergarten

#### Teachers' Perceptions of Readiness for Kindergarten

Do teachers perceive readiness for kindergarten in terms of desirable student characteristics or behaviours? Apparently this is the case for 7 of the 11 informants, both proponents and opponents of kindergarten retention.

When asked to describe an actual or hypothetical child they would consider "ready" for kindergarten, 7 informants present a remarkably similar description of an idealized ready child. This child is perceived as emotionally stable, intellectually curious, socially adept, independent, task-oriented, willing to follow routines, self-motivated, and well-coordinated; some of the informants associate these attributes with older chronological age; a few informants also associate superior maturity with the female gender.

In contrast, informants portray an "unready" child as emotionally labile, distractible, easily frustrated, irresponsible, and poorly coordinated; 3 informants refer to an unready child as male.

Four of the 11 informants, 2 of whom support kindergarten retention and 2 who oppose it, apparently have no preconceptions about desirable student attributes or behaviours for entry into kindergarten. While it appears that legal eligibility is the sole criterion of readiness for these 4 teachers, this is only the partial story.

Rather, it is apparent that the 2 teachers who support kindergarten retention consider it their responsibility to *instill* appropriate student skills during the kindergarten year. If the child fails to acquire these skills, the teacher may then recommend a second year of kindergarten in order to provide the student with additional time to do so.

In contrast, the 2 teachers who oppose kindergarten retention suggest an alternative interpretation of readiness, namely, that kindergarten teachers should be ready to modify their programs in order to accommodate the individual proficiency levels of incoming students.

Teachers' perceptions of readiness appear to be based on a combination of professional experience, the factors that they consider instrumental in the facilitation of readiness, and the significance they attach to the kindergarten entry cutoff date set by their school boards. When prognosticating the probable success of a student in

kindergarten, teachers take these factors into consideration to one extent or another.

Seven informants indicate that the authority on which they base their judgments about readiness for kindergarten is the experiential knowledge that they have acquired during their professional careers.

Four of the 6 retaining teachers indicate that they rely heavily on the impressions that they have formed over their years in teaching. Through their professional experience, they have come to identify recurring patterns of what might be termed "risk factors" in students; teachers consider the presence of these factors as highly predictive of failure, not only in kindergarten, but later in a student's career.

When predicting the probable success of individual students, retaining teachers employ as a mental yardstick the performance standards that they perceive students must meet in order to achieve success in the primary grades. They mentally weigh student risk factors against their perceived standards; the result is their estimation of the student's likelihood of achieving success.

In contrast, 3 nonretaining teachers consider that their previous teaching experience, particularly in early childhood or special education, has increased their awareness and acceptance of individual differences in students' capabilities and, accordingly, their willingness to making programming modifications.

**Risk Factors Contributing to Potential Difficulty in Kindergarten**

Two retaining informants identify inadequate preparation for school as a potential student risk factor. The teachers' implied expectation is that parents should assist in their child's readiness by establishing schedules and by providing intellectually stimulating and socializing experiences so that the child enters kindergarten with appropriate requisite attitudes and skills, such as being able to pay attention or follow routines. These teachers attribute lack of preparation for kindergarten to inadequate parenting skills.

Gender is another potential risk factor identified by 3 retaining informants. Boys, particularly those who are chronologically young, are perceived as less "developmentally mature" than girls and are therefore at greater risk of being unable to meet the performance standards expected by the teacher.

All 6 teachers who support kindergarten retention emphasize the importance of chronological age as a key factor for success in kindergarten. According to these teachers, younger students in general are less capable of meeting the expectations of the kindergarten program because they lack the maturity of their older classmates. It is evident, therefore, that retaining teachers use the performance of older students as a standard by which to measure that of younger students.

For example, one retaining teacher comments that a conflict may result if the parent and teacher are using different comparison groups to evaluate a child's performance, that is, if the parent is comparing the child's level of "maturity" with younger siblings while the teacher is comparing it with that of older classmates. This teacher states that she does, in fact, evaluate the performance of younger students relative to that of older classmates.

According to 4 informants, the legal age of entry into kindergarten, which is mandated by school board policy, is an additional risk factor for some children. Two retaining informants express the concern that the current date, which is late in the school year, permits the entry of children who are "too young" chronologically and, therefore, too developmentally immature to benefit from the kindergarten program. Two nonretaining informants express the concern that the late eligibility cutoff date encourages the "rushing" of young children into the educational institution, which in their opinion "sets them up for failure."

These 4 informants also identify an additional risk factor associated with legal entry date; that is, some parents voluntarily hold a child who is close to the cutoff out of kindergarten until the following school year. Informants' objections to this practice are discussed in the next section.

## Teachers' Proposed Strategies for Managing Readiness for Kindergarten

In discussing strategies that teachers propose to maximize the likelihood that children enter kindergarten when "ready" to do so, it is appropriate to recall Cantalini's (1987) observation that teachers make recommendations about readiness in terms of referrals for special services or retention once a child has entered school. Prior to a child's school entry, however, teacher "input" is restricted to offering advice about the advisability of entering a child only if parents have solicited the teacher's opinion. In short, the teacher's role in educational management prior to a child's school entry is advisory or consultative whereas the teacher directly participates in a child's educational management once he or she has entered school.

One recommended strategy to increase a student's probable readiness for kindergarten is raising the kindergarten entry age. This strategy is suggested by 3 retaining and one nonretaining teacher. While there is no consensus about the most appropriate or ideal starting age, 2 of the 4 teachers believe that children should have turned 5 years of age before they begin kindergarten.

These 4 teachers make two assumptions when they recommend that children should be older than currently permitted when they begin kindergarten. Their first assumption is that a child who is a "little more grownup" will be better able to cope with academic expectations, particularly in Grade 1. This assumption presupposes that academic ability is correlated with age. Their second assumption is that parents may be less likely to hold out children if the entry age were raised; this would reduce the range of ability levels within a class because students would be closer in age.

In contrast, 2 nonretaining teachers point out that raising the entry age would not eliminate the range of ability levels in a class. Their comments underline the fact that the choice of kindergarten entry age is relative; that is, regardless of which entry cutoff date is chosen, there will always be an age spread with a younger, comparatively less capable group of students.

Informants view the practice of red-shirting as an attempt by parents to ensure that their child is older and therefore more mature when he or she begins kindergarten.

Regarding advice to parents about holding out their child, one retaining teacher's comments are ambivalent; she would inform parents about her expectations and allow them to make their own decision based on their assessment of their child's capabilities; 4 other retaining teachers indicate that they would strongly advise a parent to keep a younger child out of school, particularly if the child were a boy. In apparent contradiction with this advice, these same teachers criticize their jurisdiction's current entry cutoff date because it encourages parents to hold out children whose birthdays are close to the cutoff.

While 4 of the 5 nonretaining teachers indicate a general preference that children begin kindergarten when legally eligible, 3 teachers qualify their statements based on individual contextual factors, particularly the child's gender and previous socializing experiences. All 4 teachers consider that parents are best qualified to decide whether their child is ready to begin kindergarten; these teachers would assist parents by providing them with information so they can make the best decision for their child.

One nonretaining teacher considers that raising the kindergarten entry age and red-shirting are both detrimental to kindergarten students; she describes their detrimental effects as the disruption of the "natural distribution" of students' ages, raised academic expectations in kindergarten, and kindergarten teachers' making inequitable comparisons of younger students with their older classmates. She attributes the perpetuation of these two practices to the prevalent "myth" among teachers and parents that students need to be older in order to succeed in kindergarten. Parents and teachers who hold this belief are responsible for closing a younger child's "window of opportunity" for participating in a group learning environment.

Similarly, 2 other nonretaining teachers identify the inflexible, unrealistic curricular expectations of other kindergarten teachers or society in general as the

cause of unreadiness; these 2 teachers use various expressions, including "inappropriate programming," "pushing children from a very young age," and "institutionalizing young children," to describe this risk to students' success in kindergarten.

## Readiness for Grade 1

### Teachers' Perceptions of Readiness for Grade 1

As discussed in the section on axial coding, all 6 retaining teachers have specific criteria for readiness or unreadiness for Grade 1.

Retaining teachers base their predictions of students' probable success in first grade primarily on the interpretation of first grade curricular requirements that they have acquired from their previous teaching experience at that level.

In contrast, all 5 nonretaining teachers indicate that their only criterion of readiness for first grade is that a child has attained legal entry age. In other words, these teachers consider all students of legal entry age ready for Grade 1.

Whereas retaining teachers' evaluations of student performance appear to be summative, that is, tend to focus on a student's performance on structured tasks at the end of kindergarten, nonretaining teachers tend to make formative evaluations. That is, nonretaining teachers acknowledge and accept individual differences in kindergarten entry skills and describe readiness for Grade 1 in terms of individual growth observed over the kindergarten year.

### Risk Factors Associated with Potential Failure in Grade 1

Risk factors, or "red flags," identified by the retaining teachers as characteristics or behaviours that militate against a student's probable success in Grade 1 include general weakness in "all areas" of functioning, a continued preference for self-directed "play" rather than participation in structured activities, the inability to concentrate independently on pencil-and-paper tasks, the inability to form social relationships, poor classroom participation, poor fine motor skills, poor symbolic representational ability, and low self-confidence. As discussed in the previous section, retaining teachers attribute these perceived risk factors to chronological age and concomitant "developmental immaturity." 3 teachers identify the male gender as an additional risk factor.

Three teachers indicate that a child's physical size is also a factor in promotional decisions; 2 retaining teachers report cases in which a child's larger size compared to classmates was an important factor in recommending promotion despite their concerns about the child's academic or social skills. In one case, the child's larger size was viewed as an asset; in the other, it was viewed as a detriment because the child was described as having a tendency to display aggressive behaviour towards his smaller kindergarten classmates. One nonretaining teacher, who previously practiced kindergarten retention, indicates that she routinely considered a child's physical size when making making promotional decisions, tending to promote larger children; she comments on the noticeable difference in size between retained and nonretained students when she discusses the longterm detrimental effects of kindergarten retention, implying that this may be a source of embarrassment or social stigmatization for older retained students.

Two of the 5 nonretaining teachers also make statements that involve judgments about possible causes of unreadiness. Although these 2 teachers mention age-related ability, they tend to focus on the effects of a child's social environment, particularly family conditions that either facilitate or militate against a child's readiness for Grade 1. According to these 2 teachers, the success of a teacher's interventive efforts depends on the cooperation that is received from the child's parents. They consider it futile to retain children who have minimal educational

support at home: the teacher may just as well work with the home as much as practically possible and provide the child with a fullday program that provides intellectual stimulation and consistency in behavioural management.

The remaining 3 nonretaining teachers make no comments that could be interpreted as "causes" for either readiness or unreadiness for first grade; these 3 teachers state that legal eligibility is their sole criterion for readiness for Grade 1.

**Factors Influencing Teachers' Strategies for Managing Readiness for Grade 1**

Each educational decision that affects the placement of a student is made within a complex intrapersonal-interpersonal context.

Following the paradigm model, factors that influence management strategies were discussed in terms of contextual intervening conditions.

Grounded theory assumes that intervening conditions, like causal and contextual conditions, are interactive and interrelated in actual situations (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 160). For the purpose of analysis, however, it is useful to conceptualize intervening conditions that influence teachers' proposed management strategies as intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional.

Intrapersonal conditions refer to the kindergarten teacher's own beliefs, or personal philosophy, about unreadiness and its management; interpersonal conditions refer to influences exerted by other participants in the decision-making process; and institutional conditions refer to features of the formal structure of the educational system that are relevant in placement decisions. Each type of intervening condition will be discussed separately, keeping in mind Strauss and Corbin's axiom that intervening conditions are interrelated.

As indicated previously, all 6 retaining teachers believe in basing promotional recommendations on their practical knowledge. Their trust in the efficacy of practical knowledge is juxtaposed with their distrust or disregard of educational research literature as a valuable source of information on kindergarten retention. Retaining teachers offer the following reasons for dismissing the findings of empirical research.

First, since each case is unique, promotional decisions should be made on an individual basis; the risk involved in extrapolating aggregate findings to individual cases is that "there is always an exception to the rule."

Second, it is inappropriate to generalize the findings of American studies to Canadian educational contexts because of significant differences in student and institutional characteristics.

Third, management strategies recommended by educational researchers, such as promotion with individual assistance, "sound good" in theory, but run contrary to a teacher's personal experience, are too expensive, or both.

In contrast, 3 nonretaining teachers have conducted their own reviews of research literature out of professional interest. Furthermore, a fourth teacher credits her complete reversal in attitude towards kindergarten retention to her admittedly limited exposure to research literature. A fifth teacher calls for greater effort on the part of faculties of education and school boards to provide parents and teachers with nontechnical research literature and for school boards to provide mandatory inservice presentations on kindergarten retention research.

In short, nonretaining teachers indicate that the research literature does inform their promotional decisions, substantiates their intuitive beliefs, and is a resource to share with parents to enable them to make informed decisions about retention.

On an interpersonal level, the opinions of the other central adult participants, namely the involved child's parents and the school administrator, and to a lesser extent the opinions of less closely involved professionals as well as the informal influence of other members of the teaching staff, may facilitate or constrain a teacher's proposed management strategies.

Most informants, both proponents and opponents of kindergarten retention,

acknowledge the important participatory role that parents play in promotional decision-making. To one degree or another, most informants indicate their acceptance of parents' authority to arbitrate this significant educational decision for their child.

Retaining teachers consider parental receptivity to their promotional recommendation a key factor in achieving what one teacher terms a "successful retention." It is therefore sometimes necessary for teachers to employ management strategies in order to secure parents' approval.

For example, retaining teachers stress the importance of keeping parents informed of their child's progress; they also stress the importance of presenting retention in a positive light so that parents will view a proposed retention as a beneficial measure and will, in turn, communicate this rationale to their child.

In order to convince parents about the wisdom of retaining their unready child, one teacher also employs the strategy of conducting a workshop to inform parents about the demands of the Grade 1 program.

Two retaining teachers identify parents' overestimation of their child's abilities as a reason for their disagreement that the child is unready for Grade 1. These teachers attribute this misconception to the fact that parents, unlike the teacher, have not observed the child's performance relative to other students who are older and more capable. These 2 teachers consider that parents would acquire a more realistic picture of their child's readiness if they were to observe in the classroom; they offer no suggestions about how this might be accomplished, however.

A third retaining teacher disagrees in principle with parents' being the final arbiter in promotional decisions; rather, it is the kindergarten teacher, as a professional who possesses both theoretical knowledge and practical expertise, who should make the final decision regarding a child's readiness for Grade 1. Moreover, this teacher questions parent involvement in educational decision-making in general. She expresses concern that some parent groups may use their authority to advance their own agendas. Furthermore, she believes that kindergarten teachers and school boards should more actively promote the educational importance of kindergarten to parents and make them better aware of Grade 1 expectations; otherwise, some parents will continue to devalue the kindergarten program and will therefore refuse to have their child repeat it.

The other major adult participant in the promotional decision process is the school principal; like the parent, this participant has the authority to either approve or to veto placement recommendations made by a kindergarten teacher.

One retaining teacher describes an example in which the school principal countermanded her recommendation that a child be retained; in the teacher's opinion, the subsequent promotion had deleterious consequences for the child.

In contrast, one nonretaining teacher credits her professional growth to two former principals who challenged her beliefs about the efficacy of kindergarten retention; their dissemination and discussion of research literature were instrumental in this teacher's changing both her opinions and promotional practices.

More remote participants in kindergarten teachers' management strategies include other members of the teaching staff, aides, and parent volunteers.

Other staff members, particularly other kindergarten and Division 1 teachers, may attempt to exert various forms of influence, which may either support or constrain a kindergarten teacher's management strategies. Constraining attempts might include other teachers' voicing their own opinions regarding more appropriate management strategies, criticizing the kindergarten teacher's proposed strategies, and undermining the kindergarten teacher's management strategies, such as a Grade 1 teacher's requesting that a promoted child be "sent back" to kindergarten.

None of the retaining teachers describe examples of intrastaff disagreement such as those suggested above. In fact, 2 retaining teachers consider the responses of other staff members to their management strategies generally positive. One teacher attributes this to the conservatism of the school staff in general. The other teacher states that her teaching experience in Division 1 has made her very familiar with the

expectations of each grade; she is therefore able to anticipate which students would likely be identified as unready by other teachers.

In contrast, 2 nonretaining teachers describe an atmosphere of intrastaff contention over the efficacy of kindergarten retention; one teacher describes her general impressions and the other, her personal experiences.

The first teacher indicates that retention has been a "very hotly debated topic" among her teaching colleagues for several years; some staff members favour students' being retained on the basis of achievement testing whereas others believe that other factors, such as support from the home, should be considered before a child is retained. This teacher attributes differences in staff members' philosophies to differences in their teacher training: teachers with early childhood and special education backgrounds have had more opportunity to observe children objectively and are therefore more willing to accept individual differences than are their generalist colleagues. Although the staff debate over retention continues, current school policy dictates that retention is used only as a "last resort"; the principal "will side with the parents" if they strongly oppose a retention recommendation; staffing has been increased at the Grade 1 level to provide low-enrollment classes.

The second nonretaining teacher describes her own reactions to the disapproval of other kindergarten and Grade 1 colleages concerning her promotion of "unready" students particularly if the students are chronologically young. She comments that teachers' opinions are influential in small communities such as hers. Although she feels "outnumbered" by supporters of kindergarten retention in both the school and the community, she continues recommending promotion for chronologically young children because she believes it is "developmentally appropriate."

Most informants comment on the necessity of referring individual students for diagnostic assessment and of consulting with educational specialists such as psychometrists, special education consultants, and speech-language therapists. Some informants also mention that they have been provided with an aide to assist with the management of their special needs students.

In addition, 2 informants indicate that they utilize parent volunteers regularly to help with individual and small group tutoring.

One retaining teacher indicates that her school utilizes auxiliary personnel, including parent volunteers, and makes timetabling arrangements to facilitate the instruction of special needs students; she does not indicate any special provisions for struggling nonspecial needs students, however.

One nonretaining teacher, who makes extensive use of support personnel, regards parent volunteers as a valuable classroom resource; she states that their assistance has enabled struggling kindergarten students, who might otherwise have been considered for retention, to be promoted.

Relevant institutional factors include official district or school policies regarding retention and the types of programs and support services that are available as management options.

**Teachers' Proposed Strategies for Managing Readiness for Grade 1**

All 6 retaining teachers recommend kindergarten retention for a child who is chronologically young, of presumed normal intelligence, but who is considered deficient in the academic, emotional, physical or social skills necessary for mastering the curricular requirements of Grade 1.

One retaining teacher states that she would automatically promote an older student because the problems of older students "need to be dealt with in Grade 1," such as prescribing "medication" for "hyperactivity"; she would automatically retain a younger student with similar problems, however, because "quite often if they're young chronologically that extra year in kindergarten will enable the child to be able to cope in grade one just through maturity." In other words, this teacher attributes different causes and proposes different management strategies in two hypothetical situations

that appear identical except for one feature, namely the child's chronological age.

The belief that skill development is dependent on physiological maturation, which itself is dependent on the passage of time, assumes that compensatory efforts will have only limited effects. This assumption has important implications for instructional programming and delivery.

As far as pedagogical intervention is concerned, 2 of the retaining teachers express the opinion that a teacher's efforts can significantly improve a student's performance. In contrast, a third retaining teacher states unequivocally that compensatory or enrichment efforts are basically futile because "neurological maturity is more important than a stimulating environment."

A fourth teacher states that she would prefer to take a more innovative approach to providing the "developmentally young" with additional time to mature rather than just having them repeat kindergarten. This teacher advocates that "developmentally unready" children be allowed to progress through an ungraded primary unit with individualized instruction. In her opinion, such individualized programming is not possible given the current, inadequate level of educational funding: for this reason, she continues to recommend students for kindergarten retention to ensure that they are developmentally ready to achieve success in the "regular system."

One of the nonretaining teachers also adds a proviso to her recommendation that all children be promoted to Grade 1; she is in favour of universal promotion only if teachers have the necessary administrative and financial support for professional development training in individualizing instruction and for planning and conferencing time; otherwise, she considers that it is not "reasonable" to expect that all students be promoted along with their age peers.

Two retaining teachers would promote a chronologically young child about whom they have concerns if there is evidence that retention would emotionally traumatize the child or if another year of daycare would be a financial burden.

In exceptional situations, opponents of kindergarten retention may recommend it as a possible option. For example, one nonretaining teacher indicates that she recently recommended that a child repeat kindergarten. Her reasons are similar to those described by retaining teachers, namely that the child, a male, was chronologically young and had a short attention span and poor social skills.

Despite their criticisms of retention and assertions that legal eligibility is their sole criterion for readiness for Grade 1, 3 nonretaining teachers would recommend that a child be placed in a Kindergarten-Grade 1 program if they considered it was the most appropriate placement for the child. Although K-1 programs do involve partial repeating of kindergarten, these informants apparently do not regard this as a form of "kindergarten retention," possibly because it involves a child at least partially "moving on" to the next grade.

None of the retaining teachers raise concerns about chronological age/developmental immaturity when discussing students who have been identified has having a "special educational need," such as an obvious emotional problem, speech disorder, delay in language development, mental retardation, autism, or a specific learning disability. All 6 teachers state that the provision of extra time afforded by a second year in kindergarten will not ameliorate these learning difficulties; they unanimously recommend referral for further assessment if necessary and individualized programming either in a regular classroom or in a special education setting.

Two of the nonretaining teachers also advocate the above management strategies for students with identified special needs. The other 3 nonretaining teachers consider that kindergarten retention may have short-term benefits for at least some special needs students; some special needs students might benefit from repeating kindergarten by being able to take advantage of an additional year of special ECS funding, by feeling at ease in a familiar learning environment, or by having more time to develop social skills.

