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ARE WE THERE YET?: PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF
KINDERGARTEN READINESS

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V. Susan Bennett-Armistead

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of the requirements for the

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and Policy

Nell K. Duke
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**ARE WE THERE YET?: PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF KINDERGARTEN
READINESS**

By

V. Susan Bennett-Armistead

A DISSERTATION

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

ARE WE THERE YET?: PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF KINDERGARTEN READINESS

By

V. Susan Bennett-Armistead

In a context where there is little agreement among experts about what qualifies as “ready” for kindergarten, parents can find it difficult to determine their child’s readiness. Additionally, some states are looking at kindergarten entry age as one factor that may influence later test outcomes. This interview study, reported in two papers, of 26 Head Start and Non-Head Start families whose children were kindergarten age-eligible found that families consider multiple factors when deciding when to send children to kindergarten. The first paper in this report addresses the factors and their frequency of use by families. Some considered academic, social skills, the child’s age and size. Factors considered and with whom to consult for advice, differed for Head Start and non-Head Start families, and for families of girls versus families of boys. Additionally, families who had older siblings considered different factors than those who were first-time parents of kindergarten-age children. In the second paper, the families’ views of kindergarten are explored. Families’ perceptions of kindergarten as academic, social or play-based varied by groups as well with differences between Head Start and non Head Start families as well as families with older siblings and those without. The most frequent depictions of more academic, less play based kindergartens, appeared in families with older siblings, families of boys, families not enrolled in Head Start, and families whose children were among the older half of the sample.

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DEDICATION

Through the completion of this work, I honor my late father, David L. Bennett. Every day he came home from work and asked, “So, what do you know?” Here’s what I know, Dad.

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I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Nell K. Duke for her tireless efforts in supporting my program and this project in particular. She has always modeled the greatest patience, integrity and passion for her work. Through her generous spirit I have had the pleasure to work with her as a peer on several publications and have gained the skills to successfully strike out on my own. As I develop my own academic career, I am grateful every day that I ignored her advice and hitched my career very closely to hers through the Early Literacy Project. I couldn't have learned more from anyone else. Thank you, Nell.

Additionally, I'd like to honor Dr. Pat Edwards for her buoyant good nature and wonderful advice throughout my studies at MSU. She offered me a vision of teaching that I have embraced and added to my repertoire. My students are better for it.

Dr. David Plank graciously joined my committee at the eleventh hour and offered very thoughtful and useful recommendations that enriched the texture and depth of this work. Unfortunately, Dr. Plank left MSU before I submitted final revisions to this work. I am grateful to Dr. Cheryl Rosaen for stepping in to read at this stage and for providing valuable feedback. It is clear to me why Dr. Rosaen is so well respected.

Dr. Anne Soderman, whom I have deeply respected for more than 20 years, has pushed me to be more, think harder, and be more relevant than I thought possible. Her advice on this work has enriched the project and has helped me think in new directions. Further, the model she has offered as an academic is one I hope to emulate. Most of all, she is a wonderful person and I am honored that she is my friend.

My husband, David Armistead, has worked at least as hard as I have to complete this degree. His area of expertise has been in kid wrangling, dinner preparation and listening endlessly to yet another version of the analysis. His gentle encouragement and not so gentle nudging helped me finally complete this project. Thank you, Dave.

PREFACE

The film *Forrest Gump* closes with adult Forrest putting Little Forrest on a school bus. In that moment, Forrest is confronted with the weight of thirteen years of maltreatment by the school system that developed him. He likely remembers the tauntings of schoolmates, the unkind remarks of teachers and administrators, and his struggles to understand the concepts taught. School was not a positive experience for Forrest. He looks at Little Forrest with love in his eyes, knowing that he has promised Little Forrest's mother, Jenny, to take care of him. Forrest makes the decision to put Little Forrest on the bus, thereby entrusting the person he loves most in all the world to a system with a proven record of unkindness. Forrest has to believe it will be better for Little Forrest than it was for himself.

Kindergarten children all over the country wait for busses each fall to start the adventure of public school. Attached to every kindergartener is a parent who believes that sending their child to school was the right thing to do. National surveys indicate however that some children will wait a year longer for that bus than others. In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that a significant number of children, about 9%, who are eligible to start school, do not (West, Meek & Hurst, 2000).

Some children, rather than starting kindergarten in the year they are age eligible, are withheld from kindergarten by their parents, possibly concerned that they are not yet ready to start. While research exists about the trends in who is withheld, and a growing number of studies investigate the effects of delayed entry on individual children, until

now, there has been no research that explores the thinking of parents who have made the kindergarten entry decision. Suggestions about why parents have chosen to delay their child's entry, and why the trends in delayed entry exist have been merely speculative.