In conclusion, none of the 11 informants either endorses kindergarten retention as the preferred method of managing unreadiness for Grade 1 or opposes it as

a management strategy under all circumstances. All retaining informants endorse retention for a specific "type" of child who has the characteristics that teachers associate with risk of failure, such as chronological youngness, male gender, comparative socioemotional/academic "immaturity," but consider other management strategies in extenuating circumstances, such as economic hardship or a special educational need that has a physiological basis. In contrast, all nonretaining informants favour social promotion with possible program modifications for the former type of student, but some believe that retention may have short-term benefits for some special needs students.

Therefore, the retaining-nonretaining designation used throughout this narrative is simplistic; informants' support of kindergarten retention is influenced greatly by specific contextual factors.

**Perceived Consequences of Management Strategies**

Retaining teachers tend to compare the performances of younger and older students when discussing readiness for kindergarten; they also make similar comparisons when discussing the retained child's performance during the repeated kindergarten year.

According to retaining teachers, students who were the youngest and least developmentally mature the previous year have now reversed roles; they are now the oldest in the class and therefore now have the academic and behavioural "edge" over younger, first-year kindergarten classmates. These teachers predict that retained students will continue to benefit from their superior maturity in terms of improved academic achievement and self-esteem in the higher grades.

Observing a student's progress in the second kindergarten year reinforces teachers' confidence in their practical knowledge and validates their belief in the efficacy of kindergarten retention. Only one retaining teacher questions whether students' behaviour or academic achievement is improved significantly by being retained; she has observed that the range of student abilities "narrows" by Grade 3 whether some of the students were retained or not. Additionally, she considers that students' future educational success is largely the result of "variables" beyond the kindergarten teacher's control, including the quality of teaching and amount of assistance they later receive.

When asked to weigh the risks of promotion versus retention for a hypothetical chronologically young child, retaining teachers almost unanimously state that there is greater risk in promoting a child who may be developmentally unready for Grade 1 than in retaining a child who might possibly be successful.

Again, retaining teachers base this judgment on their practical knowledge; based on past experience, they consider it highly probable that chronologically young, unready children who were promoted against their recommendations will be recommended for retention in Grade 1 or eventually in a higher grade when their relative immaturity "catches up to them."

How often this turns out to be the case is debatable, however, since several informants indicate that they are unable to follow the progress of their former students once they have left their classrooms.

Retaining teachers also associate later retention with greater risk of emotional trauma than earlier retention. This generalization is based on their belief that older children possess greater awareness of their inadequacies compared to classmates than do younger children.

One retaining teacher would risk promoting an unready child and "take the chance" of having him or her repeat Grade 1; this teacher considers that she usually makes prudent judgments, however, since these are made in consultation with parents and other professionals. This teacher's comments also imply that an unready child who is promoted in kindergarten will most probably fail Grade 1; none of the retaining teachers consider the possibility that a struggling child might actually

succeed.

In contrast, all 5 nonretaining informants associate kindergarten retention with both short- and long-term detrimental effects. In their opinion, these detrimental effects outweigh any slight gains the child might make during the second year in kindergarten.

Short-term detrimental effects during the repeated year include negative emotional responses such as boredom, frustration, and lowered self-esteem caused by feelings of failure, as well as constant exposure to younger behavioral models and separation from former friends.

One nonretaining teacher suggests an alternative explanation for the apparent growth, which retaining teachers attribute to retention, that is observed during the second kindergarten year, namely, that children will "naturally" continue to develop whether they are retained or not.

Nonretaining teachers do not consider kindergarten retention a panacea for learning problems over the longterm. Retained students often still require resource assistance during or throughout the higher elementary levels. They may also experience long-lasting feelings of inadequacy. Furthermore, they may "stick out" physically and behaviourally from younger, promoted grade peers. For example, retained elementary students tend to be noticeably larger than their younger classmates; in high school, they may be able to legally drive or to drink alcohol long before their grade peers.

Rather than having unready students repeat the same grade, nonretaining teachers advocate allowing them to "move on" with their age peers and be provided with the most appropriate programming for their individual needs, which may be in one of the specialized learning settings that are available or in a regular Grade 1 classroom.

Nonretaining teachers stipulate that certain conditions are necessary if "at risk" students are to succeed once they are promoted, however. In regular Grade 1 classrooms, it is crucial that teachers be willing to accept individual ability levels and to modify existing programs. Success for such students also involves making maximal use of resource persons, both inside and outside the school.

As previously noted, retaining teachers base their predictions about which children are likely to experience difficulty in Grade 1 and would therefore benefit from repeating kindergarten on their intuition and previous experience, that is, on their practical knowledge.

One nonretaining teacher identifies an inherent risk in making promotional decisions primarily on the basis of intuitive impressions, however. This risk arises because teachers differ in their expectations. For example, one teacher with lower expectations might recommend that a child be promoted whereas a second teacher with higher expectations might recommend that the same child be retained. One of the retaining teachers alludes to this possibility when she comments that some children, who had been recommended for retention by teachers elsewhere and who spent the second year of kindergarten in her class, could "do quite a bit" in *her* estimation, causing her to wonder why they had been retained.

Two other nonretaining teachers also suggest the possibility that intuitive impressions may result in teachers' misinterpreting the causes of some children's unreadiness for Grade 1. That is, a student's problems might be erroneously attributed to developmental youngness that will improve with the provision of more time in kindergarten, whereas, if assessed, the student might actually have a specific learning problem for which a different management strategy would be more appropriate.

## Summary

Chapter 5 began with a discussion of the philosophical assumptions underlying the qualitative component of this study.

This was followed by a discussion of the sampling and data collection

procedures used and the demographic characteristics of informants.

The grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was then used as a conceptual framework to analyze statements about child development, readiness, and kindergarten retention obtained from semi-structured follow-up interviews with 11 informants, 6 of whom had indicated their support and 5 their opposition to kindergarten retention on their Kindergarten Retention Questionnaire returns.

Using the paradigm model of data analysis suggested by grounded theory , Chapter 5 sought to describe informants' conceptualizations of "readiness" in terms of causal conditions and contextual properties. It was assumed that informants' conceptualizations of readiness would in turn determine the management strategies they considered appropriate to ensure that students would be ready for the next step in their educational career. Significant intervening conditions that either facilitated or inhibited informants' proposed management strategies were also identified as well as informants' perceptions of the short- and long-term consequences of their management strategies.

It was found that the majority of informants conceptualized readiness for both kindergarten and Grade 1 in terms of within-student characteristics/skills.

Informants who attributed readiness primarily to students' chronological age/developmental maturity tended to favour kindergarten retention as a management strategy for unready students. This belief was based on the assumption that repeating kindergarten would provide unready students with additional time to acquire the prerequisite learning attitudes and skills to be successful in Grade 1. These informants based their judgments about the readiness of individual students and the efficacy of kindergarten retention as a management strategy for unreadiness on their practical knowledge rather than on the depersonalized findings of educational research.

In contrast, some of those informants who defined readiness in terms of student attributes recognized and accepted individual variations in development and attributed deficiencies in the development of readiness to factors within students' social environments.

Based on their assumption that pedagogical intervention, not the provision of time, is necessary to ameliorate the effects of a deficient social environment, these latter informants tended to recommend promotion with supportive, compensatory measures for students considered "at-risk" for experiencing future educational difficulties. These informants were receptive to the findings of educational research to inform their decisions about the most appropriate management strategies for unready students.

In contrast, a few informants were found to conceptualize readiness simply in terms of students' legal eligibility to attend a kindergarten or Grade 1 program. These informants also interpreted "readiness" as readiness on the part of teachers and school jurisdictions to adapt programs in order to accommodate a range of students' ability levels. They also tended to recommend promotion for all legally eligible students with individual programming modifications as considered necessary and were willing to consider the recommendations of retention research when making student placement decisions.

Informants were not always able to effect their preferred management strategies because of intervening, interactive factors that constrained their actions. Intervening conditions included institutional factors, such as nonretention policies, and the actions of other adult participants who were involved in management contexts. Informants' reactions and efforts to manage these intervening conditions were also discussed.

These findings and those of the quantitative phase of the study are summarized, compared, and contrasted in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 6

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY FINDINGS

This chapter summarizes, compares, and contrasts the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study with reference to the major and each of the minor research questions.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the findings related to the first minor research question rather than those related to the major research question for the following reason.

The first minor research question considers the extent to which nativism constitutes a philosophy of child development held by kindergarten teachers. Logically, it is necessary to consider this question *before* considering a possible relationship between nativist belief and promotional practice, the major research question.

This is followed by a discussion of the fourth minor research question concerning nativist belief and preferred management strategies and then by the second and third minor research questions concerning retention research.

### Evidence of Nativist Belief

This section discusses the findings related to the the first minor research question; namely, to what extent does nativism constitute a philosophy of child development held by kindergarten teachers?

This question will be discussed in terms of majority agreement-disagreement with the questionnaire statements taken from the Gesellian literature, the type of promotional factors that teachers consider most important, and the extent to which they favour the strategies for unready students advocated in the Gesellian literature; the discussion of preferred management strategies also addresses the fourth minor research question.

### Nativist Belief Statements

This section considers the extent to which respondents agree or disagree with the 12 questionnaire statements regarding kindergarten readiness and retention taken from the Gesellian literature, which all three expert reviewers identified as indicative of nativist belief. As discussed in Chapter 4, these 12 statements were used to construct an aggregate nativist score.

Questionnaire statements that refer to specific factors, such as age, or to proposed strategies, such as holding chronologically young children out of kindergarten, will be discussed in the parts of the chapter that consider the findings related to promotional factors and management strategies.

Throughout the chapter, the term "respondents" will be used to refer to the full sample of 190 kindergarten teachers who responded to the questionnaire and the term "informants" to refer to the subsample of 11 teachers who also participated in follow-up interviews. The terms "retaining informants" and "nonretaining informants" are also used with the same connotations as in Chapter 5.

#### The Relative Importance of "Nature" versus "Nurture" in School Readiness

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the central assumption of the nativist philosophy is that physiological growth, or "developmental maturity," is a more important factor than a stimulating environment in the development of school readiness.

The majority of respondents disagree with the statement that neurological maturity is *more* important than a stimulating home environment for success in kindergarten.

Assuming that they interpret the term "neurological maturity" to mean physiological development, respondents obviously consider that environmental factors also play an important role in contributing to performance in kindergarten; for example, several respondents explain their reason for disagreeing with this statement with comments such as "there has to be a balance," and "What a choice! Both are important."

Even those informants who discuss school readiness in terms of "developmental maturity" also attribute unreadiness for school in part to inappropriate parental role-modelling or lack of stimulation in the home.

The above findings support Meisels' (1987) contention that contemporary educators consider maturation only one aspect of development along with socioeconomic and familial factors, experiences with the physical and social environment, and gender differences.

However, many participants indicate by their questionnaire or interview responses that they consider "maturity" (however they conceptualize this construct) an important aspect of school readiness, as will be discussed in the section on promotional factors.

It should be noted that the nativist statement about the greater importance of physiological development than environmental stimulation in readiness has an educational corollary, which is that environmental intervention has minimal, if any, effect on the development of school readiness. Participants' agreement-disagreement with this corollary will be considered in the section on preferred alternatives to kindergarten retention.

**Nativist Beliefs about Retention**

The nativist rationale for supporting kindergarten retention is that it provides immature children with additional time in which to mature so they will be able to better cope with the academic expectations of Grade 1.

The majority of respondents agree that retention is more effective in kindergarten than other grades, is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up and is an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in Grade 1; these three belief statements are consistent with the nativist view about the benefits of retention.

All 6 retaining informants advocate kindergarten retention as a preventative measure that will spare the chronologically young, immature child from inevitable academic difficulties in Grade 1 or later elementary grades; these informants predict that future educational problems will arise because unready children cannot overcome their relative immaturity without the "gift of time," as it is referred to by one informant. The gift of time is provided by having a child spend a second year in kindergarten or in an extra-grade class.

The views of the 6 retaining informants about the benefits of kindergarten retention contrast with those of the 5 nonretaining informants, who support social promotion with individualized assistance (as necessary) for chronologically young children.

Additionally, the majority of respondents disagree that kindergarten students should never be retained, that retention will stifle a child's desire to learn, and that immature children who are promoted do as well as those who are retained; these three statements were negatively reworded to produce statements antithetical to the nativist view of retention, the asumption being that disagreement with them implies agreement with the nativist view of retention.

Like the majority of respondents, retaining informants believe in the short- and long-term benefits of kindergarten retention. (Only one retaining informant questions the efficacy of retention, but continues to recommend it anyway.) Informants believe that, rather than stifling a child's desire to learn, retention improves a struggling child's self-esteem and attitude toward school because the child perceives that he or

she is now more competent than (younger) classmates.

In contrast, the nonretaining informants associate kindergarten with detrimental short- and long-term effects on students' motivation, self-esteem, and learning. Based on their understanding of retention research literature and their own observations, these informants believe that promoted children do as well, if not better, than their retained classmates.

## The Relative Importance of Promotional Factors

This study differs somewhat from previous studies regarding the method for obtaining information about the relative importance of factors involved in promotional decisions.

For example, Haack (1984/1985) asked primary teacher respondents to consider 19 factors in relation to one of their own students who had been recommended for retention. In contrast, Bergin et al. (1996) asked each kindergarten teacher respondent to consider only one profile of a hypothetical child out of eight possible profiles, which differed on one of three variables, age, gender, or independence level. Tomchin and Impara's (1992) examination of factors involved in K-7 teachers' promotional decisions included both a "Teacher Retention Beliefs Questionnaire," which asked teachers to weigh the relative importance of 10 factors, and a "Retention Decision Simulation Exercise," which asked respondents to consider 40 vignettes that varied by academic performance, ability, maturity, size, age, and gender.

This study asked respondents both to consider the importance of each of 15 individual factors and also to identify the factors *they* considered important in promotional decisions; in both instances, respondents were asked to make judgments in the abstract. In the follow-up interviews, informants were asked to describe a student they considered ready for Grade 1, that is, were asked to identify promotional factors involved in a specific case.

Despite differences in methodology, the consistent findings of this and the cited studies lead to three general observations: the first observation concerns the *type* of factors that teachers consider important; the second concerns the *number* of factors that teachers consider when making promotional decisions; the third concerns the *basis* on which teachers consider promotional factors. Each of these three observations will be discussed in turn.

### The Most Important Promotional Factors

**Language development.** One noteworthy finding is the importance that participants accord to language development.

Haack (1984/1985) also found that the majority of primary teachers she surveyed considered language development an important factor in promotional decisions. Haack did not consider this finding surprising because of the importance that the school places on achievement in reading and writing.

The significance that kindergarten teachers in this study attribute to language development may reflect their belief that proficiency in oral language is an important prerequisite to the development of literacy (reading and writing) skills.

In describing a child who is ready for kindergarten or Grade 1, most informants, including those who do not recommend retention, comment on the importance of a child's demonstrating early literacy skills, such as a willingness to listen to stories, having good listening comprehension, having an extensive vocabulary or sight word repertoire, or having a rudimentary knowledge of phonics.

Informants who recommend retention stress the importance of a child's willingness to participate and to master concepts taught in structured activities particularly at the end of kindergarten when increased instructional emphasis is placed on developing specific skills in preparation for formal reading instruction in Grade 1.

In contrast, the majority of respondents apparently do not have similar expectations for students whose language deficiencies result from being non-English speakers because English as a second language is a relatively insignificant promotional factor and the majority of respondents disagree that ESL students will learn more English if they are retained.

"**Maturity.**" Eighty-three respondents specifically use the terms "maturity," "maturational readiness," or "immaturity" in their descriptions of the promotional factors they consider most important; all of these terms are used prominently in the nativist literature.

In their comments, respondents either use the term "maturity" alone as if it were self-explanatory, or as an "umbrella term" that subsumes different components, as in "maturity level--social, emotional, physical, academic," or with a descriptor, such as "emotional maturity" or "social maturity."

Similarly, a number of respondents use the generic terms "readiness" or "development" alone or with descriptors that denote specific aspects of readiness or development, such as "academic readiness" or "emotional development."

If the nouns, maturity, development, and readiness, are used as adjectives to describe the attributes of students (as in "mature," "ready," or "(well-)developed" students), it could be argued that these terms are semantically interchangeable.

In the cited studies, students' "maturity" was also found to be an important promotional factor.

For example, Bergin et al. (1996) found that independence level, which they equated with "maturity" based on the assumption that the two constructs were "closely related", was the only significant predictor of kindergarten teachers' recommending retention for a hypothetical child of the three variables (age, gender, and independence level) that they studied.

Tomchin and Impara (1992) found that academic performance, ability, and maturity were the most significant predictors of a retention decision across age levels on their Retention Decision Simulation Exercise.

**Age.** As in this study, Bergin et al. and Tomchin and Impara found that, as an individual factor, age was ranked as relatively unimportant on their questionnaire.

In contrast, most informants in this study, even those who do not recommend retention, consider age an important factor in readiness for both kindergarten and Grade 1. It should be noted that March 1st is the kindergarten entry cutoff date for Edmonton and a number of neighbouring school jurisdictions. As Gredler (1992) has noted, this is the latest kindergarten entry cutoff date in North America.

To manage perceived age-related risks, the majority of informants recommend, to one extent or another, raising the kindergarten entry age and keeping children close to the entry age home an extra year.

However, the reasons for endorsing holding out or raising the age of kindergarten eligibility are different for nonretaining and retaining informants.

Retaining informants advocate these measures to increase the likelihood that students will be better able to meet the expectations of existing programs whereas nonretaining teachers support these measures on the belief that the current entry age forces the youngest students to become "institutionalized" before they are ready.

The last sentence of the respondent's comments quoted below illustrates the dilemma faced by kindergarten teachers who are reluctant to retain students, but who feel powerless to change what they consider to be inflexible program expectations:

> If I felt confident that the Grade 1 program would provide for all individual needs, I would not feel a need to retain any child. Children who cannot attend at group time and have trouble coping with school at the K-1 level will not have a *positive* [emphasis in original] first year experience in the structured setting of our grade one classes. Change the age or change the program!

Although age is not one of the most important individual factors, the majority of respondents agree that the older child has a better chance of success in kindergarten, favour raising the kindergarten entry age, and keeping a child close to the entry cutoff age at home an extra year. Considering that respondents favour strategies to increase kindergarten entry age, the reason for the relatively low ranking of age as a promotional factor remains unclear.

Regarding concerns about school entry age, the Southern Regional Education Board (1994) has argued that attempts to manipulate the age at which children begin school or advance from grade to grade reflect a common misconception that school entry age is "in some way a developmental criterion" (p. 17).

According to the Southern Regional Education Board, neither legal school entry age nor the school's expectations of students' entry skills is related to child development; school entry age is simply an "arbitrary point at which society agrees to assume responsibility for, and bear the costs of, a large portion of a child's education and care" (p. 17).

Although no informant explicitly expresses this opinion, the willingness of 3 informants to accept students for kindergarten on the basis of "where they're at" at the legally appointed time and to make programming modifications for them implies that entry age itself is not an issue for these informants.

**The Type of Promotional Factors Considered Most Important**

On both the closed- and open-ended questions, the factors that the majority of respondents consider most important refer to aspects of the child's emotional, social, and academic functioning.

In other words, the *factor type* identified by teachers as most important in promotional decisions relates to student emotional, social, or academic competencies.

The nativist literature defines school readiness in terms of the same type of factors identified by participants in this study, that is, to various aspects of the psychological and physiological "maturity" of the child. As noted in Chapter 3, Meisels (1995) has termed this the "within-the-child" conceptualization of readiness.

Physical size is one aspect of physiological development that has been associated with school readiness in the nativist literature.

In this study, a child's *small* size compared to classmates is a relatively insignificant promotional factor on its own. Only 2 respondents name physical size as a factor when they make promotional decisions. Additionally, the majority of respondents disagree that a child who is significantly smaller than others the same age is a suitable candidate for retention. Comments on several returns, such as "size would be a factor in the decision but *NOT* [emphasis in original] the chief factor" and promotion is "not based on size alone, but must be based on maturity and development" reflect the belief that the small size alone is an insufficient reason for retention. Other comments, such as "some of my most brilliant students are *tiny!* [emphasis in original]", reflect the belief that physical size does not predict success, which counters the nativist belief that small size is one predictor of unreadiness.

On the other hand, comments of some informants suggest that a child's *larger* physical size compared to classmates may improve his or her chances of being promoted even if the teacher has concerns about the child's socioemotional or academic readiness for Grade 1. For example, one informant expresses concern that retaining larger children would contribute to their becoming socially stigmatized because they would "stick out" noticeably from classmates; a second informant expresses reluctance to retain a larger child with aggressive tendencies because repeating kindergarten would provide him with further opportunities to "bully" younger, smaller classmates.

In contrast to the "within-the-child" view of readiness discussed above, a few respondents, and all 5 nonretaining informants, name factors, such as the availability of support personnel and programs, the wish to avoid retention by adapting the child's

program, or consideration of the Grade 1-3 teachers' philosophy, suggesting a conceptualization of readiness as a "relational, interactional educational construct that reflects a focus on both the child's status and the characteristics of the educational setting" (Meisels, 1995, p. 18).

**Parental Support**

The only important promotional factor that does not belong in the "within-the-child" category is parental request or refusal to have the child retained. Parental support of a teacher's recommendation to retain (or to promote) a child is a critical factor because, as one respondent notes, parents "actually have the final say as ECS is not mandatory."

All 11 informants acknowledge that parents are the final authority in all educational decisions affecting their child. Retaining informants place particular emphasis on the importance of first securing parental acceptance of their retention recommendation and then of having parents transmit the appropriate rationale for being held back to the child. This is the same procedure advocated in the nativist literature for achieving maximal benefit from a retention: that is, the teacher first convinces the parent of the benefits of retention and the parent, in turn, convinces the child.

Although parental support does not belong the category of factors that refer to students' capabilities, it is conceptually related to this category because parental support *validates* the teacher's perception of the child's capabilities.

**Retention Decisions are based on a Combination of Factors**

The following findings of this and previous studies lead to the second observation that teachers consider, not just one, but *several* factors simultaneously when making promotional decisions.

Bergin et al. (1996) noted that a number of respondents gave multiple reasons for placement recommendations; this finding is noteworthy because each respondent reviewed only one profile in which only *one* independent variable was manipulated.

In this study, relatively few respondents who answered the open-ended question which asked them to identify their own promotional factors name only *one* factor; in these few cases (with frequencies in parentheses), the single factor is parental support/approval/request (4), academic readiness (3), emotional maturity (2), age (1), or immaturity (1). In all other cases, respondents name two or more factors.

As one respondent explains his or her answer, "many factors combine to make me consider retention"; according to a second respondent, "generally, it is more a combination of many factors, i.e., chronological age, immature language and social development, parental imput [sic]. That is--what would be best for the child"; in the opinion of a third respondent, "at the kindergarten level you have to consider the whole child; not just intellectual level but also his/her social and emotional level too."

A fourth respondent expresses the opinion that

> your questions are too limiting - A child is retained not for any *one* [emphasis in original] reason, but after looking at his functioning in all levels, determining a reason for low ability & behavior & then deciding if another year in K would help child [sic] better prepare for grade one.

Retaining informants also indicate that their promotional decisions are based on a combination of factors, as in "But when you get a child with *all* [emphasis in original] of that, poor social skills, poor fine motor skills, young, you need to give them a chance. . . . So, I wouldn't hold them back because of one or two things. But when they're all working together and you've got a child who you know is just going to flounder in first grade, it's not fair."

Therefore, when considered in combination with other factors within specific contexts, even relatively unimportant factors, such as physical size, assume greater significance, as illustrated by the questionnaire and interview comments cited in the previous section on type of promotional factors considered important.

For example, Tomchin and Impara (1992) also found that respondents assigned little relative weight to physical size on their questionnaire. However, this factor was significant when combined with other factors on their retention decision simulation instrument.

**Teachers Consider Promotional Factors on a Case-by-Case Basis**

The third observation regarding promotional factors refers to the *basis* on which teachers make promotional decisions.

Haack (1984/1985) found that her respondents generally appeared "more comfortable" responding to questions about specific students than to questions based on absolute criteria. She also noted that many written comments indicated that promotional decisions should be based on individual cases rather than on absolute criteria. Edson (1990) also concluded that kindergarten teachers consider the contextual factors of each case when making promotional decisions.

The shared conclusion of Haack and Edson is supported by the written comments of numerous respondents in this study; for example, one respondent indicates that "I found the questions difficult to answer in a 'cut-and-dried' manner; each case seems to have so many factors to consider. * [sic] so, answer [sic] is: the individual child & circumstances are most import. [sic]"

The fact that teachers judge the relative importance of promotional factors on a case-by-case basis has significant implications for their use of research findings on retention, as will be discussed later in the chapter.

**Nativist Belief and Preferred Strategies for Unready Children**

The fourth minor research question sought to determine if there was a relationship between nativist belief and the types of strategies favoured for students considered unready for Grade 1.

The implications of the rank ordering of the eight suggested alternatives to kindergarten retention as evidence of nativist belief are first discussed. This is followed by a discussion of the results of the inferential tests on the statistical relationship between nativist belief and each alternative.

**Smaller Classes with Individual Assistance**

Respondents' first choice of alternatives to kindergarten retention is smaller classes with increased individualized/remedial instruction. It could be argued that the choice of smaller classes is a purely pragmatic choice that bears no relationship to any particular orientation toward child development and school readiness.

However, the wording of this option also included "increased individualized/ remedial instruction" and the fact that respondents in this study chose it as their most preferred alternative has significance for answering the fourth minor research question; the implication of this finding as evidence of nativist belief will be discussed in the section of Chapter 7 that considers the theoretical significance of the study findings.

**Strategies to Raise Kindergarten Entry Age**

Respondents' second choice is to raise the kindergarten entry age, which is a nativist strategy that equates school readiness with chronological age. Most informants, including some who oppose kindergarten retention, also advocate this strategy, although, as previously discussed, they appear to have different reasons than

retaining informants for doing so.

Although respondents favour raising the entry age as a method for ensuring that students are older when they begin kindergarten, they are less in favour of red-shirting as a method of achieving the same purpose. There are two plausible explanations for respondents' preference of raising the entry age. First, some teachers may feel uncomfortable advising parents face-to-face to keep their child home an extra year (although some informants report having done so in the past, apparently without reservation.) Second, a policy change would provide official validation of teachers' concern that the current entry age is too young.

**Readiness Testing**

The ordering of alternatives related to readiness testing reveals an apparent inconsistency; that is, although the majority of respondents appear to favour developmental prekindergarten for unready 5-year-olds, which implies some sort of screening procedure, they disfavour kindergarten entry based on developmental readiness testing

In Question 1, about 53% of respondents agree and 47% disagree that students should not be tested for kindergarten readiness.

Some respondents explain why they believe that children should be assessed for kindergarten readiness: "children who will not be five till Jan or Feb [sic] of kindergarten year should be assessed. Every child at 4 1/2 is *not* [emphasis in original] ready."

Others state reasons for their objection to readiness assessment, such as "Not if entrance is determined this way. Should take everyone," "how do you define 'readiness'??," "who assesses?," and "age would determine readiness, but change the entry age."

None of the informants mentions readiness assessment as a management strategy for readiness for kindergarten; 2 nonretaining informants indicate that their only criterion for readiness is legal age of eligibility, making it highly unlikely that they would support readiness testing.

Additionally, from their responses on Question 1, respondents appear to be more in favour of developmental testing at the end rather than before kindergarten. That is, they appear to be more in favour of testing as a criterion of admission to first grade rather than as a criterion of admission to kindergarten.

Greater agreement with the utility of testing to inform placement decisions at the end of kindergarten may be in some way related to teachers' beliefs about appropriate, perhaps different, treatments for special needs and nonspecial needs students. For example, it is reasonable to assume that a teacher would be more likely to recommend a specialized program or placement for a student with a diagnosed special need than to recommend retention; the results of testing would therefore be useful in helping the teacher decide which management strategy to recommend.

However, respondent opinion about whether special needs students should be retained or not is almost equally divided. The written comments on several questionnaires indicate that this decision depends on the "nature of the special needs."

To complicate the issue further, all 6 retaining informants believe that retention is an inappropriate management strategy for special needs students whereas 3 of the 5 nonretaining informants believe that retention can benefit at least some special needs students.

To resolve these issues, it is necessary to obtain additional, indepth information about teachers' opinions regarding the role of developmental testing at the kindergarten level and their preferred management strategies for special needs students.

**Transition Class, Red-Shirting, Promotion with Assistance, and Ungraded Primary Unit**

The close rankings of transition class, red-shirting, and promotion with assistance suggest that respondents favour strategies of both kinds, that is, strategies such as transition class and red-shirting, whose purpose is to increase the likelihood that students will meet program expectations, *and* strategies, like promotion with individual assistance, which involve at least some individual modifications to curriculum.

Table 11 indicates that, in terms of *number* of respondents who strongly favour/favour each of the three alternatives, more respondents actually favour promotion (132) compared to transition class (124) or red-shirting (120). A few respondents comment that they favour promotion with assistance despite the fact that it is "not usually available in grade one."

Questionnaire comments like the following suggest that economic considerations may have prompted some respondents to disfavour the transition and ungraded primary class alternatives: "Great on paper. Very difficult with current class size"; "not enough children to warrant these classes"; "What kind of funding or budget allocations do you see?"; "I have worked in one of these [ungraded primary classes] - it only works with *lots* [emphasis in original] of aides & teachers. Not realistic during Klein Admin.[sic]."

An ungraded K-3 primary unit was the least preferred alternative to kindergarten retention. As suggested above, some respondents may have rejected this alternative for economic reasons. Other respondents comment that they "do not know much about these classes."

In contrast, the following respondent strongly favours ungraded primary despite the current age/grade structure of early childhood education:

> I have not read any literature pertaining to research; however all of the E.C.S. philosophy is based on an ungraded period of time which is K-3. We are trying to use a philosophy within a framework that is not compatible. Every year, I am faced with difficult decisions - "Is a child immature but bright"? or "is a child just needing a little more time to learn new concepts"? Or is the child having a learning disability? An ungrade [sic] 4 year period would eliminate this dilemma.

One of the retaining informants also expresses a preference for an ungraded primary unit rather than retention for chronologically young, immature students. However, she feels compelled to continue recommending retention because she considers that radical changes to the current age/grade structure of schooling are economically unfeasible given the recent cutbacks in educational funding by the provincial government.

**The Significance of Correlations between Nativist Belief and Alternatives to Kindergarten Retention**

Regarding the statistical relationship between nativist belief and the eight alternatives to kindergarten retention, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients calculated for each of the eight alternatives to kindergarten retention and aggregate nativist score are statistically significant for the following alternatives: raise the kindergarten entry age, individual progress through an ungraded primary (K-3) unit, kindergarten entry on the basis of developmental readiness testing, promotion with remedial assistance, and keep a child who is close to the entry cutoff age at home an extra year. The theoretical implications of these findings are discussed in Chapter 7.

**An Alternative Explanation for These Findings**

The possibility must be considered that respondents had difficulty in judging the relative merits of several decontextualized options, which was found to be the case with the question regarding promotional factors. Both questions required respondents to make generalized judgments based on their propositional knowledge rather than contextual judgments based on their case knowledge.

The following comments do suggest that the propositional type of question itself may have made responding difficult for some respondents: "Question is difficult to answer since each child is so unique & circumstances vary. There really is *no* [emphasis in original] answer!! I would sooner see a child kept home & starting later than retention", and "Perhaps I read too much into the question but I found too much info was missing."

Comments such as these raise the issue of whether or not a survey is the most appropriate method for studying teachers' beliefs about child development and retention. Participants in this study, for example, indicate that they make promotional decisions on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration the salient features of each case ; a typical survey format, however, forces them to make responses to questions that are phrased in terms of general propositions, causing some teachers to "read too much into" questions that some find "too broad" and others "too limiting."

**The Relationship between Nativist Belief and Promotional Practice**

The major research question of the study was to determine if there was a relationship between kindergarten teachers' nativist belief and their promotional practice.

This relationship was defined in terms of a correlation between teachers' responses to statements on the Kindergarten Retention Questionnaire that were indicative of nativist belief and their practice of recommending that students repeat kindergarten.

"Nativist belief" was defined operationally in terms of an aggregate nativist score. This score was derived by combining the 12 statements concerning child development and kindergarten retention which all three expert reviewers of the questionnaire agreed were indicative of nativist belief.

"Promotional practice" was defined operationally as the number of kindergarten students the teacher considered would benefit from kindergarten retention for the current school year, 1995-6, including cases recommended for partial repeating, such as placement in a K-1 classroom. The number of recommendations for kindergarten retention was considered a more accurate reflection of a teacher's support for kindergarten retention than the number of actual retentions, which is dependent on school policy and on administrator and parental approval.

Based on 136 cases for whom data on all 12 statements are available, there is a statistically significant relationship between nativist belief and promotional practice, as they were defined in this study ($r = .46$, $p = .00$).

In interpreting correlation coefficients, Fraenkel and Wallen (1993) considered that a correlation of at least .50 be obtained before any "crude" individual predictions can be made and that correlations of .65 or higher enable the researcher to make "reasonably accurate" predictions about individuals. They also noted, however, that educational research often reports correlations between .40 and .60. In their opinion, correlations of this magnitude can be of theoretical or practical value.

The data collection method and narrow operational definitions of "nativist belief" and "promotional practice" used in the quantitative phase of this study must be taken into account when judging the significance of the correlation between these two variables.

In this study the methods used to examine the relationship between nativist belief and promotional practice consisted of the completion of a 5-page questionnaire

administered on one occasion only and a one-hour interview with a small, purposeful subsample of respondents.

In contrast, Smith and Shepard (1988), for example, collected data for more than a year using a multimethod approach that involved clinical interviews with kindergarten teachers, participant observations in classrooms and at decision-making events, document analysis, and semistructured parent interviews.

Despite differences in methodology, Smith and Shepard's operational definitions of nativist belief and promotional practice were similar to those used in this study.

Smith and Shepard's definition of nativist belief was based on seven categories of belief statements that emerged from their informants' statements about the nature of child development and school readiness. Each of the 12 statements in the aggregate nativist score used in this study could be placed in one of Smith and Shepard's seven categories, as Smith and Shepard have listed them (1988, p. 314).

Smith and Shepard defined promotional practice as the "rate of retention of kindergartners in the schools where each teacher taught. When this documentary evidence was not available (such as when a teacher was new to a school), *we asked the teacher to report the percentage of kindergartners that were retained in her most recent class*" (p. 320, italics added).

In light of the similar operational definitions used in this study and that of Smith and Shepard, the magnitude of the correlation found in this study need not imply that this finding has no explanatory or predictive utility. What it does imply is that the unaccounted-for variance in scores is attributable to factors other than nativist belief.

The interview data suggest that the variance in scores may be attributable, at least in part, to contextual factors. That is, the interview findings indicate that contextual factors have a modifying effect on informants' preferred promotional decisions; even those informants whose statements about child development and retention are consistent with nativist belief consider promoting students in some specific contexts; conversely, even those informants whose statements are consistent with nonnativist belief consider retention in some specific contexts.

## Teachers' Familiarity with and Attitudes towards Kindergarten Retention Research

This part of the chapter discusses the findings that are related to the second and third minor research questions.

The purpose of the second research question was to assess kindergarten teachers' familiarity with research on the effects/effectiveness of kindergarten retention.

The purpose of the third research question was to determine if there was a difference between teachers who support and those who oppose kindergarten retention regarding the importance they attribute to the findings of empirical research on kindergarten retention when making promotional decisions.

Following this discussion, the findings are compared and contrasted with those of other studies that comment on teacher's familiarity with or utilization of empirical research findings on retention.

The implications of the findings for theory, teacher preparation, and classroom practice are then considered.

### Teachers' Familiarity with Kindergarten Retention Research

Based on combined no response/"don't know" rates, which are 28%, 27%, and 21% of the total sample respectively for each of the three closed-ended statements regarding research on Question 1 of the questionnaire (i.e.,"Research indicates significant benefits of kindergarten retention", "Research indicates that repeating is not

emotionally harmful to a kindergarten child", and "Research indicates that retention should be discouraged at the kindergarten level"), it appears that a substantial number of respondents are unfamiliar with kindergarten retention literature.

Respondents reveal their lack of familiarity with research by either not responding to the three statements on Question 1, by placing question marks beside them, or by making comments such as "don't know," "unknown," "not familiar with specific research," "not sure," "no idea," "don't have access to up-to-date research," "have not read much on the subject," and "not aware of research."

In their open-ended comments to Question 9, sixteen respondents also indicate that they are unfamiliar with kindergarten retention literature.

For example, one respondent states that "I have not read any literature pertaining to research"; a second notes that "I have been so busy learning about teaching kindergarten (including going to many inservices) that I have not investigated recent research"; a third admits that "I am not as familiar with kindergarten retention research as I probably should be"; and a fourth indicates that "there were statements in section 1 of your survey that I did not feel I could answer or respond to fully. I am not familiar with research on kindergarten retention. Therefore I did not respond to statements five, 11, or 18."

Respondents offer a variety of reasons for their unfamiliarity with kindergarten retention literature including the following.

Several respondents indicate that they are unfamiliar with research findings because professional responsibilities have kept them "too busy." A few indicate that there is "not enough time to attend to all the research available." In contrast, a few others indicate that little or no research on kindergarten retention exists, as in, "I am a member of ECEC [the Alberta Teachers' Association's Early Childhood Education Council], and there have [sic] not been any research on this. The most current research I have read is from university, and most information is on retention for other grades." A few respondents indicate they are unfamiliar with kindergarten retention research because they are either new to teaching or new to teaching kindergarten. Several others indicate research literature has not been made available to them; for example, one respondent comments that "I haven't seen any. Why hasn't our consultant at ----- sent any out?"

One possible explanation for some respondents' unfamiliarity with kindergarten retention research is that kindergarten retention is not an issue in their situation because of prohibitive school board policy or school administrator disapproval. For example, one respondent, who indicates that kindergarten retention is not prohibited, but is "discouraged," states that "I have not done a lot of research in this area since the retention question has not really arisen for several years."

This last explanation remains only speculative for two reasons, however. First, almost half of the respondents indicate that their schools or centres have no prohibitive policies or procedural guidelines for kindergarten retention. Second, the existence of a prohibitive policy does not necessarily preclude a teacher's personally reviewing research literature on kindergarten retention.

The interview comments support the questionnaire finding that many kindergarten teachers are unfamiliar with kindergarten retention research.

Four of the 11 informants admit to only limited familiarity with retention research. The remaining 7 informants consider themselves familiar with research. When asked to elaborate, 4 informants provide only sketchy, sometimes inaccurate, recollections of research findings, however. Although 3 informants indicate that they have undertaken extensive personal reviews of research literature on their own initiative, only one is able to recall the names of specific researchers or some details of studies, and only one indicates that she tries to remain current on educational research, including kindergarten retention research, through regular professional reading. However, these informants all express a willingness to consider and learn more about retention research and to distribute research articles to parents.

**The Importance of Research as a Factor in Promotional Decisions**

In ordinal ranking of the 15 promotional factors that respondents were asked to consider in Question 3 of the questionnaire, research on the effectiveness of kindergarten retention is a relatively insignificant factor.

When respondents are asked to identify the factors they consider most important when making promotion decisions in Question 8, none name research on kindergarten retention as a factor.

Eighty-six respondents, 48% of the 178 respondents who answered Question 9, indicate that they do not consider research when making promotional decisions for the following reasons.

Six respondents consider that educational research does not apply to actual practice. For example, one respondent expresses the opinion that "I feel that teaching in an inner-city school with our highly transient mobile population, research does not address our needs. Research, I feel, is based on an average 'normal' population which we are not." Another respondent considers that "it does not sound as if [research] has been done by people teaching in the realities of today's schools: larger classes, budget cutbacks, reduced classroom assistance, increase in behavior management problems, overtired children of working parents."

Eight respondents consider that research on kindergarten retention is contradictory or inconclusive. For example, one respondent states that "I have read a lot of research and attended inservicing on it, but as with most research there is as much for as against the whole idea." According to another, ". . . research really varies. Some time ago retention was recommended. Then in 1993 we got a lot of information encouraging that teachers never retain children. Like other areas of education, this subject seems to go through 'swings'."

Fourteen respondents consider that the decision to retain a child in kindergarten should be made in consultation with colleagues and parents.

Thirty-five respondents emphasize the importance of making retention decisions on an individual basis, taking the functioning of the "whole child" into consideration, as illustrated by these three comments: "I haven't seen any research that's been done lately so don't know if it is recommended or not. Besides - researchers don't know my students as individuals as I do. I see how they cope in my classroom and the grade 1 rooms next door."; "I feel that data can be interpreted and twisted so much, and it is *data* [emphasis in original]. I feel the whole child must be considered - each one as an individual. I find that reading all the research confuses me more!"; "Teacher [sic] should observe and assess each child according to his/her abilities, skills, reactions, actions, behaviors, responses individually/and what would be appropriate for *that* [emphasis in original] pupil."

Twenty-two respondents indicate that their professional experience is a more valuable guide than research findings when making promotional decisions, or, as one respondent puts it, "experience takes the place of much research." A second respondent expresses that opinion that "from experience I feel you can *never* [emphasis in original] go wrong by giving a student who is having difficulties an extra year to learn and mature."

A similar opinion is expressed by a third respondent:

> My experience has shown that maturity is generally the most important factor determining a child's readiness. You can't "hurry up" or "remediate" a child who is socially, emotionally and physically immature. It is especially difficult for average and above- children who know they know a lot and yet their hands or bodies won't cooperate and keep up with other more mature students. They begin to view themselves as "incapable" or "stupid" and are actually relieved to continue in ECS. In 14 years of teaching ECS - I have seen only 3 students born in Feb. (turning five) who I felt were ready for Gr. 1 the following Sept.

One respondent summarizes the opinion of many when she indicates that her promotional decisions are based on "guts, heart, experience, child, parents."

Similar opinions are expressed by many of the 92 respondents (52% of the respondents who answered Question 9) who indicate that they do consider research findings, at least to some extent, when making promotional decisions.

A shared opinion is that research is only one factor that should be considered. For example, one respondent states that "research [sic] not the primary consideration - decisions [sic] based on own experience and observations and also collective experience of colleagues." Similarly, another respondent comments that "depending on the child [sic] many factors are taken into account. Research is one factor but not the deciding factor. This all depends on the capabilities of the child."

The comments of a third respondent summarize the collective opinion that a teacher's professional experience is the most important guide when making promotional decisions; furthermore, experience dictates that promotional decisions be made on an individual basis in consultation with parents:

> I think it is important to look at all areas for guidance. But I feel that much depends on a teacher's experience and each situation is looked at separately and with close communication over the year with the parent. I am very hesitant to retain, but the students we have held back have done very well. I track them as I've been at the same school for 11 years. For those who are "young" it gives them a chance to catch up. They seem to stay on the top to middle of the class versus at the bottom where they had been the year earlier. It's important to look at the child from K-12.

The supremacy of experiential knowledge over research-based knowledge in promotional decision-making is also apparent when one considers the percentage of respondents who simultaneously acknowledge the existence of research that is critical of kindergarten retention while continuing to favour this practice.

Eighty-two respondents disagree/strongly disagree that research indicates significant benefits of kindergarten retention compared to 54 respondents who agree/strongly agree); 81 respondents disagree/strongly disagree that research indicates that repeating is not emotionally harmful to a kindergarten child (58 respondents agree/strongly agree); 74 respondents agree/strongly agree that research indicates that retention should be discouraged at the kindergarten level compared to 76 who disagree/strongly disagree; despite the fact that many respondents are apparently aware that much research does not support the practice of retention, only 15 respondents disagree/strongly disagree that kindergarten students should never be retained.

Many respondents continue to recommend retention despite their awareness of negative research studies; this is most clearly illustrated by views of one respondent, who comments that "research indicates that retention at any level is not in the best long-term interests of the child. The negatives outweigh the positives. Sense of failure often has life long repercussions." Despite these comments, this respondent disagrees that children should never be retained in kindergarten.

The most plausible explanation for this phenomenon is that respondents disregard research evidence which does not support or conflicts with their experiential evidence. This explanation receives support from the comments of two other respondents, one of whom states that "research that I have read discourages retention, but every K and gr. I teacher knows that retention can only benefit the child." Similarly, a second respondent acknowledges that

> I know the research does not support retention in Kindergarten or in later years but I also feel that immature and/or young children who are not demonstrating a keen desire to learn may experience unnecessary stress and anxiety if pressured in a demanding Grade 1 situation. I am not convinced by the

research stating the negative or harmful effects on emotional development of the young child.

Not all respondents disregard research findings that conflict with their personal beliefs about the efficacy of retention, however.

One respondent states that "if I have a certain belief or philosophy but it is absolutely unsubstantiated by research evidence then I need to review my beliefs." A second respondent indicates "I am less apt to retend [sic] students now than I did 5-7 years ago - due to research done in this field. I have mixed feelings about this issue." And a third respondent relates that "a few years ago I heard a speaker speak about the failure of retention and it definitely made me think more carefully about the possible outcomes." All 3 respondents disagree that kindergarten students should never be retained.

In contrast, one of the informants indicates that her previous belief in the benefits of kindergarten retention were challenged when she was presented with contrary research evidence, prompting her to reconsider her beliefs about retention and then to change her promotional practices. This informant states that she no longer recommends retention for students.

## Differences in Teachers' Attitudes toward Retention Research

Interview findings provide an answer to the third research question, that is, do teachers who support and those who oppose kindergarten retention have a different attitude towards retention research?

Although the extent of informants' familiarity with recent retention research is questionable, there is an obvious difference in attitude towards the utility of research between those who support and those who oppose kindergarten retention.

All 6 retaining informants express distrust or skepticism toward retention research for the reasons described in Chapter 5; these informants indicate that research findings on the effects/efficacy of kindergarten retention are irrelevant when they make promotional decisions; they rely instead on their practical knowledge to recommend the most appropriate management strategy on an individual basis.

In contrast, all 5 nonretaining teachers demonstrate a receptive attitude towards retention research; they indicate that they do consider research findings when making promotional decisions and, as noted in the previous section, at least one has withdrawn her support of kindergarten retention based on a personal review of the literature; some express an interest in finding out about current research findings and make an effort to share both favorable and critical literature on retention with parents.

Three statistical findings provide further information about the relationship between nativist belief and the importance of retention research as a factor in promotional decisions.

First, the data suggest a negative correlation between aggregate nativist score and the importance of research on the effectiveness of kindergarten retention as a factor in promotional decisions, although the selected alpha level of .05 was not obtained ($n$ = 114, $r$ = -.17, $p$ = .08).

Second, there is a statistically significant negative correlation between aggregate nativist score and consideration of retention research ($r$ = -.27, $p$ = .00).

Third, an Independent Samples Test that examined the same relationship is also statistically significant, $t(128) = 3.14$, $p$ = .00.

## Summary

Chapter 6 summarized the findings of the study with regard to the major and minor research questions.

In combination, the major and two minor research questions explored the possibility of a relationship between teachers' nativist belief and three outcomes: their

promotional practice, most important promotional factors, and preferred alternatives to kindergarten retention for "unready" children.

It was found that the majority of respondents agreed with nativist statements regarding the benefits of kindergarten retention, although they did not agree that neurological development is more important than a stimulating home environment for success in kindergarten.

The promotional factors kindergarten teachers considered most important related to students' communication, emotional, social, and academic competencies, as in the nativist literature. Meisels (1995) has termed this the "within-the-child" view of school readiness.

It was also found that many kindergarten teachers made promotional decisions on an individual basis, taking all relevant factors into consideration.

A statistically significant correlation was found between nativist belief, as measured by aggregate nativist score, and promotional practice, as defined in terms of number of retention recommendations for the current school year.

The relationship between nativist belief and management strategies for unready students advocated in the nativist literature was not straightforward. It was suggested that teachers make promotional decisions on an individual, contextualized basis, which limits generalized predictions about management strategies based on nativist belief alone.

In combination, the other two minor research questions investigated teachers' familiarity and attitudes toward retention research and whether their attitudes were related to nativist belief.

The cumulative questionnaire evidence along with the interview comments of the 6 retainining teachers indicated that a substantial number of participants appeared either unfamiliar and/or uninterested in the findings of kindergarten retention research. However, analysis of questionnaire comments and the interview comments of the 5 nonretaining teachers revealed individual variations in teachers' attitudes toward retention research.

# CHAPTER 7

## CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Chapter 7 states the general conclusions of the study, considers their implications for theory, educational policy and practice, and makes suggestions for topics for further research.

### Conclusions

Chapter 6 summarized the findings of this exploratory study of the beliefs of Albertan kindergarten teachers about child development and kindergarten retention with respect to the major and minor research questions posed in Chapter 3.

The first minor research question of the study sought to determine to what extent teachers could be ordered along a dimension of nativist belief regarding child development and kindergarten retention. This question was explored in terms of the extent to which teachers agreed or disagreed with 12 statements taken from the nativist literature which were identified by a panel of 3 experts as being indicative of nativist belief, the type of factors that teachers considered most important in promotional decisions, and the extent to which teachers favoured management strategies advocated in the nativist literature.

Although the majority of respondents agree with most nativist statements, they do not agree with others, most importantly the statement that neurological development is more important for school success than a stimulating home environment. Follow-up interviews with 11 selected teachers confirm that participants cannot be easily classified as strictly nativist or nonnativist on the basis of their statements about child development and kindergarten retention.

As far as promotional factors for Grade 1 are concerned, the quantitative and qualitative data show that the type of factors identified as most important to the majority of teachers are related to a student's competencies in the communication, emotional, social, and academic areas. The nativist literature defines school readiness in terms of student capabilities, particularly in the socioemotional area.

Based on their choice of promotional factors, the conception of school readiness demonstrated by the majority of teachers in this study reflects a view that Meisels (1995) has termed a "within-the-child" conception of readiness. In contrast, a minority of respondents and 5 of the interviewed teachers (those who do not support kindergarten retention in principle) identify school variables, such as availability of program options, as also important in promotional considerations. This view reflects a "relational, interactional" view of readiness (Meisels, 1995). Three of the 5 nonretaining informants indicate that legal age is their only criterion for school readiness and are satisfied if a student demonstrates progress throughout the kindergarten year.

The study finds overwhelming support for the practice of kindergarten retention: approximately 90% of respondents disagree that kindergarten students should never be retained. The majority of respondents agree with the statements about the benefits of kindergarten retention that are advanced in the nativist literature.

The fourth minor research question inquired about the possibility of a relationship between nativist belief and preferred management strategies for unready children.

The findings reveal that there is no straightforward relationship between nativist belief and choice of eight management strategies suggested as alternatives to kindergarten retention. Teachers' most preferred alternative is smaller classes with increased individualized/remedial instruction. According to nativist literature, pedagogical intervention would have limited, if any, effect on improving unreadiness, which is presumably the result of "developmental (physiological) immaturity." The majority of respondents do favour raising the kindergarten entry age and, to a lesser

extent, other strategies that increase the age at which students enter kindergarten. Interview findings show that raising the entry age is supported by all 6 retaining and some nonretaining informants, although retaining and nonretaining informants appear to have different rationales for supporting this measure.

On the other hand, many respondents favour the alternative of promotion with individual assistance. Based on ample questionnaire and interview evidence that teachers make promotional decisions on an individual (contextual) basis, it is concluded that nativist belief does not reliably predict teachers' choice of placement options.

The major research question addressed the possibility of a relationship between nativist belief and promotional practice. As these two variables were operationally defined in this study, a statistically significant correlation ($r$ = .46) was found between them. Using Fraenkel and Wallen's (1993) criteria for judging the predictive utility of a correlation coefficient, it is concluded that a correlation of this magnitude is suggestive of a relationship between nativist belief and promotional practice.

The second and third minor research questions explored teachers' familiarity and attitudes toward the findings of retention research and questioned if nativist and nonnativist teachers differed on the extent to which retention research findings influenced their promotional decisions.

The quantitative findings reveal that a substantial proportion of respondents and all 6 retaining informants are either unfamiliar or uninterested in the findings of retention research; practical knowledge based on their teaching experience is the primary source of knowledge on which these teachers base their promotional decisions, not the propositional knowledge of empirical research. Differences in teachers' attitudes toward retention are evident, however. A few respondents and all 5 nonretaining teachers, whose orientation can be described as nonnativist, are receptive to retention research findings and, in some cases, no longer endorse kindergarten retention after personally reviewing the research literature.

## Teachers' Beliefs about Kindergarten Retention

The next part of the chapter discusses the major findings of the study as they compare and contrast with earlier studies on kindergarten teachers' attitudes or beliefs about kindergarten retention.

## Implications for Theory

### Teacher Endorsement of Kindergarten Retention

Both the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study indicate considerable support for kindergarten retention: for example, 90% of respondents indicate that they have considered retaining a student in kindergarten; the interview findings also revealed that even those informants who oppose retention in principle endorse it in specific contexts.

This degree of support for kindergarten retention is consistent with three previous studies: 95% of Bell's (1985) surveyed kindergarten teachers agreed with the value of retaining socially immature or academically unready children; Smith and Shepard (1988) found "remarkable unanimity of sentiment" in favour of retaining kindergarten students among their 40 interviewed kindergarten teachers, including those who rarely retained; Edson (1990) found that 20 of 21 interviewed kindergarten teachers endorsed kindergarten retention.

However, Bergin et al. (1996) found that, contrary to their expectation, only 34 (13.5%) of 252 randomly surveyed kindergarten teachers recommended retention or transition class for hypothetical children who differed on the basis of age, gender, or independence level, but who were held constant on academic readiness skills. A Mann-Whitney $U$ test revealed a statistically significant difference in mean ages of teachers

who recommended retention/transition and those who recommended promotion. Based on this finding, Bergin et al. hypothesized that younger, more recently trained teachers may have been exposed to discussions of the negative effects of retention during their teacher education programs.

In this study, the correlation between respondent age and the number of recommendations for retention for the current school year was not statistically significant ($n$ = 170, $r$ = .00, $p$ = .97).

The discussion of participants' familiarity with and attitudes toward research information on retention in the previous chapter casts doubts on Bergin et al.'s suggestion that kindergarten teachers are becoming better educated about the negative effects of retention.

## The Relationship between Nativist Belief and Promotional Practice

As indicated in Chapter 6, a statistically significant correlation was found between nativist belief and promotional practice, as these constructs were operationally defined in the study.

Similarly, Smith and Shepard (1988) found a statistically significant difference ($t$ = 6.5, $p$ < .01) in the retention rates of the 40 kindergarten teachers in their study; this difference corresponded to the nativist/nonnativist belief system dichotomy.

Smith (1989) cross-tabulated these data to show the relationship between the nativist/nonnativist belief system dichotomy and retention rates. She classified teachers who retained 10% or more of kindergartners as "high retaining" and those who retained fewer than 10% as "low retaining" Analysis of Smith's data reveals a high retaining-low retaining ratio of approximately 5:1 for nativists and 1:6 for nonnativists.

## Classification of Teacher Beliefs based on the Nativist/Nonnativist Dichotomy

Regarding the classification of teacher beliefs on the basis of the nativist/nonnativist dichotomy, the findings of this study differ from those of previous studies of kindergarten teachers' beliefs about child development and retention in the following important respect.

Smith and Shepard (1988) reported that they were unable to classify only 2 of the 40 kindergarten teachers on the basis of belief system because these 2 teachers expressed internally inconsistent beliefs. For example, although they believed that unreadiness for kindergarten was due to slow developmental maturation which could be assessed by the Gesell School Readiness Test (a nativist belief), they also believed that unreadiness could be remedied by intensified instruction (a nonnativist belief).

That is, with only two exceptions, Smith and Shepard found it possible to differentiate between nativist and nonnativist teachers based on their contrasting beliefs in the following seven categories: the nature of human development, the rate of development of school readiness, the best sources of evidence for determining inadequate readiness, whether the unready child will catch up to classmates, whether unreadiness can be remedied, the best remedial methods (if any), and the causes of unreadiness for first grade. Smith and Shepard considered these seven categories as the components of a teacher's belief system.

Blinded classification of their interview transcripts by a second analyst who was familiar with the construct of nativism as well as the classification of teachers by classroom observers confirmed that the "analysis that separated Nativists from other types of belief was robust" (p. 314).

Edson (1990) also classified the 21 kindergarten teachers in her study according to Smith and Shepard's belief categories; she classified only one informant as a nativist whereas Smith and Shepard classified 19 of their 40 informants as nativists.

Unlike the studies of Smith and Shepard and Edson, no clearcut demarcation between nativists and nonnativists is found in this study.

The majority of teachers do agree with most of the major belief statements found in the Gesellian literature. For example, the majority agree that retention is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up (i.e., agree that the immature child requires more time to develop), agree that developmental tests are helpful in promotional decisions, disagree that immature children who are promoted do as well as those who are retained (i.e., agree that immature children generally do not catch up to mature classmates), agree that retention is an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in Grade 1 and that unready children should be held out of school for a year (i.e., agree that extra time is a remedy for unreadiness), agree that promotion should be based on the achievement of learner expectations in the kindergarten program document (Alberta Education, 1995), that is, agree that most children should attain a common standard by the end of kindergarten.

However, the majority of respondents do not agree that neurological development is more important than a stimulating home environment for success or that children should be assessed for kindergarten readiness.

Additionally, opinion is almost equally divided regarding whether it is more important to make sure that a child is ready to meet classroom expectations than to shift the whole curriculum downwards to meet the child's maturity level.

Furthermore, although the majority of respondents agree that kindergarten retention provides an opportunity for the immature child to catch up, prevents daily failure in Grade 1, and is more effective than retention in other grades, they choose smaller classes with increased individualized/remedial instruction as the most preferred alternative to repeating kindergarten. This finding would not be expected if nativists eschew academic assistance as "irrelevant and harmful" (Smith & Shepard, 1988, p. 319).

Third, the following findings indicate that the relationship between nativist belief and types of management strategies for unready students is not straightforward, as discussed in Chapter 6.

There are statistically significant positive correlations between aggregate nativist score and two options that are not recommended in nativist literature, namely, individual progress through an ungraded primary (K-3) unit and promotion with remedial assistance. In contrast, correlations between aggregate nativist score and two methods favoured by nativists, transition class and developmental prekindergarten for unready 5-year-olds, are not statistically significant. Using Fraenkel and Wallen's (1993) criteria for judging the predictive utility of a correlation between two variables on the basis of magnitude of correlation, these findings suggest that nativist belief (as defined in this study) does not reliably predict the choice of management strategy.

Comments of the 11 interviewed teachers provide further evidence that beliefs about child development and school readiness are not easily categorized in terms of consistent, dichotomous belief sets that range along a continuum from nativism to environmentalism.

The statements of even those informants whose beliefs might be considered representative of the polar ends of a nativist/nonnativist continuum reveal apparently inconsistent beliefs.

For example, one informant, who has an aggregate nativist score of 41 (the highest possible score being 48), reports that 25 students would have benefited from kindergarten retention over the past 5 school years, and attributes unreadiness for Grade 1 to "developmental immaturity"; yet this informant also states that she has never had a student she would consider unready for kindergarten because she can "develop the necessary skills throughout the year."

A second informant, whose beliefs could also be described as highly "nativist-like," has a nativist score of 42, has considered 22 students for kindergarten retention over the previous 5 years, ascribes unreadiness for first grade to chronological age and gender, but disagrees that neurological maturity is more important than a stimulating home environment for kindergarten success and cites inadequate parenting skills as a contributing factor to unreadiness for kindergarten.

A third informant, whose comments about student age and gender reflect nativist belief, has a nativist score of 41, strongly agrees that neurological maturity is more important than a stimulating home environment for success, recommends retaining chronologically young children "with problems" because they need an extra year to "mature," but favours promoting older children with similar problems so they may receive appropriate attention in Grade 1; despite the fact that she recommends different treatments primarily on the basis of a student's age, this informant favours *promoting* even a "young and immature" child if the family cannot afford an extra year of halfday daycare.

In contrast, the informant most representative of the nonnativist position has an aggregate nativist score of 14 (the lowest possible score being 12), defines kindergarten readiness solely in as students' having attained legal age to attend, stresses modifications of programs to meet individual student needs, refers to the practices of holding-out and retaining kindergarten students as "*myths*," states that promotional decisions should be based "*not* [on] teacher's perception but *data* (emphasis in original)"; yet this informant considers that some special needs students might benefit from repeating kindergarten, presumably in order to provide them with more time for funded intervention.

In conclusion, it is not possible to easily classify and order teachers' beliefs about the development of school readiness along a dimension of nativism to environmentalism as was done by Smith and Shepard and Edson.

Rather, it appears that the aggregation of beliefs about child development and school readiness held by the majority of teachers in this study may be likened to Garrison and Macmillan's (1987) conception of a "bundle" of pedagogical ideas:

> Teachers come to the pedagogical setting with a bundle of ideas about teaching, about its purposes, its goals, about the best modes and methods of approaching certain subjects with specific students. We can grace this bundle of ideas with the title of "theory," as long as we recognize that for the usual teacher, *these ideas are not organized in any specific way* [italics added], that they are intuitively rather than objectively reasonable for them, and they are based upon their own *limited* [italics in original] personal experience, perhaps poorly interpreted. (p. 41)

According to Clark (1988), research on teacher thinking has documented the fact that teachers develop and hold "implicit theories" about their students, subject matter, and their own roles, responsibilities, and conduct. Clark considered that these implicit theories were not "neat and complete reproductions of the educational psychology found in text-books or lecture notes," but "eclectic aggregations of cause-effect propositions from many sources, rules of thumb, generalizations drawn from personal experience, beliefs, values, biases, and prejudices" (p. 6).

Figure 1 provides an indication of the strength of nativist belief, as it was measured in this study, for 136 respondents. The frequency distribution suggests that nativist belief is normally distributed across this subsample. At the upper end of the distribution is a relatively small proportion of teachers, like the retaining informants, whose aggregate nativist score is high, suggesting that they have a fairly consistent, strongly held set of nativist beliefs. At the other end of the distribution is a relatively small proportion of teachers, like the nonretaining informants, whose score is low; this latter group might be considered "nonnativist," or in some cases, even "antinativist," because their beliefs are antithetical to those of teachers at the upper end of the distribution. The majority of teachers appear to have an eclectic mixture of beliefs about child development and school readiness, which vary in strength.

There is strong evidence that most participants, including the most vocal critics of retention among "nonnativist," nonretaining informants, support kindergarten retention in some contexts. In contrast, there is equally strong evidence that many participants, including the most vocal supporters of retention among "nativist"

retaining informants, reject kindergarten retention in specific contexts.

It must be concluded, therefore, that contextual factors exert a strong moderating influence on the beliefs of even those participants at either end of the scale, like the retaining and nonretaining informants.

If there is any *one* belief that could be common to participants in this study it is that promotional decisions must be made on an individual basis, taking all relevant contextual factors into account.

## Implications for Teacher Preparation

As far as beliefs about readiness are concerned, the majority of participants obviously conceptualize readiness in terms of child characteristics or competencies.

Graue (1993) has suggested that traditional early childhood teacher education courses, with their emphasis on stage theories of child development, reinforce what she has termed an "overly psychological view of child readiness" (p. 261), which disregards not only the social factors that mediate development, but also the social and cultural contexts in which developmental theories are themselves embedded.

Graue has advocated that teacher education programs adopt a more "open" approach to developmental theory, which would involve the critical examination of its implicit sociocultural values. She has also argued that teacher education programs include discussion of policy issues such as entrance age, testing, grouping, retention, that result from various positions on development so that prospective teachers will be better informed when they make future professional decisions.

## Implications for Educational Policy

To promote the achievement of the first national and regional educational goal, namely, that all children in the United States "begin school ready to learn" by the Year 2000, the Southern Regional Education Board (1994) has advocated the adoption of the following kindergarten and primary grade policies. First, all schools should implement developmentally appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment procedures. Second, standardized norm-referenced results should not be used to assess the progress or potential of preschool or primary students. Third, a student's progress should be judged in terms of his or her past performance and the development of "critical" skills. Fourth, holding out and kindergarten/primary retention are "ineffective, even harmful" practices for most students. Fifth, funds currently used for upper grade remediation should be redirected into early invention services, particularly intensive individual tutoring. Sixth, schools should encourage the active involvement of parents. Seventh, schools should establish policies and procedures to improve home-school communication and to facilitate transitions from preschool or school and from kindergarten to the primary grades. Eighth, kindergarten teachers, primary teachers, and elementary school administrators should have formal training in child development and early childhood education. And, ninth, schools should be given more autonomy to direct state and local funds into primary programs and be held accountable for the results.

The policies advocated by the Southern Regional Education Board are based on guidelines for the kindergarten and primary grades endorsed by leading American professional organizations (i.e., the National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1992; the National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1990; the National Association of State Boards of Education, 1991). Its proposed policies of student assessment are consistent with those endorsed by the Early Childhood Education Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association (Schroeder & Edge, 1991). Some of its other recommendations, such as mandatory early childhood training for kindergarten/primary teachers and elementary school administrators, go beyond those currently recommended by the Alberta Teachers' Association.

## Implications for Classroom Practice

### The Purpose of Kindergarten

Citing Hill (1926/1987), Charlesworth (1989) described the original purpose of kindergarten as a year of "relatively informal education designed to form a bridge from home to more formal schooling in the elementary grades" (p. 5).

Charlesworth observed a trend away from a focus on developing school readiness through socializing experiences and learning through play to a more academic emphasis in American kindergartens in the 1980s. As noted in Chapter 1, Charlesworth expressed the opinion that the kindergarten experience had become one "for which children need to be ready when they arrive" (p. 5).

This study demonstrates that kindergarten teachers do have expectations about their students' entry abilities and behaviours.

Their expectations are most clearly revealed in the descriptions of students considered ready or unready for kindergarten made by 7 of the 11 interviewed teachers.

In describing readiness for kindergarten, informants place particular value on the child's demonstrating the social-emotional skills necessary to function cooperatively and independently within a group when they begin kindergarten. Few informants unequivocally endorse the principle that all children are ready for kindergarten on the basis of legal age alone.

These findings raise the following question: if children are expected to enter kindergarten already possessing attitudes and skills that they were traditionally expected to develop while *in* kindergarten, then what is the purpose of the kindergarten year? In other words, is kindergarten an intrinsically valuable learning experience for young children or is it worthwhile only in so far as it provides a dress-rehearsal for the academic expectations of first grade?

This question becomes even more pertinent in light of significant changes in the provision of early childhood services in the province of Alberta during the early and mid-1990s.

As well as reducing funding by 50% in early 1994, the Minister of Education announced plans to review the goals of kindergarten in order to make them more specific and more closely related to school entry and to establish an evaluation process to monitor the progress of kindergarten students (Tanner, 1994).

Following these measures, Alberta Education (1995) introduced a *Draft Kindergarten Program Statement* whose rationale is to "describe learning achievements [in five learning areas] that are appropriate for young children and will prepare them for successful learning experiences in Grade 1" (p. 1).

According to this document, the purpose of kindergarten is to "provide learning experiences that meet the diverse needs of children and *prepare them for entry into Grade 1* [italics added]" (p. 1).

Unfortunately, participants in this study were not specifically asked for their opinions about the purpose of kindergarten or their own role as a kindergarten teacher. The answers to these two questions would provide valuable information about the relationship between teachers' beliefs about the significance of kindergarten and their classroom and promotional practices.

The purpose of kindergarten stated in the *Draft Kindergarten Program Statement*, informants' expectations about kindergarten students' entry and exit skills, and agreement of the majority of respondents that kindergarten promotion should be based on attainment of specific learner expectations identified in the kindergarten document, however, do support Charlesworth's claim that kindergarten has assumed a different role than that for which it was presumably originally intended.

### The Bases of Kindergarten Teachers' Retention Decisions

In most circumstances, nonretaining teachers either consider age as the sole

criterion for promotion or attempt to "match" students with particular programs based on assessment of their needs; in contrast, retaining teachers make retention decisions primarily for idiosyncratic reasons such as "intuition" or "gut feelings."

Although the majority of respondents agree that promotion should be based on the achievement of learner expectations identified in the *Draft Kindergarten Program Statement* (Alberta Education, 1995), none of the retaining informants indicates that she actually bases her promotional decisions on these guidelines or any other performance assessments administered in a uniform manner; in fact, one retaining informant contends that kindergarten teachers should be provided with guidelines to help them make promotional decisions.

In contrast, interview comments indicate that teachers who recommend retention select candidates primarily on a subjective basis, using their intuition, past experience, interpretation of primary grade requirements, or "gut feelings." The apparent exception to this is if a child has a suspected or diagnosed special need, in which case retaining teachers consider the results of testing when making a placement decision.

As far as reliance on intuitive judgments to make important educational decisions is concerned, however, Clark (1988) has pointed out that "teachers are subject to the full range of insights and errors in human judgment described by Nisbett and Ross (1980), just as all humans are when faced with complex, fast-paced, consequential, and occasionally emotion-laden social judgments and action situations" (p. 6).

The possibility that using intuition to evaluate students may lead to errors in judgment is raised by 2 nonretaining teachers who express concerns that they may have misdiagnosed the causes of some students' unreadiness and therefore mistakenly relegated them to repeating kindergarten.

Furthermore, an anecdotal observation made by one retaining teacher points out the possibility that a child who is retained in one school context by a teacher with stringent expectations might be promoted by another, less stringent teacher in a different school context.

This incidental finding illustrates the point made by Gredler (1992), Shepard and Smith (1988), and particularly by Graue (1993) that promotional decisions are relational, not absolute, that is, are highly dependent on the specific social context in which they are made.

Based on her exploration of different meanings of readiness from a social constructionist perspective, Graue (1993) has proposed a reconceptualization of readiness in which this construct is viewed not as a "stable psychological trait," but as a "locally generated meaning that depends on community characteristics and values" (p. 255). According to Graue, the adoption of a social view of readiness has the following four implications for educational policy and practice.

First, a social view of readiness would involve the school's providing greater support for programs and services that foster a partnership of the home and school founded on the belief that education is a shared responsibility.

Second, the adoption of a social view of readiness would involve transforming the conception of readiness as "readiness for school," which underlies the practice of kindergarten readiness screening into the conception of "readiness for learning," as suggested by Kagan (1990). A readiness for learning perspective focuses on a child's abilities, not deficiencies, and assumes that all children are ready for school. As a result, traditional screening procedures could be replaced by two possible alternatives, either an information-exchanging opportunity between parents and teachers during registration, or contextualized classroom assessments whose purpose is to improve instruction.

Third, a social constructionist view of readiness has implications for the course content of early childhood teacher education programs. Graue's opinions about the effects of traditional early childhood teacher education programs on prospective teachers' conceptualizations of readiness were discussed in the previous section on the

implications for teacher education of teachers' beliefs about readiness.

Fourth, the adoption of a social view of readiness would result in fundamental changes in kindergarten entrance policy, curriculum, school structure, and performance standards. Citing Kagan (1990), Graue has suggested that "we move from individualizing entry by interventions such as redshirting and special programs based on readiness assessments followed by homogenization of services after children enter school to homogenizing entry through a single entrance criterion [i.e., chronological age] coupled with individualized services to meet children's needs" (p. 262).

Based on the assumption that teaching is a social endeavor, Graue has advocated the development of school structures that would facilitate teachers' communicating and sharing of educational responsibilities across grade levels. These new school structures would help broaden individual teachers' views of readiness; they could consist of primary level units, such as ungraded primary classes or traditional graded classes whose curriculum is planned by a teaching team including preschool teachers. Their success would depend on administrators' commitment to providing time for both intra- and intergrade curriculum planning. Supportive learning settings would permit students to progress from grade to grade with individualized assistance if necessary and reporting to parents would be based on narrative, multigrade reports which focus on formative evaluation of students' progress.

In Graue's opinion, such structural adaptations would strengthen standards and accountability in early education because the school would be responsible for meeting the needs of all children, not just those perceived as ready.

## Teachers' Familiarity with and Attitudes toward Kindergarten Retention Research

### Implications for Theory

The following section compares and contrasts the study findings with those of other studies that have also examined teachers' familiarity with and attitudes toward research on retention or related management strategies.

#### Teachers' Familiarity with Retention Research

The findings concerning teachers' familiarity with research on retention corroborate those of the few studies (Biegler & Gillis, 1985; Edson, 1990) that have considered kindergarten teachers' familiarity with retention research.

Biegler and Gillis also found a substantial percentage of teachers (46%) who were undecided regarding the statement that research indicates beneficial effects of retention for students with academic and social problems. Only three K-3 teachers were involved in their follow-up interviews; all three teachers indicated that they were unfamiliar with retention research.

Edson (1990) considered that 7 of the 21 kindergarten teachers she interviewed were familiar with general research themes whereas the majority were not knowledgeable about retention research.

#### The Importance of Retention Research in Promotional Decisions

Based on both quantitative and qualitative findings of the study, it is possible to state the following general conclusions about the importance of retention research as a factor in promotional decisions.

**The relative unimportance of research as a promotional factor.** Regarding the importance of retention research, Edson (1990) noted that no teacher substantiated her retention beliefs and practices by citing or referring to relevant research. She therefore concluded that "research has little or no significance in

shaping an individual kindergarten teacher's point of view about retention" (p. 166).

A similar conclusion can be drawn from the questionnaire results of this study; for example, although 48% of all respondents do indicate that they consider educational research on kindergarten retention at least to some extent when making promotional decisions, research on the effectiveness of kindergarten retention is a relatively unimportant promotional factor for the 171 respondents who have ever considered retaining a student. As will be discussed later, however, the interviews reveal some notable individual exceptions to this general finding.

**The relative importance of practical versus propositional knowledge.** The questionnaire and interview responses reveal that the majority of sampled teachers base their promotional decisions primarily on their practical, or case, knowledge rather than the propositional knowledge derived from empirical research. Smith and Shepard (1988) and Smith (1989) arrived at a similar conclusion.

The general literature on teacher utilization of research findings suggests possible explanations for teachers' greater reliance on their practical knowledge in their professional decision-making and actions.

In order to understand teachers' utilization of knowledge, Hultman and Hörberg (1995) have argued that it is necessary to consider teachers' working context, thought processes, strategies, and attitudes toward change.

In Hultman and Hörberg's opinion, thinking is a practical cognitive activity which is closely associated with a specific context; therefore, a "logical, generalizing, and context-specific solution to a problem in an academic environment cannot be easily and hastily transferred to the specific actions or a teacher in an ordinary situation" (p. 344). Whereas problem-solving in the "technical rational model" is governed by explicit, systematic, and precise procedures, problem-solving in everyday situations occurs within a context that is influenced by a variety of factors including the composition of the student body, parental involvement, colleagues, administrators, curriculum content, (sometimes contradictory) explicit and implicit teaching goals, and limited resources.

Additionally, the strategies that teachers develop in order to "survive" when placed under increased pressure, as well as teaching traditions and routines, and "group defense mechanisms" all militate against teachers' willingness to utilize external, innovative knowledge.

McAninch (1993) has similarly attributed teachers' apparent underutilization of research findings in their practice to their epistemological orientation.

Analogizing the working conditions of classroom teachers and "everyday" physicians, McAninch has used the term "clinical consciousness" to describe the world view of practitioners in both professions. Clinical consciousness is characterized by an orientation to action, reliance on the efficacy of one's actions and on firsthand experience in decision-making, a pragmatic approach to problem-solving, and a "distrust" of generalization. This epistemological orientation differs markedly from that associated with inquiry in the natural sciences.

Malouf and Schiller (1995) have argued that the application of research knowledge to local practice is a complex process which involves an "interplay" between research knowledge and a combination of three other types of factors: teacher attitudes and beliefs, contextual factors, and teacher knowledge.

The structural and functional features of teachers' attitudes and beliefs and the contextual factors of teachers' work environments that militate against their utilizing research knowledge have been discussed in Chapter 2 (e.g., Malouf & Schiller, 1995; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992).

Malouf and Schiller have suggested that new models of teacher knowledge may help explain the process by which research knowledge becomes integrated into practice.

As an example, they cited Schulman's (1986) model of different forms of teacher knowledge. According to Schulman, teacher knowledge includes propositional knowledge, case knowledge, and strategic knowledge, or professional judgment which

is applied when research-based principles appear to produce contradictory implications for practice or when a simple solution is not possible. In Schulman's model, research principles can be applied to practice "*only* on the basis of the teacher's case knowledge and strategic knowledge" (Malouf & Schiller, 1995, p. 414, italics in original). There are two reasons for this. First, research findings often produce contradictory implications for practice. Second, research principles are usually general, abstract, incomplete, and can only be applied to practice on the basis of practical knowledge.

However, as indicated in the previous discussion of the bases for teachers' retention decisions, Clark (1988) and McAninch (1993) have expressed concern that important educational decisions which are made on the basis of implicit, unquestioned beliefs may have deleterious consequences for students.

Regarding retention decisions, for example, Smith (1989) has claimed that teachers' practical knowledge may lead them to believe that kindergarten retention is beneficial. This misconception is the result of two features of classroom teaching: first, teachers do not have access to controlled comparisons which would reveal that the achievement of promoted "controls" is eventually comparable to that of the retained "treatment group"; second, teachers usually do not have the opportunity to track the progress of students who were retained in kindergarten to the end of their school careers; they are therefore unable to observe any delayed socially stigmatizing effects of early retention which may be experienced in adolescence.

Contrary to Smith's claims, the comments of some respondents and informants in this study do provide testimonials to the longterm benefits of kindergarten retention.

For example, one respondent states that "I have never had a parent of a child who repeated say they regret their child repeated. The child always benefited [sic]. Those who didn't repeat but should have almost always repeated at some point in Division 1 (ECS-3)."

According to a second respondent, "I have had parents come to me years later and thank me for holding their child back and I have also had parents say they wished they would have held their child back in kindergarten as we recommended." This respondent indicates that she recommended six students be retained in kindergarten the same year, but all continued on; all six have since repeated an elementary grade.

Similarly, a third respondent considers that

> many of the those [sic] papers are theories. I feel I've seen the results of retention. Parents of all those children I have retained reported back at the end of ECS and Gr 1 their child's success. Those who move on and weren't ready had reports that perhaps they should have reconsidered and held them back especially if they were socially or emotionally immature and very young.

On the other hand, interview findings lend credence to Smith's claim that teachers usually do not have information about their retained students' longterm progress.

Only 4 informants indicate that they have had some contact with retained students or their parents in later school years.

Based on testimonials of parents or upper grade teachers, 2 retaining informants consider kindergarten retention a panacea for later educational ills. In contrast, a third retaining informant has observed a narrowing in the range of students' abilities by third grade whether students have been retained or not. One nonretaining informant has followed the progress of a group of students who completed a transitional year between kindergarten and Grade 1 up to Grade 6; she questions the efficacy of this extra-year placement because these students have all required continual resource room assistance; additionally, she considers that they now suffer from the social stigma of being noticeably physically larger than their promoted classmates.

## Teachers' Criteria for Testing the Validity of Research

Based on questionnaire comments quoted earlier and those of all 6 retaining informants, it is apparent that a teacher's own values and experience function as important referents for testing the validity of research.

Zeuli and Tiezzi (1993) and Kennedy (1997) found that teachers' most frequently used criterion for testing the validity of research findings was their own values, beliefs, or experiences. Kennedy also found that teachers who used this method of validation were more likely to give idiosyncratic reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with a study's conclusions than were teachers who used the evidence presented in the study as their evaluation criterion.

The clearest illustration of idiosyncratic misinterpretation of research in this study is the following response of one informant to the question "Do you consider yourself familiar with research on kindergarten retention?":

> Yes. I've read a wide variety of things and, could I add to that, that a lot of stuff that is out or has been in the past from *my* [emphasis in original] training and from some of the things that I've dealt with or the seminars that I've gone to or the things that I read are American-written. And Americans, when they're talking about preschool children or early childhood education, . . . their cutoff date is the first of September. And their child has to be *5* [emphasis in original] when they walk in the door to kindergarten and *6* [emphasis in original] when they walk in the door for Grade 1. . . . And so when you read the statistics, that's not a fair comparison to our children. And . . . their 5-year-old kindergarten-aged child who comes in September first goes . . . 5 days a week fulltime. And then they have a junior kindergarten and they can come again when they are 4, going on 5, which . . . a fair portion of our children are and that's their kindergarten for 3 mornings or afternoons a week. Now, think of the difference of preparation that these children have before they get to Grade 1. There's going to be such a large difference of the 4 1/2-year-old who stays in our kindergarten who would be in their *junior* [emphasis in original] kindergarten and we send them off to Grade 1 whereas the other children would put in an *entire* [emphasis in original] year fulltime in kindergarten before they get to their first grade.

It is obvious that this informant is not discussing kindergarten retention research at all, but is offering an explanation for the (supposedly) higher achievement of American compared to Canadian kindergarten students, which is not a topic discussed in either the American or Canadian literature on kindergarten retention.

## Types of Teacher Attitudes about the Practical Contribution of Research

Findings of this study are consistent with those of previous studies that describe variations in teachers' attitudes about the practical importance of research (Kennedy, 1997; Zeuli, 1994; Zeuli & Tiezzi, 1993).

Based on their review of the teacher education literature, Zeuli and Tiezzi (1993) suggested that teachers have three distinct conceptions of research. In the first conception, research is associated with a lack of influence; in the second and third conceptions, teachers hold different views about the contribution that research should make to practice.

Zeuli and Tiezzi characterize the first conception of research as follows:

> By far the most common is teachers' view that research is irrelevant and lacking in practicality (see Lucas, 1988; also Broudy, 1985). Teachers feel that it does not answer questions they themselves ask and solves problems they feel are less than critical (see Huling, Trang, & Correll, 1981). Many of these teachers likely

find research reports difficult to understand. They are awed by research jargon (see Clark, 1986; Griffin, 1983), overpowered by the multiplicity and fragmentation of research results (Tom, 1985), and find research too theoretical (Bolster, 1983). Predictably for these teachers research is not helpful (Howe, 1984) and seems far-removed and contradictory (see Richardson, 1990; Richardson-Koehler, 1987). Teachers see little action between the world of educational researchers and the world of teachers (Hopkins, 1985). The lack of perceived relevance dampens their interest in the findings of researchers and the adaptations of teacher educators. Perhaps because teachers see research as irrelevant, they are suspicious and believe researchers are self-serving (see Hosford, 1984). It is no surprise then to find teacher educators concerned that teachers are alienated by research (Fenstermacher, 1983). In sum, many teachers see research as useless (Bolster, 1983; Clark, 1986; Hosford, 1984).

Considering the 48% of respondents who do not consider research in promotional decisions, the questionnaire comments quoted previously, the comments of all 6 informants who support kindergarten retention, and the relatively low ranking of research as a promotional factor, it is evident that the first conception of research is predominant in this study, at least as far as kindergarten retention research is concerned.

According to Zeuli and Tiezzi, the second teacher conception of research involves the belief that the main purpose of research is to provide direct, practical teaching strategies and techniques. Teachers who hold this view uncritically accept the authority of research as "scientific truth." Zeuli and Tiezzi have suggested that research reduces the complexity and uncertainty of teaching for these teachers and increases their sense of professionalism.

The comments of a few respondents are suggestive of the second conception of research. For example, one respondent, who agrees that children should never be retained, states that "practice should be based on sound research." A second respondent, who disagrees that children should not be retained, states that she "want[s] to do what has been proven effective." A third respondent, who strongly disagrees that children should not be retained, expresses the opinion that "research should be valid so a professional should consider it."

Zeuli and Tiezzi also identified a third conception of research, which is "more elaborate," but less widely held than the first two conceptions. Teachers with this view consider research challenging, thought-provoking, and open to critical analysis; teachers with the third conception believe that the importance of research is to enable them to critically analyze and reconsider their experiences and practices.

The opinions expressed by the 5 nonretaining informants reflect the third conception of research. For example, one informant indicates that she read a great deal of research when she began teaching because she was looking for a "lot of theoretical bases to develop [her] beliefs on." This informant critically reviewed articles on both sides of the retention issue before concluding that "solid research" does not support this practice. Similarly, a second informant expresses the opinion that faculties of education and school boards have not provided teachers with enough research to challenge their belief in retention. Two other informants indicate that they began to question their own beliefs about readiness and to reconsider their promotional practices after reviewing literature critical of retention. Two of the 5 informants have conducted their own review of the literature on retention as a self-selected topic for their graduate course work. Three also express an interest in sharing and discussing research articles with interested colleagues and parents so they may become more aware of both the "pros and cons" of retention.

The comments of other questionnaire respondents who agree or strongly agree that children should never be retained, but who declined to be interviewed, also indicate a willingness to consider research. For example, one respondent states that "when the school does not have a retention policy then the teacher has research to

use as a guide." A second considers that "with no ECS training, I feel it's important for me to read recent research and reports on retention." A third indicates that "I initially felt that retention was appropriate. After reading research, many discussions with colleagues, and teaching for a number of years I've come to feel that retention at the K. level is more harmful (self-esteem) than helpful (gains made in academic areas)." A fourth respondent reviewed research on retention for a postgraduate course, concluding that the literature was "more neg than pos [sic]."

The receptive attitude toward research demonstrated by this group of participants is comparable to that of the majority of Kennedy's (1997) interviewed teachers.

If Kennedy's response categories are combined, 56% of her participants indicated that the research literature they reviewed "gives new information," "sharpens thinking," "raises questions, provokes thought," "suggests a new goal to strive for," "suggests changing practice," that they "will try it out," and "can include it in [their] curriculum." In contrast, 44% indicated that the reviewed research had either "no influence" or "validates existing beliefs" (p. 27).

Citing Fuhrman (1992) and Tushnet (1992), Malouf and Schiller (1995) have suggested that teacher application of research findings involves the construction of new knowledge. Citing Richardson (1990), they regarded teacher learning not simply an additive process, but a developmental process in which new knowledge, including research knowledge, is assimilated into existing knowledge structures, resulting in the creation of new knowledge structures. These new knowledge structures, in turn, direct goal-directed actions.

## Explaining Variations in Teachers' Receptivity toward Research

Malouf and Schiller's description of the process involved in constructing new knowledge does not explain the obvious individual differences in participants' willingness to assimilate new research-based knowledge into their existing knowledge structures, the differences in teachers' reactions to research literature noted by Kennedy (1997), or the variations in teacher attitudes toward research identified by Zeuli and Tiezzi (1993).

Some nonretaining informants in this study attribute their own receptivity to research-based teaching ideas and strategies to their type of teacher training or teaching experience. A feature that is common to the teaching histories of all 5 nonretaining informants in this study is training or previous teaching experience in special education, which would have likely included some exposure to research-based information or teaching methods.

Green and Kvidahl (1990) noted that Clemson, Arends, Young, and Mauro (1989) found that students entering a research-oriented program had more positive attitudes toward research than did students entering a field-based program. Green and Kvidahl suggested that this difference in attitudes may reflect a self-selection bias on the part of applicants to teacher education programs.

For an explanation of differences in teachers' receptivity toward research-based information, it may therefore be necessary to study the biographical history of each teacher.

## Implications for Teacher Preparation

This section discusses implications of the study findings that are related to teachers' utilization of retention research both for teacher education programs in general and for early childhood education specialist programs in particular.

Green and Kvidahl's (1990) suggestion that preservice teachers' choice of training program, field-based versus research-based, may reflect a self-selection bias implies that the study of preservice teachers' entering beliefs may help to explain why some teachers are more receptive to research-based information than are others.

In his review of the general literature on teachers beliefs, Pajares (1992) stressed the importance of studying the epistemological beliefs of preservice teachers. In his opinion, research findings have suggested that the educational beliefs of preservice teachers greatly influence their acquiring and interpreting knowledge as well as their future teaching behaviour and that their unexamined entering beliefs may be responsible for the "perpetuation of antiquated and ineffectual teaching practices" (p. 328). According to Pajares, the study of preservice teacher beliefs is a relatively unexplored area of educational research which could greatly inform teacher education and practice. For teacher education, the study of preservice teacher beliefs could provide teacher educators with information about possible curricula and program direction.

The focus of undergraduate teacher training programs influences both the type and amount of exposure that preservice teachers receive to research-based information.

Green and Kvidahl (1990) noted that an introductory course in research methodology is generally not part of an undergraduate program and that teacher education *is* primarily an undergraduate program.

Although numerous respondents in this study have undoubtedly taken courses at the graduate level, some of which may have been courses in research methods, the majority indicate that the bachelor's degree is their highest completed educational level. It is therefore unlikely that they have received training in educational research methods, assuming that most have completed a typical field-based teacher education program.

Green and Kvidahl (1990) reported that 75% of teachers surveyed by Eaker and Huffman (1981) agreed that there should be greater discussion of research findings, if not methods, at the undergraduate level.

Based on the findings of their own study of teachers' opinions about and application of research, Green and Kvidahl advocated the inclusion of an introductory research methods course in the preservice teacher education program. The focus of this course would be to "demystify" research, that is, to explicitly demonstrate its utility for everyday classroom life. Citing suggestions by Gable and Rogers (1987), Green and Kvidahl proposed that such a course include discussion of observational and qualitative methods, class projects involving data gathering and sorting, use of statistical software, rephrasing of research methods in applied terms, and use of examples from real classrooms including case studies actually conducted by inservice teachers.

None of the 11 informants recall the topic of kindergarten retention being discussed during their ECE courses, which may be the case for other participants in this study. If so, it would therefore be unlikely that these participants were made aware of relevant retention research during the course of their undergraduate specialist training. In fact, questionnaire and interview data suggest that many kindergarten teachers learn about retention research through inservice presentations, administrator dissemination of research literature, or as a self-selected study topic for a graduate level course.

As noted in Chapter 2, Doyle's (1989) study was the only one reviewed which measured attitude change before and after a presentation of research on the effects of retention. Analysis of Doyle's results indicates that of three community groups, service club leaders, local teachers, and undergraduate education majors, the education majors showed the greatest response shift and were the least favourable toward retention following his presentation.

Although Doyle considered this finding "encouraging," he did not express confidence in the longevity of the students' open-mindedness, however: "How long these budding - and perhaps fragile - tendencies to dissent from conventional views will survive when these prospective teachers are immersed in the conventional wisdom of the schools and communities they will join is open to question" (p. 219).

Doyle's finding does suggest that an optimal time to provide teachers with

empirically-based information about retention and related management strategies is during their preservice preparation, a suggestion that has been seconded by Haberman and Dill (1993).

According to Haberman and Dill, the currently dominant teacher ideology, which they term the "ideology of exclusion," consists of two central premises. The first premise involves defining a teacher, not as an instructor of individuals, but as a manager of groups or classes. The second premise involves the belief that any intrusion on a teacher's group management (e.g., by individual children who will not or cannot function in the group) constitutes a problem. This ideology is reinforced public accountability for teaching, which involves self-, supervisor, and public evaluation, in which teacher effectiveness is judged in terms of success in managing group, not individual, learning.

The dominant teacher ideology of exclusion also assumes that age-grouping minimizes individual differences and maximizes group management, that drills in basic skills bring children lagging behind their age-mates up to grade level, that retention is the best management for those who lag far behind because failure promotes motivation and readiness for learning, that teachers cannot be expected to contend with the added problems of mainstreamed students or students in poverty, and that it is unreasonable to hold teachers accountable for learning because of the large class size and wide range of ability levels found in the typical classroom.

In Haberman and Dill's opinion, changing the attitudes of practicing and prospective teachers toward retention requires "three parts change in teacher ideology and one part change in their instructional know-how" (p. 357).

That is, a new ideology, which they term the "ideology of inclusion," would be founded on three principles: first, that wide variation in student achievement levels is a normal, even desirable, part of teaching; second, that even those students whose achievement falls far below grade level have the right to attend regular classrooms; third, that teachers be committed to uncritically providing strategies for low achieving students. This new ideology would be reinforced by administrative support, assessment procedures, professional development, and personnel decisions.

In Haberman and Dill's opinion, if preservice teachers are to adopt the ideology of inclusion, teacher education programs adopt the following philosophy and practices:

> Prospective teachers should be taught using the same procedures they are expected to use with children. Modelling best affects ideology. Differences among potential teachers must be actively sought out, recognized and enhanced. Candidates should be able to finish courses, workshops, and even total certification programs in different time periods so that their different achievement and effort levels are recognized. The program should build on behaviorally demonstrated teacher strengths (Ornstein, 1993). Demonstrating and involving teachers in hands-on curriculum, strategies of accelerated instruction, process reflection, product development, and integrated uses of technology where they themselves function in subgroups in teams and as individuals is minimally essential for change. Professors must model uses of groups for whom approach and curriculum have been differentiated to meet varying needs. . . . Further, teachers should be prepared using networks of colleagues who espouse and practice an ideology that expects wide variations in student achievement and accepts responsibility for working with all students in the classroom. . . . Finally, the retraining and orientation of university faculties to the *given* of this ideology is an enormous but absolutely essential task. (p. 358, italics in original)

Although Haberman and Dill considered this type of preparation important in affecting a change in teacher acceptance of retention research, they stressed that the process of teacher selection was even more critical; their rationale was that "preparation derived from the research knowledge base is extremely important but only

possible for those willing to accept, internalize and implement the findings" (p. 358).

Although faculties of education cannot legally exclude applicants from teacher preparation programs on the basis of applicant ideology, school systems do have the freedom to hire only those candidates whose beliefs and values they consider most conducive to promoting their students' learning. Inservice training programs that are founded on the ideology of inclusion are the primary source of promoting "real change" in teachers' attitudes toward the incontrovertible research evidence against retention.

A discussion of suggestions for increasing inservice teachers' use of research-based knowledge, and particularly their use of retention research, follows.

## Implications for Classroom Practice

Horm-Wingerd et al. (1993) concluded that the degree of first grade teacher support for transition classes found in their study was "in direct contrast with the negative empirical findings that have been reported" (p. 136). Citing previous studies, Horm-Wingerd et al. attributed their respondents' lack of familiarity with relevant research literature to their reliance on lay or nontechnical printed material or on the opinions of colleagues rather than on scholarly journals for professional information, to their low membership in early childhood professional organizations, and low attendance at research-oriented conferences.

Horm-Wingerd et al. considered that their respondents' strong endorsement of transition programs reflected a "lack of communication" between early childhood researchers and classroom teachers. In their opinion, "classroom teachers have failed to make use of available information, but the early childhood community has failed to adequately disseminate pertinent information concerning transition classes to key primary school personnel" (p. 137).

Horm-Wingerd et al. suggested that individual early childhood educators and organizations increase their efforts to recruit primary school personnel for membership in professional organizations and for elementary and early childhood organizations to sponsor joint professional activities or conferences.

Tanner and Combs (1993) also concluded that the degree of teacher support for retention found in their study was indicative of a "gap between research and practice." In their opinion, teachers are either not being informed about relevant research or, if they are being informed, are rejecting negative research evidence. Tanner and Combs recommended that "research findings must be effectively, efficiently and clearly communicated to teachers, educational policy makers, and prospective educators" (p. 75).

Similarly, Norton (1990) considered the dissemination of retention research to educators, school boards, legislators, the general public, and particularly to parents, "imperative" in order to counter apparent wide-spread support for retention.

Regarding dissemination of research findings in general, however, Zeuli and Tiezzi (1993) have termed the imposition of research prescriptions on teachers by external agents "unacceptable." They have argued that

> contrary to popular slogans, teachers want research prescriptions; they do not want others (e.g., administrators, researchers) telling them what prescriptions must become part of their teaching repertoires. Teachers want to test the efficacy of the techniques against their own classroom experiences and accept them at their discretion. (p. 15)

Zeuli and Tiezzi were skeptical that typical "cursory" graduate course work helps broaden teachers' conceptions of research. They suggested providing teachers with opportunities to discuss and understand the ideas and assumptions underlying research recommendations, such as in graduate courses specifically designed to expand their views of research, or enabling teachers to learn to do research on their own practice and thus become more reflective practitioners. They based these

suggestions on their finding that completion of a master's degree was not, in itself, associated with more flexible beliefs about the influence of research; teachers' indepth involvement in research as teacher-collaborators *was* closely associated with these beliefs, however.

Similarly, Malouf and Schiller (1995) were not convinced about the potential of staff development to produce widespread, longterm improvements in practice.

According to Malouf and Schiller, problems in implementing research-based practices and in sustaining collegial relations among teachers at the "micro" level of classrooms and schools originate at the "macro" local, state, and national levels; that is, problems at the micro level are the result of the "paradoxical and ineffective" linear model approach to knowledge dissemination and innovation of the United States educational system. Their critique of the linear model approach to information flow was presented in Chapter 2.

*Malouf and Schiller have argued that the organizational complexity of the* school at the micro level makes it highly probable that "organizational perturbations" will accompany the introduction of new practices.

Citing Cuban's (1988) distinction between first-order changes, which function within existing organizational structures, and second-order changes, which involve reorganization of goals, structures, and roles, Malouf and Schiller claimed that second-order changes are more likely to meet with local resistance because of local actors' concern that proposed changes may disrupt existing power relationships.

In Malouf and Schiller's opinion, many educational innovations have failed because of "organizational inertia or politics" or because "they were erroneously treated as first-order changes when second-order changes were in fact required" (pp. 419-420).

After reviewing the literature that has examined problems involved in directly applying research-based interventions to complex social contexts (Cronbach, 1975; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991; Huberman, 1983; Lindblom & Cohen, 1979; Shavelson, 1988), Malouf and Schiller suggested that, if research is to contribute to practice, then it is necessary to reconceptualize the current linear model approach.

The purpose of alternative approaches would not be to replicate research-based interventions, but to provide a "synergism of research knowledge and other forces that shape teacher practice" (p. 421).

From the example of previous small-scale studies, this synergic approach could likely include a redefinition of researcher and practitioner roles with significant practitioner involvement in several, or possibly all, stages of the research process. It would likely also include methods for evaluating the contextualized effects of research innovations, such as Osher and Kane's (1993) contextual model for describing and testing educational innovations. It would also be based on the belief that local implementation processes support rather than undermine appropriate use of research.

Smith and Shepard's (1989) proposed approach of combining dissemination of research information and action research to counter the practice of retention is also based on the belief that local implementation processes are an important aspect of research utilization.

Smith and Shepard have suggested that teachers be provided with research evidence on the effects of retention, be given time to consider the local implications of this research, to form study groups to consider ways of reorganizing the school structure to make it more supportive of alternatives to retention, and to conduct action research in collaboration with researchers.

Another suggestion for increasing teacher utilization of research knowledge, advocated by Zeuli and Tiezzi (1993), is assisting teachers to develop research skills to do research on their own practice.

In his (1992) annotated bibliography of teacher-researcher literature, Belanger included a review of two graduate courses in developing teacher-researcher skills described by Asher (1987) and Mohr and MacLean (1987). For example, the course described by Asher was guided by the following seven principles: modelling and discussing of the instructor's own research processes, participant involvement in

research from the beginning of the course with seminar discussions that focused on ideas and concerns directly related to the research project, emphasis on the discovery and revision processes, support for researchers throughout the research project, emphasis on the social, not solitary, nature of research, emphasis on teachers' ownership of the research, and emphasis on the complex nature of the research process.

## Suggestions for Future Research

The last part of Chapter 7 identifies some of the central and related issues concerning kindergarten retention that have emerged from this study which would be enlightened by further research inquiry.

The first topic, Canadian retention rates and practices, is suggested because, as indicated in the review of the literature in Chapter 2, there is relatively little current demographic information regarding the practice of retention in Canadian educational contexts.

The other suggested topics, listed below, involve further questions raised by the findings of the study itself.

That is, concern expressed by many participants about the current kindergarten entry age, teachers' beliefs about the role of testing of kindergarten students, teachers' opinions about various alternatives to kindergarten retention, the perceptions of other participants in kindergarten promotional decisions, and the necessity of improving kindergarten teachers' attitudes toward retention research are all important issues related to kindergarten retention that emerged from this study.

These issues require more indepth investigation than has been afforded by this exploratory study of kindergarten teachers' beliefs about kindergarten retention.

Additionally, from the perspective of building grounded theory, Strauss and Corbin (1990) have pointed out the necessity of the researcher returning to the field to collect further data on poorly developed categories in order to increase both the "conceptual density" and "conceptual specificity" of the theory.

### Canadian Retention Rates and Practices

In her review of Canadian retention rates and practices, Zeigler (1992) reported the cumulative retention rates for only three school boards in the southern-central Ontario region; 1982 was the most recent year reported.

Cantalini (1987) also reported the age- and gender-related rates of the Ontario school board involved in her study.

Otherwise, as Ziegler (1992) has noted, there is a dearth of published information regarding Canadian retention rates.

Similarly, historical and current retention practices of Canadian school jurisdictions have been poorly documented. The only Canadian study reviewed was published in 1989 by the Canadian Education Association.

As indicated in Chapter 2, some conclusions of the Canadian Education Association's study appear inconsistent. For example, it was indicated that two-thirds of the 122 surveyed boards had retention guidelines or policies and that the rest used some type of promotional evaluation criteria; it was also indicated that "many" boards had no specific promotion policy and that promotional decisions were made at the school level, however.

Unlike the present study, the Canadian Education Association surveyed only public and separate school boards and did not include privately operated schools or centres offering kindergarten programs.

Eighty-eight respondents (48% of the 185 respondents who answered the question) indicate that their schools or centres have no procedural guidelines or policies prohibiting kindergarten retention; 77 respondents (42%) indicate that there are guidelines, either formal or informal, which apparently include one or more of the

following features: parental consultation, request or consent, some form of student assessment, administrator approval, programming considerations, or regulations such as an individual student may be retained only once from kindergarten to Grade 3 (i.e., K-Division 1) or from kindergarten to Grade 6 (i.e., K-Division 2); the remaining 20 respondents (11%) indicate that their schools/centres have policies prohibiting kindergarten retention, which apparently involve policies made at the school or district level.

Information provided by respondents about current kindergarten retention practices and policies could be verified and expanded by surveying supervisory personnel of school boards, privately operated schools, and ECS centres in the region surveyed in this study.

Furthermore, the knowledge base on promotional practices at the provincial and national levels would be greatly broadened through descriptive survey research that employs appropriate sampling techniques as well as detailed narrative and tabular summaries of the results.

## Developmental Testing of Young Children

Like kindergarten retention, readiness and screening testing of young children is a controversial topic for early childhood professional organizations and researchers. For example, the Early Childhood Education Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association has stated its opposition to student assessment practices that grade or place a child primarily on the basis of standardized testing (Schroeder & Edge, 1991).

As a strategy to manage readiness for kindergarten, Cantalini (1987) has suggested implementing a double entry policy. This policy would include entry based on readiness testing and teacher-parent collaboration in defining entry criteria. If the teacher and parents agreed that the child was ready for kindergarten, he or she would enter kindergarten in either September or January, on whichever date was closest to his or her fifth birthday, would progress through a two-semester system at each grade, moving to the next level based on the joint decision of the parents and teacher.

Other early childhood researchers have opposed early screening and readiness testing, however. For example, Gredler (1992) has argued that early educational testing of young children was derived from the practice of early medical screening whose purpose was to detect treatable disorders. However, Gredler questioned whether learning and behavioural problems could be accurately and reliably predicted from childhood assessment for several important reasons. First, young children display unstable behaviour patterns. Second, kindergarten teachers even within the same system differ in perceptions of kindergarten readiness and success. Third, tests cannot determine the quality of instruction that the child receives. Fourth, the tests themselves have only limited predictive validity with regard to future academic achievement. For these reasons, Gredler recommended that children be allowed an initial orientation period of at least three months in kindergarten before being considered for testing.

Meisels (1987, 1989) identified another problem with early childhood testing, the substitution of readiness tests for screening tests. In Meisels' opinion, this substitution is the inadvertent result of confusion about the differences between these two types of tests. Readiness tests, like the Brigance, are criterion-referenced, in which a particular score indicates current achievement, whereas norm-referenced screening tests may be used to predict future performance.

Additionally, Bredekamp and Shepard (1989) have argued that policies of readiness testing for screening and placement are linguistically and culturally biased, harm children psychologically by labeling them as failures before they even begin school, place the onus on the child's performance rather than on the educational system's responsibility to provide appropriate programming, and accelerate the "trickle-down" of curriculum.

On the other side of the issue, the Gesell School Readiness Screening Test is

one developmental screening test in widespread use throughout the United States.

Charlesworth (1989) has noted that placement based on "developmental age" measured by the Gesell test depends on whether it is given prior to or at the end of kindergarten. If tested before kindergarten, the unready child may be recommended for a developmental kindergarten class or to be kept home another year. If tested at the end of kindergarten, the child may be retained or recommended for an extra-year program. Charlesworth has pointed out, however, that many school systems do not have developmental kindergartens, forcing children most in need of intellectual stimulation to stay at home and get even further "behind" their more privileged peers.

Meisels (1987) has expressed the opinion that the use of the Gesell School Readiness Screening Test

> based as it is on a set of tests with unknown validity and reliability, a theory that is outmoded and unsubstantiated, an unverified notion of developmental age, and a racially and ethnically narrow normative base-- for developmental screening and class placement is empirically unjustified and professionally suspect. The Gesell tests can be used effectively as school readiness tests for initial curriculum planning for individual children, but there currently is no evidence to support more extensive application. (p. 71)

Bredekamp and Shepard (1989) have charged that the psychometric properties of the Gesell battery do not meet the standards established for professional test development including those of the American Psychological Association.

Additionally, Gredler (1992) and Meisels (1989) have expressed concern about the proliferation of locally developed tests that have not been assessed in terms of validity, reliability, or other psychometric criteria.

Respondent opinion in this study is obviously divided regarding whether children should be assessed for kindergarten readiness. Although informants were not directly asked for their opinions about readiness testing during their interviews, none mentioned it as a management strategy although most did propose other strategies such as red-shirting and increasing the kindergarten entry age.

On the other hand, the majority of respondents agree that developmental tests are helpful in deciding whether to retain a student. Retaining informants also indicate that they refer students for assessment if they suspect a learning problem and do not recommend retention if formal assessment indicates that such is the case; in contrast, one retaining informant indicates that she will consider retention if assessment reveals that the child has a normal IQ.

Further research is necessary to explicate kindergarten teachers' opinions about the role of testing as a prerequisite to kindergarten entry and for promotion to Grade 1 as well as their methods of evaluating the progress of kindergarten students.

## The Beliefs of Other Stakeholders in Promotional Decision

The two main purposes of this study were to explicate the beliefs of kindergarten teachers regarding child development and readiness and to investigate the relationship between their beliefs and promotional practices.

As discussed in Chapter 2, a number of previous studies have compared and contrasted the opinions of a group of teachers with those of one or more of the other adult "stakeholder" groups involved in promotional decisions, usually administrators, parents, and/or a different group of teachers, such as upper grade teachers. For example, Brynes and Yamamoto (1986) compared the opinions of teachers, principals, and parents toward elementary retention.

Some of the previous studies have reported intergroup agreement about the effects of retention. For example, Haack (1984/1985) found that parents and teachers of retained primary students strongly agreed that retention was an appropriate management strategy.

Other studies have found differences in opinions about the efficacy of retention. For example, Bell (1985) noted that her surveyed kindergarten teachers almost unanimously supported kindergarten retention whereas their principals' support was "more cautious."

The majority of kindergarten teachers in this study agree that promotional decisions made in kindergarten are strongly influenced by school practice in Grades 1 to 6; some participants comment that they consider the type of next year placement including the availability of support personnel and programs when they make promotional decisions.

**The Philosophies of Grade 1 Teachers**

Although only one respondent considers the philosophy of the Grade 1-3 teachers important in promotional decisions, this is a concern of some informants, especially of those who oppose kindergarten retention. Nonretaining informants express concern about outcomes for students, particularly the chronologically young, who are placed in Grade 1 classes (and other kindergarten classes) with teachers who demonstrate what informants consider unrealistic, inflexible academic expectations and "developmentally inappropriate" practices.

Although the Grade 1 teacher may not be directly involved in the promotional decision-making process at the end of kindergarten, this individual must be considered a stakeholder in the process because it is usually he or she who is directly affected by the participants' decision. That is, although the Grade 1 teacher may not be a *participant* in the decision-making process, he or she is often the *recipient* of the outcome.

A number of researchers, including Faerber and VanDusseldorp (1984), Haack (1984/1985), Manley (1988/1989), and Tomchin & Impara (1992), have considered the opinions of Grade 1 teachers in their surveys of elementary teachers' attitudes toward retention and their reasons for retaining students. Additionally, Karweit (1991) has noted that students are most likely to be retained at specific transitional points in their school careers, such as Grade 1.

No study was reviewed that specifically considered what expectations Grade 1 teachers might have for students entering their classrooms, what expectations they might have for kindergarten teachers and programs, or what role they play or believe they should play in promotional decisions or in facilitating the transition of kindergarten students from a year of "informal schooling" to their first year of "formal school." Such a study would increase the knowledge base on teacher beliefs and kindergarten retention.

**The Perceptions of Retained Students**

The child on whose behalf concerned adults make educational decisions is unquestionably the most important stakeholder in the promotion/retention decision-making process.

Although the majority of respondents in this study obviously believe that kindergarten retention does not result in psychological harm, informants have diametrically different opinions about its psychological effects depending on whether they support or oppose the practice.

Some reviewers of the literature on the psychological effects of elementary retention, such as Foster (1993) and Graham (1994), have focused on studies that found negative effects of retention on students' self-concept, school adjustment, or other affective variables as reported by teachers, parents, or students themselves; other reviewers, such as Walters and Borgers (1995), have noted that some studies reported positive psychosocial effects associated with retention.

As discussed in Chapter 2, several researchers (Karweit, 1991, 1992b; Reynolds, 1992) have voiced concern about methodological problems associated with measuring

the effects of retention.

Differences in sample selection and timing of the study may have contributed to the differences in findings of the following two studies, for example.

Byrnes (1989) interviewed 71 Grade 1, 3, and 6 students who were currently repeating a grade; of 64 students, 84% described their perceptions of retention in terms of negative feelings such as feeling angry, sad, or ashamed.

In contrast, Pierson and Connell (1992) found that retained elementary students did not differ significantly from three nonretained comparison groups (random and matched-ability samples of current classmates and students from earlier classrooms who had been socially promoted when the retained students had been held back) in perceptions of self-worth or peer relatedness, but had significant lower perceptions about their own cognitive competence than the random group.

Pierson and Connell suggested that a possible explanation for the difference between their and Brynes' findings was that they imposed a "buffer-year" restriction during sample selection in order to reduce the contamination of long-range effects of retention by short-term negative emotional effects.

Any future research study will need to address methodological issues such as those raised above.

One topic identified by Pierson and Connell as needing further research is an examination of students' different perceptions of retention that result from differences in formal and informal processes of communication and decision-making among parents, teachers, and students.

Additionally, Pierson and Connell considered that one problem of previous studies on the effects of retention was their lack of an underlying theoretical framework.

The self-systems processes model (Connell, 1990), which guided Pierson and Connell's 1992 study, may prove valuable in future studies of affective variables associated with retention.

Finally, only one Canadian study was reviewed (i.e., Cantalini, 1987) which considered issues concerning kindergarten entry age, retention, and behavioural variables. Additional studies would greatly expand the knowledge base on the effects of elementary retention on student affective and achievement outcomes in Canadian educational contexts.

## Research on How to Support Teacher Utilization of Research

This study provides some insights into kindergarten teachers' familiarity and utilization of research on kindergarten retention. Consistent with the general literature on teacher utilization of research, the majority of participants in this study underutilize the retention research literature. This finding is also consistent with the findings of the few previous studies that have investigated teachers' utilization of retention research literature.

In this study, participants' underutilization of kindergarten research in informing promotional decisions appears not so much a result of its inaccessibility, because relatively few participants indicate that research literature has not been made available to them, as a result of their devaluating the findings, particularly if the findings challenge or contradict their experience-based beliefs about the efficacy of kindergarten retention.

Educational researchers who are critical of retention, including Horm-Wingerd et al. (1993), Norton (1990), and Tanner and Combs (1993), have called for increased dissemination of negative research information to practitioners.

A variety of factors which limit the success of simply increasing the amount of research information disseminated to practitioners in affecting a change in their beliefs about retention were discussed earlier in this chapter. Factors that were considered ranged from the different (nomothetic versus idiographic) epistemological orientations of researchers and practitioners to the practical problems involved in making research

information more comprehensible to practitioners who have little or no background in educational research methodology.

In contrast to researchers who have focused on factors that militate against teachers' use of research information, Fuhrman (1992) has taken the position that it is possible to unite educational research and practice so as to further the interests of both "producers" and "consumers."

In Fuhrman's opinion, previous discussions of practitioners' research utilization have focused on the differences in perspective between researchers and practitioners rather than on their common purpose-- which is to improve education.

Fuhrman has advocated the following three approaches to promote this mutual goal of educational researchers and practitioners.

The first approach calls for researchers' establishing a client-based research agenda, or a "problem-oriented" approach to research (MacRae, 1987, cited in Fuhrman, 1992). The first step would involve researcher-practitioner negotiation of specific topics within general areas of study. The second step would involve their identifying aspects of the topic that need to be addressed.

The second approach requires that researchers' view research utilization as a process whose purpose is to improve education. This necessitates their adopting a constructivist perspective of knowledge with greater focus on the knowledge contexts of research consumers. Researchers must also support replication of studies on instructional strategies and practices in varied contexts. Replication is important not only because it increases the generalizability of findings, but because it provides information about the contextual conditions supporting utilization, therefore providing practitioners with specific guidance about how to utilize research information in their specific contexts. Researchers must also increase their efforts to strengthen the integration of research and its dissemination to practitioners. This involves sustained researcher-practitioner interaction before, during, and after the study, as advocated by Huberman (1989, cited in Fuhrman, 1992). There must also be greater collaboration among researchers who are studying different levels of the educational system and increased funding for large-scale, multilevel, multisite research studies. One factor that limits understanding of the education system as a whole is a tendency of educational policy and research to focus on the discovery of educational innovations. The new focus for education research should include the study of strategies that encourage teachers to use research information. In Fuhrman's opinion,

> in this nation, we frequently approach research much like we approach education policy, as a series of disconnected projects, each one promised as "the answer." (Smith and O'Day 1991; Cohen 1990). We shape research as if the next "innovation" or "new approach" is likely to provide the clue to educational improvement that has eluded us up till now. We act as if we did not know that many past research-based approaches fell short of expectations because of issues surrounding use--not because they were not promising in and of themselves. We keep searching for the next great hope, while we should be focusing on what we would do if we found it. More attention to the system surrounding change-- for example, to the factors that give teachers the time and incentive to use research findings--would be as valuable as the most promising improvement strategy. Focusing on how to make the system work in support of innovation seems at least as important as discovering innovations, although the former is less glamorous and perhaps less attractive to funders. (p. 12)

The third approach involves the development of new organizational forms of research that would enhance the relationship between researchers and practitioners. One form is collaborative, or action research, and the second is the consortium form for research centres or to coordinate the efforts of large projects that are geographically dispersed.

It appears that any efforts to improve teacher utilization of research-based knowledge about the effects of retention research must overcome the following dilemma, however.

On one hand, researchers such as Haberman and Dill (1993), Norton (1990), and Tanner and Combs (1993) have lamented the lack of practitioner acceptance of the retention research knowledge base, attributing it to the persistence of ideologies about the benefits of retention. Norton and Tanner and Combs have advocated increasing the dissemination of relevant research literature as a means of countering pro-retention ideology.

On the other hand, researchers such as Hultman and Hörberg (1995), Malouf and Schiller (1995), and Zeuli and Tiezzi (1993), have identified problems associated with the traditional top-down model of information flow used in education.

Fuhrman's (1992) suggestion that research attention be directed at the contexts and methods that optimize practitioners' use of research findings may provide a promising means of resolving this apparent dilemma.

## Kindergarten Entry Age

In his review of assessment and educational issues related to school readiness, Gredler (1992) provided a detailed analysis of historical and recent variations in school entrance age in the United States as well as other countries. He also noted a general trend toward increasing the school entry age in the United States over the past 30 years.

In Gredler's opinion, the rationale for raising the school entrance age involves the beliefs that the younger child "(1) cannot benefit from school and (2) may experience long-term undesirable consequences of such placement" (p. 98).

These are two concerns that are either explicitly stated or implied by many participants in this study. The source of their concern is the kindergarten entry age that is currently accepted by a number of school boards in the region. In fact, Gredler noted that the Edmonton school system had the latest cutoff (March 1) of any school system in North America.

After conducting an extensive review of studies whose findings are used to support a higher entrance age, Gredler concluded that

> although the entry age has risen steadily over the past 30 years, an even higher entrance age is advocated by some as a solution to the problem of individual differences found in the classroom. Overlooked in the call for increased entrance age is the fact that as the entry age is increased, a new younger group is formed and this group is now found to be at risk. There is no absolute entry age cutoff which is the "best"; evaluation of the performance of the young children is often found to be relative to the older children's performance. *Thus the problem is really one of how to set curriculum objectives properly and to evaluate the children fairly.* (p. 115, italics added)

As discussed earlier in the chapter, the Southern Regional Education Board (1994) has also taken the position that the choice of school entrance age is an arbitrary decision that is unrelated to child development. Like Gredler, the Southern Regional Education Board has identified developmentally appropriate programming (following guidelines advocated by the NAEYC) for young children, not manipulating school entry age, as the means of maximizing the school success of young children.

From this perspective, working toward Gredler's proposed solution for resolving the problem of school entry age presents a challenging task for both early childhood researchers and practitioners; the development and implementation of appropriate curriculum and evaluation offers many opportunities for researcher-practitioner collaboration and for practitioners to conduct research into their own practice.

## Alternatives to Kindergarten Retention

Researchers who are critical of retention (Gredler, 1992; Norton, 1990; Pierson & Connell, 1992; Smith & Shepard, 1989), have advocated promotion with remediation rather than retention or social promotion for students whose achievement is substantially below grade level. For example, Smith and Shepard (1989) have claimed that tutoring, summer school, pull-out or inclass individualized instruction have been shown to be more effective and economical than retention.

This study has not considered the merits of intervention programs and practices that are intended to prevent the early school failure of at-risk children, although research on the effects of alternatives to kindergarten retention is relevant to the issues examined in the study.

A number of early childhood researchers (Charlesworth, 1989; Gredler, 1992; Karweit, 1992a; Meisels, 1992; Melvin & Juliebö, 1991; Siegel & Hanson, 1991; Slavin et al., 1993; Stephen, 1992) have reviewed a variety of alternatives to traditional methods for managing school readiness; these alternatives include preschool family support services, reduced early childhood class size, prekindergarten programs, multiage groupings, fullday kindergartens, and specialized early literacy programs.

For example, Slavin et al. (1993) concluded that

> what research on early intervention suggests is that there is no magic bullet, no program that, administered for one or two years, will ensure the success of at-risk children throughout their school careers and beyond. However, it is equally clear that children must successfully negotiate key developmental hurdles in their first decade of life, and that *we know how to ensure that virtually all of them do so*. (p. 16, italics in original)

For most at-risk students, Slavin et al. proposed intensive early intervention, particularly individual tutoring in Grade 1, followed by longterm maintenance involving inexpensive instructional strategies and support services.

Charlesworth (1989) also concluded that there was no single "best choice" among approaches; she also concluded that, regardless of which approach is selected, it must match the preoperational child's learning style. For this purpose, Charlesworth suggested several guidelines for a child-centered, developmentally appropriate education.

Karweit (1992a) identified the following three impediments to reforming kindergarten education, however.

First, reformers have overemphasized the approach of changing kindergarten by changing laws, such as by making kindergarten mandatory or fullday, or by adjusting the entry age. Karweit has argued that although these measures guarantee that all children have the same *amount* of kindergarten education, they do not guarantee the *quality* of their kindergarten experience; the latter is dependent on changing people's beliefs, behaviours, and activities, which is, in Karweit's opinion, a much more difficult task.

Second, reformers have been too eager to discard rather than to incorporate previous models. In Karweit's opinion, "good educational practice is probably evolutionary, not revolutionary" (p. 85).

Third, and most importantly, kindergarten education lacks an adequate research base on which to make decisions, partially because of the "ideological fervor" that motivates the contemporary curricular reform movement. In Karweit's opinion, kindergarten reform will succeed only if it supported by data.

Related to Karweit's third point, Gredler (1992) has raised the possibility that the positive effects of innovative interventional/remedial approaches may actually be the result of the Hawthorne effect, a possibility which Gredler considered needed to be addressed by educational researchers.

Following Karweit and Gredler's recommendation, it is suggested that research

attention continue to focus on the development and assessment of approaches that offer alternatives to traditional strategies like kindergarten retention, which are based on nativist belief, in order to provide an optimal educational experience for all kindergarten students. To paraphrase Holloman (1990, p. 15): "if adults do not fail, neither will the child."

## Summary

Chapter 7 presented the general conclusions of the study, their implications for teacher education, educational policy, and classroom practice, and suggested relevant topics that would benefit from further research.

These suggested topics were a review of Canadian retention rates and practices, further investigation of kindergarten teachers' opinions about the developmental testing of young children, study of the perceptions of other stakeholders in promotional decisions, particularly those of Grade 1 teachers and students who have been retained in kindergarten, a study of methods that would optimize teachers' utilization of retention research, resolving issues concerning kindergarten entry age, and the study of effectiveness of early intervention approaches that would provide alternatives to kindergarten retention.

Chapter 7 concludes with the following reflection on the professional significance of the study from a personal perspective.

## The Personal Significance of the Study

Chapter 1 began with a discussion of my perceptions about students' readiness for school and my eventual questioning of the efficacy of kindergarten retention; these were concerns that evolved during my tenure as a kindergarten teacher and provided the motivation for undertaking this study.

Now the study is completed, it seems appropriate to reflect on its significance for me as a professional educator of young children. To do this, I return to Christopher Clark's (1989, 1992) invitation to teachers to become designers of their own professional development. As I indicated in the first chapter, Clark's thought-provoking discussion provided the final impetus for this study.

Clark has suggested that the first step in becoming a "maturing professional teacher" is to write one's own credo about teaching. According to Clark, this necessitates getting one's unconscious beliefs and implicit theories "out on the table," that is, articulating them explicitly, at least to one's self.

Completing this study has enabled me to achieve the first step in self-directed professional development; that is, it has enabled me to recognize the implicit beliefs about child development and kindergarten retention that underlie my own kindergarten teaching practice.

It has also enabled me to better understand the beliefs of my kindergarten teaching colleagues, some of whom appear to have already started out on the journey of professional self-reflection and some not, but all of whom undeniably have the best interests of their students at heart.

Moreover, completing this study has made me aware that a teacher's implicit beliefs can have significant consequences for students, as Clark has pointed out.

Regarding my own practice, completing this study has compelled me to reflect on the consequences that my own implicit assumptions have had for my students over the years, leading me to critically reevaluate my previous readiness management strategies. Reevaluation of my previous practice is particularly the result of insights into alternative approaches that I have received from some colleagues whose conceptualization of readiness differs from my own. Their insights have increased my awareness of options about which I was previously either unaware or was inclined to dismiss because they did not coincide with my own assumptions about child development or philosophy of teaching.

If this study similarly challenges the reader to critically examine his or her own implicit beliefs about readiness and kindergarten retention, then it will have been a worthwhile endeavor.

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# APPENDIX A

## INTRODUCTION LETTERS AND CONSENT FORMS

March . 1996

4419 11A Avenue
Edmonton. AB
T6L 6M4

Name
ECS Coordinator (Principal)
Private Centre (Private School)
Address
Town. AB
Code

Dear

As part of the requirements of the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Elementary Education. University of Alberta. I am conducting a study of kindergarten retention. A copy of approval of the Department of Elementary Education's Research Ethics Review Committee is enclosed.

This study involves the completion of a short questionnaire by all kindergarten teachers as well as possible participation in one 45-minute personal interview by selected teachers.

A covering letter and questionnaire for each kindergarten teacher in your centre (school) are enclosed.

I would appreciate your cooperation in forwarding the questionnaire to the kindergarten teacher/s in your centre (school) for completion and return mailing to me in the stamped. self-addressed envelope provided by April 30th. Upon completion of the study. a summary of results will be mailed to you for your information.

If you have any questions about the study. please contact me at 461-8629 (home) or 492-1198 (office) or Dr. Lorene Everett-Turner. my dissertation advisor. at 492-5428.

Thank you for participating in this study.

Yours truly.

Linda Reichenauer
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Elementary Education
University of Alberta

Encls.

March , 1996

4419 11A Avenue
Edmonton, AB
T6L 6M4

Name
Superintendent of Schools
School Division
Address
Town, AB
Code

Dear

As part of the requirements of the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Elementary Education, University of Alberta, I am conducting a study on kindergarten retention.

I am writing to request consent for school personnel in your jurisdiction to participate in this study.

A copy of the approved Department of Elementary Education Research Ethics Review Application, Summary of Proposed Research Project, Kindergarten Retention Questionnaire, and Teacher Interview Protocol are enclosed.

If you have any questions about my study, please contact me at 461-8629 (home) or 492-1198 (office) or Dr. Lorene Everett-Turner, my dissertation advisor, at 492-5428.

Thank you for considering my request.

Yours truly,

Linda Reichenauer
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Elementary Education
University of Alberta

Encls - 4

March . 1996

4419 11A Avenue
Edmonton, AB
T6L 6M4

Name
Superintendent of Schools
School Division
Address
Town, AB
Code

Dear

This is further to my letter of March __ requesting your consent for school personnel to participate in my research study on kindergarten retention.

The questionnaires are now ready to be mailed to schools in your jurisdiction. In order to have them completed and returned to me by April 30th, I would appreciate a reply as soon as possible, preferably by FAX.

If it is more convenient, please indicate your consent by signing below and returning this FAX to me.

My FAX number is 492-7622.

Thank you for your co-operation.

Yours truly,

Linda Reichenauer
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Elementary Education
University of Alberta

---

I give approval for you to contact kindergarten teachers through school principals:

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

March , 1996

4419 11A Avenue
Edmonton, AB
T6L 6M4

Principal
Public or Separate School
Address
Town, AB
Code

Dear Principal:

As part of the requirements of the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Elementary Education, University of Alberta, I am conducting a study of kindergarten retention. A copy of approval of (Name), (Position), is enclosed.

This study involves the completion of a short questionnaire by all kindergarten teachers as well as possible participation in one 45-minute personal interview by selected teachers.

A covering letter and questionnaire for each kindergarten teacher in your school are enclosed.

I would appreciate your cooperation in forwarding the questionnaire to the kindergarten teacher/s in your school for completion and return mailing to me in the stamped, self-addressed envelope provided by April 30th. Upon completion of the study, your school district office (participating schools and the office of Service Development and Administrative Support for the Edmonton Public School Board) will receive a summary of results.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me at 461-8629 (home) or 492-1198 (office) or Dr. Lorene Everett-Turner, my dissertation advisor, at 492-5428.

Thank you for participating in this study.

Yours truly,

Linda Reichenauer
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Elementary Education
University of Alberta

Encls.

March , 1996

4419 11A Avenue
Edmonton, AB
T6L 6M4
461-8629 Home
492-1198 Office

Dear Colleague:

As a fellow kindergarten teacher, I am writing to ask your assistance in a study of teacher attitudes toward kindergarten retention that I am conducting as part of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree at the University of Alberta.

Please complete the attached questionnaire at your earliest convenience and mail it in the stamped, self-addressed envelope provided.

To help me keep track of the questionnaires as they are returned, I have printed a number code at the top of this cover page. This will not affect the confidentiality of your response. At no time will teachers or schools be identified.

However, if you are willing to be contacted for a possible followup interview, please complete the information at the bottom of this cover letter. I will be contacting teachers for interviews during May. If you would prefer not to participate in a possible interview, please omit this information when you return the questionnaire.

If you have any questions about the questionnaire or study, please telephone me at one of the above numbers.

When the study is completed, participating (centres/schools/regional division office/participating EPSB schools and the office of Service Development and Administrative Support, as applicable) will receive a summary of results.

Thank you very much for participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Linda Reichenauer
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Elementary Education
University of Alberta

---

I am willing to participate in a possible followup interview:

NAME: _____

CONTACT ADDRESS: _____

PHONE NUMBER: _____

# APPENDIX B

## KINDERGARTEN RETENTION QUESTIONNAIRE

# KINDERGARTEN RETENTION QUESTIONNAIRE

## Kindergarten retention is the practice of having a child spend two consecutive years in kindergarten.

1. Beside each of the statements presented below, please circle whether you Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), or Strongly Disagree (SD).

**IN KINDERGARTEN:**

| | SA | A | D | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Retention will stifle a child's desire to learn. | SA | A | D | SD |
| The older child has a better chance of success. | SA | A | D | SD |
| Retention decisions in kindergarten are strongly influenced by school practice in grades one to six. | SA | A | D | SD |
| Retention is more effective in kindergarten than in other grades. | SA | A | D | SD |
| Research indicates significant benefits of kindergarten retention. | SA | A | D | SD |
| The best way to prevent failure is to hold the unready child out for a year. | SA | A | D | SD |
| Students with identified special needs should not be considered for retention. | SA | A | D | SD |
| A child who is significantly smaller than others the same age is a suitable candidate for retention. | SA | A | D | SD |
| Children should not be assessed for kindergarten readiness. | SA | A | D | SD |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ESL students will learn more English if they are retained. | SA | A | D | SD |
| Research indicates that repeating is not emotionally harmful to a kindergarten child. | SA | A | D | SD |
| Promotion should be based on achievement of learner expectations in the kindergarten program statement. | SA | A | D | SD |
| Retention is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up. | SA | A | D | SD |
| Immature children who are promoted do as well as those who are retained. | SA | A | D | SD |
| Retention is an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in grade one. | SA | A | D | SD |
| Neurological maturity is more important than a stimulating home environment for success. | SA | A | D | SD |
| It is more important to make sure that a child is ready to meet classroom expectations than to shift the whole curriculum downwards to meet the child's maturity level. | SA | A | D | SD |
| Research indicates that retention should be discouraged at the kindergarten level. | SA | A | D | SD |
| Developmental tests are helpful in deciding whether to retain a a student. | SA | A | D | SD |
| Children should never be retained. | SA | A | D | SD |

2. Have you ever considered retaining a student in kindergarten?

   Yes _____ No _____ **If no**, please skip to Question 4.

3. To what extent do you consider each of the following factors important when you make a retention decision? Please circle one number on a scale of 1 to 4 where **1** means "**not all important**" and **4** means "**very important**" to show how important each factor is to you.

| | **Not At All Important** | | | **Very Important** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Poor socialization skills; does not interact well with other children | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Insufficient progress in readiness skills | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Chronologically young in comparison to classmates | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Poor gross and fine motor skills | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Immature language development; poor vocabulary and concepts | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| School's continuous progress policy | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Poor work habits due to short attention span | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Emotionally unready for school situation; overly shy; easily upset; crying; frequent tantrums | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Small in size compared to classmates | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Parental request or refusal | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| English as a second language | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Research on the effectiveness of kindergarten retention | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Poor attendance | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Low motivation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| School entry late in year | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

4. The following are alternatives to repeating kindergarten. Please circle whether you Strongly Favour (SF), Favour (F), Disfavour (D), or Strongly Disfavour (SD) each option.

| | SF | F | D | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Raise kindergarten entry age | SF | F | D | SD |
| Individual progress through an ungraded primary (K-3) unit | SF | F | D | SD |
| Kindergarten entry on the basis of developmental readiness testing | SF | F | D | SD |
| Transition (pre-grade one) class between kindergarten and first grade | SF | F | D | SD |
| Promotion with remedial assistance | SF | F | D | SD |
| Keep child close to entry cutoff age at home an extra year | SF | F | D | SD |
| Developmental Pre-K for unready five-year-olds | SF | F | D | SD |
| Smaller classes with increased individualized and remedial instruction | SF | F | D | SD |

5. Please answer the following questions about yourself.

My year of birth is 19___ ___
Year of graduation: 19___ ____

I have specialized training in early childhood education

Yes_____ No_____

My highest level of education is

Bachelor's _____ Master's _____ Other (Please specify) _____

I have taught a total of _____ years.

I have taught kindergarten _____ years.

I have also taught the following grades _____

6. Please complete

| | Number of Children I Believed Would Benefit From Retention | Number of Children Who Were Actually Retained |
|---|---|---|
| 1991-92 | | |
| 1992-93 | | |
| 1993-94 | | |
| 1994-95 | | |

For the current school year, please indicate how many children you consider would benefit from retention: _____

7. Does your school/centre have a policy that prohibits kindergarten retention?

Yes _____ No _____

**If no**, does your school/centre have any guidelines regarding kindergarten retention?

Yes _____ No _____

**If yes**, please describe briefly the procedure involved:

_____

_____

_____

8. Please comment on the factors you consider the most important when making promotion decisions.

_____

_____

_____

9. Do you consider research when you make promotional decisions?

Yes _____ No _____

Please explain the reason for your response above.

_____

_____

_____

**- THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS SURVEY! -**

# APPENDIX C

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

1. Tell me about a child you considered really ready for kindergarten.

2. Tell me about a child you considered unready for kindergarten.

3. At the end of kindergarten did you consider retention for this child?

4. (If the child was retained) In what ways did retention help this child?
   In the short-term? In the long-term?

5. Can you recall a case in which you recommended that a child be retained, but the child was promoted?
   What were the circumstances?
   Do you think the promotion had positive or negative consequences for the child?

6. Are there any circumstances in which you would not consider retaining a child?

7. Can you recall a case in which retention had negative consequences?

8. Which do you think is more risky: to promote a child who needs retaining or to retain a child who needs promoting?

9. Can you suggest other alternatives to straight repeating of kindergarten?

10. How familiar do you consider yourself with research on kindergarten retention?
    Was this topic discussed in your teacher training program?
    (For teachers with post-bachelor's courses) Was this topic discussed in your graduate program?

11. How applicable is research to your situation when you make promotional decisions?

12. Are there any additional comments about kindergarten retention you would care to make?

# APPENDIX D

# COVERING LETTERS

# AND

# KINDERGARTEN RETENTION QUESTIONNAIRE

# SUMMARY OF RESULTS

June 5, 1997

4419 11A Avenue
Edmonton, AB
T6L 6M4

Name
Superintendent of Schools (etc.)
School Board
Address
Town
Postal Code

Dear

To fulfill the requirements of the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Elementary Education, University of Alberta, I have been conducting a study of kindergarten retention. As part of this study, a short questionnaire was mailed to school personnel in your district in Spring, 1996, with your approval.

A Summary of Results of the survey is enclosed for your information. I would appreciate your providing the results to your kindergarten staff.

If you have any questions about the results, please contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. Lorene Everett-Turner, 492-4273, Ext. 248, or myself, office 492-4273, Ext. 262, or home 461-8629.

I anticipate completion of the dissertation in 1998 and a copy will be available in the University of Alberta Coutts Education Library.

Thank you again for granting approval of your school personnel to participate in the study.

Yours truly,

Linda Reichenauer
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Elementary Education
University of Alberta

Encl.

June 5, 1997

4419 11A Avenue
Edmonton, AB
T6L 6M4

Name
Managing Director
Leadership Services
Edmonton Public Schools
One Kingsway
Edmonton, AB
T5H 4G9

Dear

Re: Study on Kindergarten Retention (034.96)

Please find enclosed the Summary of Results of a kindergarten retention questionnaire surveying kindergarten teachers as part of my study on kindergarten retention.

Also enclosed is a copy of a covering letter to principals of schools that responded to the questionnaire, requesting that they provide the summary to their kindergarten staff.

If you have any questions about the results of the survey, please contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. Lorene Everett-Turner, 492-4273, Ext. 248, or myself, office 492-4273, Ext. 262, or home 461-8629.

I anticipate completion of the dissertation in 1998 and a copy will be available in the University of Alberta Coutts Education Library.

I would like to thank Edmonton Public Schools for its cooperation in the completion of this study.

Yours truly,

Linda Reichenauer
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Elementary Education
University of Alberta

Encls - 2

June 5, 1997

4419 11A Avenue
Edmonton, AB
T6L 6M4

Dear Principal:

To fulfill the requirements of the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Elementary Education, University of Alberta, I have been conducting a study of kindergarten retention. As part of this study, a short questionnaire was mailed to Edmonton Public Schools in spring, 1996, with the approval of the Director of Service Development and Administrative Support.

As a school that participated in the survey, the Summary of Results is enclosed for your information and that of your kindergarten staff.

If you have any questions about the results of the survey, please contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. Lorene Everett-Turner, 492-4273, Ext. 248, or myself, 492-4273, Ext. 262, or home 461-8629.

I anticipate completion of the dissertation in 1998 and a copy will be available in the University of Alberta Coutts Education Library.

Thank you for participating in the study and for providing these results to your kindergarten staff.

Yours truly,

Linda Reichenauer
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Elementary Education
University of Alberta

Encl.

c.c. Leadership Services

June 5, 1997

4419 11A Avenue
Edmonton, AB
T6L 6M4

Dear ECS Coordinator:

To fulfill the requirements of the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Elementary Education, University of Alberta, I have been conducting a study of kindergarten retention. As part of this study a short questionnaire was mailed to your centre for completion by your kindergarten staff in spring, 1996.

A Summary of Results of this survey is enclosed and I would appreciate your providing the results to your kindergarten staff.

If you have any questions regarding the results of the survey, please contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. Lorene Everett-Turner, 492-4273, Ext. 248, or myself, office 492-4273, Ext. 262, or home 461-8629.

I anticipate completion of the dissertation in 1998 and a copy will be available in the University of Alberta Coutts Education Library.

Thank you again for participating in this study.

Yours truly,

Linda Reichenauer
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Elementary Education
University of Alberta

Encl.

June 5, 1997

4419 11A Avenue
Edmonton, AB
T6L 6M4

Dear Principal:

To fulfill the requirements of the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Elementary Education, University of Alberta, I have been conducting a study of kindergarten retention. As part of this study a short questionnaire was mailed to your school for completion by your kindergarten staff in spring, 1996.

A Summary of Results of this survey is enclosed and I would appreciate your providing the results to your kindergarten staff.

If you have any questions about the results, please contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. Lorene Everett-Turner, 492-4273, Ext. 248, or myself, office 492-4273, Ext. 262, or home 461-8629.

I anticipate completion of the dissertation in 1998 and a copy will be available in the University of Alberta Coutts Education Library.

Thank you again for participating in the study.

Yours truly,

Linda Reichenauer
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Elementary Education
University of Alberta

Encl.

June 5 , 1997

4419 11A Avenue
Edmonton, AB
T6L 6M4

Name
Address
Town
Postal Code

Dear

As promised during our interview, for your information I am enclosing the summary of results of the survey portion of my research study on kindergarten retention.

If you have any questions about the results, please call me at home, 461-8629.

I anticipate completion of the dissertation in 1998 and a copy will be available in the University of Alberta Coutts Education Library.

Thank you very much again for agreeing to be interviewed and for sharing your thoughts on kindergarten retention.

Best wishes for the remainder of this school year and for a most relaxing summer!

Sincerely,

Linda Reichenauer

Encl.

# KINDERGARTEN RETENTION QUESTIONNAIRE
# SUMMARY OF RESULTS

This Summary of Results is based on 190 responses to a five-page questionnaire on kindergarten retention received from kindergarten teachers in private centres, private schools, and fifteen school jurisdictions in the region designated as "Zone 3" by Alberta Education. The questionnaire was mailed to private centres, private, public, and separate schools in Spring, 1996.

## Characteristics of Respondents:

Regarding highest completed level of education, 153 respondents (80.5%) state they hold a Bachelor's degree, twenty-three (12.1%) hold a Graduate Diploma, and twelve (6.3%) hold a Master's degree. Two respondents (1.1%) did not answer this question.

One hundred and forty-four respondents (75.8%) state they have specialized training in early childhood education and 46 respondents (24.2%) state they do not.

Total number of years of teaching experience ranges from less than one year to 30 years with a mode of 10 years and a mean of 12.6 years.

Number of years of kindergarten teaching experience ranges from .5 to 24 years with a mode of one year and a mean of 7.3 years.

Eighteen respondents (9.6%) indicate they have taught at the kindergarten level only. One hundred and seventy respondents (90.4%) state they have also taught at other grade levels. Experience ranges from pre-kindergarten to post-secondary teaching with previous Division One teaching experience, particularly at the first grade level (52.1%), being most frequent.

## Policies and Guidelines Regarding Kindergarten Retention:

One hundred and eighty-five respondents answered this question, a response rate of 97.4 percent. The following percentages are based on this total of 185 responses.

Twenty respondents including one respondent who is uncertain (10.8%) indicate that

their schools/centres have policies prohibiting kindergarten retention. Of those respondents who make elaborating comments, three cite district policy and two cite school or administrator policy. Four respondents indicate that students are promoted with their age group and program modifications. Two respondents refer to testing for special placement. Three suggest an automatic promotion policy except in cases where parents insist the child be retained. Two respondents describe non-retention policies that have apparent exceptions, i.e., for children within a specific birthdate range, or K-1 placement for children identified as unready for a Year One program.

Eighty-eight respondents (47.6%) indicate that their schools/centres have no policies prohibiting kindergarten retention or procedural guidelines for kindergarten retention.

The remaining 77 respondents (41.6%) indicate there are guidelines regarding kindergarten retention, although it is not possible to determine whether these are formal or informal. Respondents' comments indicate that procedures for retaining kindergarten students include one or more of the following (frequencies in parentheses): parental consultation/consent (55), student assessment including informal assessment by teacher, testing, consultation with resource personnel or other involved teachers (39), administrator involvement/approval (14), formal parental request (9), programming considerations for the next year (4), and only one retention permitted in K/Division 1 or K-6 (2).

Number of Students Considered for Retention:

Respondents were asked to complete a chart which indicated the number of children they considered would benefit from retention for each of the previous four school years (1991-2, 1992-3, 1993-4, 1994-5) and which also indicated the number of children who were actually retained for each of those years. Respondents were also asked to indicate how many children they considered would benefit from retention for the then-current school year

of 1995-6.

One hundred and 72 respondents (90.5%) answered this question, at least in part. Fourteen respondents (7.4%) omitted the question and a further four questionnaires (2.1%) were excluded from analysis because respondents indicated it was their first year of teaching or first year teaching kindergarten and did not indicate number of considerations for retention for the current year.

This information is difficult to summarize because of the substantial amount of missing data due to non-response and non-applicability to the kindergarten level.

Based on responses that provide specific numbers of retentions (n = 167) and not just estimates of retentions (n = 5), such as "one to five a year," "several," or "usually 3-4," a total of 271 kindergarten students were retained during the school years 1991-92 to 1994-5. This total must be interpreted cautiously, however, since it is based on respondents' recall of cases dating back several years and may also inadvertently include retentions at higher grade levels.

Table 1 illustrates the discrepancy between the number of students considered for retention and actual number of retentions. Again, these totals must be interpreted with caution for the reasons already cited. In addition, only responses that provide a comparison of both recommended and actual retentions for a particular year are reported. (The number of responses on which the totals are based are included.) Reasons for these differences may be reasonably inferred as including non-retention policy, parental refusal, etc. The number of actual retentions for 1995-6 is not included since it was still the current school year at time of completion of the survey. Table 1 excludes responses with only partial data for a year, years teaching other grade levels, years in which "zero" recommendations and/or actual retentions were made, and responses indicating that teacher had never retained a student in

kindergarten.

Table 1 Comparison of Total Recommended and Total Actual Retentions with Number of Respondents: 1991-2 to 1995-6

| Year | Recommendations for Retention | Actual Retentions | Number of Respondents |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1991-2 | 76 | 39 | 39 |
| 1992-3 | 90 | 56 | 46 |
| 1993-4 | 116 | 65* | 58 |
| 1994-5 | 182 | 89** | 87 |
| 1995-6 | 302 | N/A | 126 |

* includes 2 cases in which retention was not recommended by teacher
** includes 3 cases in which retention was not recommended by teacher

Statements of Opinion Regarding Kindergarten Retention:

Respondents were asked to indicate if they "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree" with 20 statements about kindergarten and kindergarten retention.

For comparison purposes, the categories "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" have been combined and the categories "Strongly Disagree" and "Disagree" have been combined.

Table 2 indicates the percentage of agreement with nine of the 20 statements. These were statements with which at least 50 percent of respondents agreed. (Percentages are based on the total sample of 190 respondents including those who did not respond to a particular statement.)

Table 3 shows statements with which 50 percent or more of respondents were in disagreement.

As indicated in Table 4, there was less than 50 percent majority of opinion regarding five of the statements.

Table 2 Statements about Kindergarten Retention with which Fifty Percent or More of Respondents Strongly Agree/Agree with Percentage Agreement

| Statement | % Agreement |
|---|---|
| Retention is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up. | 83.7 |
| The older child has a better chance of success. | 76.8 |
| Retention is an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in grade one. | 73.7 |
| Promotion should be based on the achievement of learner expectations identified in the kindergarten program statement. | 66.9 |
| Developmental tests are helpful in deciding whether to retain a student. | 65.8 |
| Retention is more effective in kindergarten than in other grades. | 63.1 |
| Retention decisions in kindergarten are strongly influenced by school practice in grades one to six. | 57.4 |
| The best way to prevent failure is to hold the unready child out for a year. | 54.2 |
| Children should not be assessed for kindergarten readiness. | 53.2 |

Table 3 Statements about Kindergarten Retention with which Fifty Percent or More of Respondents Strongly Disagree/Disagree with Percentage Disagreement

| Statement | % Disagreement |
|---|---|
| A child who is significantly smaller than others the same age is a suitable candidate for retention. | 95.3 |
| Children should never be retained. | 90.0 |
| Retention will stifle a child's desire to learn. | 89.5 |
| Neurological maturity is more important than a stimulating home environment for success. | 81.1 |
| Immature children who are promoted do as well as those who are retained. | 77.9 |
| ESL students will learn more English if they are retained. | 75.9 |

Table 4 Statements with Less than Fifty Percent Agreement or Disagreement with Undecided/No Response Category Added

| Statement | % Agree | % Disagree | % Don't Know/ No Response | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Research indicates significant benefits of kindergarten retention. | 28.5 | 43.2 | 28.4 | 100 |
| Students with identified special needs should not be considered for retention. | 47.3 | 48.9 | 3.7 | 100 |
| Research indicates that repeating is not emotionally harmful to a kindergarten child. | 30.5 | 42.6 | 26.9 | 100 |
| It is more important to make sure that a child is ready to meet classroom expectations than to shift the whole curriculum downwards to meet the child's maturity level. | 48.9 | 44.2 | 6.8 | 100 |
| Research indicates that retention should be discouraged at the kindergarten level. | 40.0 | 39.0 | 21.0 | 100 |

**Most Important Factors in Promotional Decisions:**

To the question "Have you ever considered retaining a student in kindergarten?", one hundred and seventy-one respondents (90%) indicate that they have considered retaining a student in kindergarten; eighteen (9.5%) state that they have not. One first-year teacher indicates that the question is not applicable.

Respondents who have considered retention were then asked to indicate the importance of 15 factors when making retention decisions by using a scale of 1 to 4 where 1 meant "not at all important" and 4 meant "very important."

Table 5 shows the rank ordering of factors with the mean score of each. (Mean scores were calculated using responses of the 171 teachers who indicated they had ever

considered retaining a kindergarten student, including those who did not respond to particular items.)

Table 5 Rank Ordering of Promotional Factors with Mean Score

| Factor | Mean Score (/4) |
|---|---|
| Immature language development | 3.32 |
| Emotional unreadiness | 3.32 |
| Parental request or refusal | 3.23 |
| Insufficient progress in readiness skills | 3.15 |
| Poor socialization skills | 2.95 |
| Poor work habits due to short attention span | 2.95 |
| Poor gross and fine motor skills | 2.78 |
| Chronologically young in comparison to classmates | 2.56 |
| Low motivation | 2.46 |
| Poor attendance | 2.15 |
| School's continuous progress policy | 2.11 |
| School entry late in year | 2.09 |
| Research on the effectiveness of kindergarten retention (non-response 11.1%) | 2.00 |
| English as a Second Language | 1.81 |
| Small size compared to classmates | 1.35 |

An open-ended question also asked respondents to comment on factors they consider most important when making promotion decisions. One hundred and seventy respondents (89.5 %) answered this question. In descending order of frequency (reported in parentheses), respondents cite the following as the most important factors: social/interpersonal skills/development (78) "maturity"/"maturational readiness" (57), academic readiness skills (56), emotional development (54), work habits including attention span, listening skills, following directions/routines, completing a task (48), chronological age (32), gross/fine motor skills (27), parental wishes/approval (26), speech/language skills/development (24), "interest in learning"/motivation/self-initiative/"attitude" (13), intelligence/intellectual development (12), self-confidence/self-esteem (10), independence (10), advisability of retaining special needs students (9), type of following year placement

including availability of support personnel and programs (8), "physical development"/ "physical endurance" (7), "over-all development"/"general readiness" (7), home background (6), progress made in kindergarten (6), "ability to cope" (6), teacher's estimation of child's probable success in Grade One (4), creativity (3), gender of child (3), teacher wishes to avoid retention by adapting child's program (3). Each of the following factors was mentioned twice: attendance, "personality"/"personal skills," physical size, results of testing, attainment of Kindergarten Program Statement learning outcomes, teacher's wish to have child remain with age-peers. Each of the following was mentioned only once: cooperativeness, frustration level, problem-solving skills, teacher's perception of effects of retention on the child, shyness, "problems in more than one area," school board policy, "goals to be met through retention," and teacher consideration of Grade 1-3 teachers' philosophy.

**Alternatives to Kindergarten Retention:**

Respondents were asked whether they "strongly favor," "favor," "disfavor," or "strongly disfavor" eight alternatives to straight repeating of kindergarten. This question received an overall response rate of 100 percent.

In Table 6, each option is rank-ordered from most to least favoured. Frequencies have been converted to a four-point scale and the mean score is reported based on the total sample of 190 teachers including those who did not respond to particular items.

Table 6 Rank Ordering of Alternatives to Kindergarten Retention with Mean Score

| Alternative to Repeating Kindergarten | Mean Score (/4) |
|---|---|
| Smaller classes with increased individualized/remedial instruction | 3.38 |
| Raise kindergarten entry age | 3.03 |
| Developmental Pre-K for unready five-year-olds | 2.86 |
| Promotion with remedial assistance | 2.78 |
| Transition (Pre-Grade One) class between K and Grade One | 2.75 |
| Keep child close to entry cutoff age at home an extra year | 2.72 |
| Individual progress through an ungraded primary (K-3) unit | 2.39 |
| Kindergarten entry on the basis of developmental readiness testing | 2.13 |

Influence of Educational Research on Kindergarten Retention:

Respondents were asked to indicate "yes" or "no" to the question "Do you consider research when you make promotional decisions?". All but 12 respondents (6.3%) answered this question.

Ninety-two respondents (48.4% of the total sample) indicate that they do consider educational research on kindergarten retention, at least to some extent, when making promotional decisions. Five respondents state they would like further information on research through increased research output or in-service activities. Three respondents state they have conducted their own investigation of the research literature.

Reasons given for the importance of research include the following: research indicates that retention does not result in significantly improved student achievement (2); board policy is based on research (1); research provides a wider perspective on the topic of retention (4); research provides up-to-date information, particularly for parents (4); research indicates that retention is related to later dropping-out (2); research provides information based on a larger scale (3); research provides a guide in the absence of policy(1); research provides a guide in the absence of ECS training (1); research can be used to support

teacher decisions, particularly to parents (9); research can substantiate one's own beliefs (1); research shows that immaturity is an acceptable reason for retention (1); research has been proven effective/valid (3); research shows the importance of social skills for future success (1); and research informs professional practice (2).

Some respondents add the following comments about their reference to research when making promotional decisions: *in contrast to research findings, respondents' personal* experience demonstrates positive short- and/or long-term effects of retention (9); the uniqueness of each situation must be taken into account (1); respondents have been too busy to keep up-to-date on research (4); research is only one factor in a promotional decision (6); the teacher's "gut feeling"/experience also plays a significant role in the promotion decision (12); research results vary (6); research is considered only if applicable to own students (1); research often conflicts with school practices (1); despite research, respondents still believe that students' self-esteem will suffer in an "overwhelming" first grade classroom situation for which they are not ready (2).

Eighty-six respondents (45.3%) state they do <u>not</u> consider research. Stated reasons are that promotional decisions should be made on the basis of individual circumstances (35), on the basis of teaching experience (22), and/ or in consultation with other teachers and parents (14). Sixteen respondents indicate that they are either unaware of current research or it is unavailable to them. Eight respondents state that research results are either inconclusive or contradictory. Six respondents indicate that educational research does not apply to their actual practice, e.g., sample characteristics are dissimilar to those of their own students.

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