The following two papers report on a study that was designed to examine parents' thinking about kindergarten entry for their children. The study was conducted by interviewing twenty-six families of kindergarten age eligible children in three communities in Michigan. These families give us a great deal of insight into a decision faced every year by families all across the United States.

The first paper identifies the factors considered by interviewed parents when evaluating their children's kindergarten readiness. Almost all families in the study considered academic factors, but in most cases other factors, such as the child's size or gender, were considered as well. Sometimes, these other factors were more important than academics. Families varied in both what they considered and how they weighed what they considered against other factors. Examining the number of factors considered and whether they discussed their decision with others, this paper explores the variation across individual families' decision making processes. One parent in the study didn't think a decision needed to be made, that her child was just ready. Others processed the decision by considering a single component. Still others report having agonized over the decision, evaluating information from as many sources as they could tap and having many components in their decision-making process. For some, the decision was emotional and elicited feelings about their own or other family members' experience with schooling. For others, it was a clear cut matching of their child's capabilities to the classroom they would attend. Some drew on a wide range of family, friends, and teachers

to help them think about their child's readiness. Others asserted that they talked to no one about their thinking.

By learning about the factors parents consider and the ways that parents make the school entry decision, one can better support them when they ask, "Is my child ready for kindergarten?"

While the first paper addresses the factors families consider, the second paper looks at families' views of kindergarten. Kindergartens have changed significantly since many parents of kindergarteners were in them themselves. Increased demand for evidence of academic performance at earlier and earlier grades has necessitated a push down of academic rigor that is reflected in many kindergarten classrooms. While parents may be remembering rest time and graham crackers, their child may experience something quite different. In short, the second paper addresses the question, "What do parents think the child is getting ready getting ready *for*?" Families in this study identified their children's prospective kindergarten with varying descriptors, some reflecting the trend toward a more academic notion of kindergarten, others describing a play-based environment with little attention paid to academics. While one might expect families in the same district to describe their local kindergartens in the same way given that at any information they might have about the program would be similar, there was actually more variation within district by groups than across districts. For example, families who had previous children attending the school described the school setting more similarly across districts than families whose first child was entering kindergarten compared.

The question of readiness is important but it is also two sided. While a national debate rages over where readiness should lie, in the child or in the school, the reality is children are going to school. They bring with them characteristics and knowledge that may or may not align with the expectations of the school they attend. Researchers can better discuss the complexities of the kindergarten, and the decision to send or not to send, by reflecting on established facts, from this study, that some families consider *and* what views they hold of kindergarten. For example, knowing that many families feel that knowledge of their child's potential school is important, researchers might suggest the enquiring family become familiar with the school their child might attend. This addresses both sides of the question of readiness by identifying both what the prospective school is like and what characteristics or knowledge the child may need to be successful in that setting. Because some families will indicate that knowing the school is not enough, one might advise them to talk with the principal about individual teachers and the kind of classrooms they run.

Understanding the factors parents consider and decision-making processes they employ can also help us consider how best to influence those processes. For families that may rely heavily on the characteristics of their child, for example, it is crucial to provide carefully considered, accurate information about children's abilities in the preschool years. For families that have not considered how kindergarten has changed in the last twenty five (or even five) years, researchers might offer information about the demands of kindergarten and the expectations for an incoming kindergartener. Both papers offer suggestions for working with families based on the findings.

Finally, as schools consider the long term implications of having classes with a chronological age range as wide as two years, as certain demographic groups and districts experience redshirting more frequently than others, as some groups hold differing views of what goes on in kindergarten, this study helps us think about how education researchers might influence patterns of family decision making in directions believed to be in the children's, schools' or districts' best interests.

In the long run, families will continue to trust us to do right by their children. In part, education specialists may have to earn that trust by helping families think about when the relationship should begin. The following study can assist in that endeavor.

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CHAPTER 1

ARE WE THERE YET?: FACTORS INFLUENCING PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN'S READINESS FOR KINDERGARTEN

By

V. Susan Bennett-Armistead

Families are called upon to make the decision about when to send their children to kindergarten with very little institutional guidance. In a context where there is little agreement among experts about what qualifies as “ready” for kindergarten, this can be a confusing decision to make. Yet, this decision to start a child’s school career is perceived by some parents to be a crucial one. Additionally, in light of the increased pressure to perform in later years, some states are looking at kindergarten entry age as one factor that may influence later test outcomes. This interview study of twenty-six Head Start and Non-Head Start families whose children were kindergarten age-eligible found that families consider multiple factors when deciding when to send children to kindergarten. Academic skills, while considered by many families, are not considered by all families and not the only concern for families. Some consider social skills, the age and size of a child entering the program and future factors such as the age or size a child will be in high school. The decision is also given different levels of consideration by different families. Some spend considerable time on the decision, considering many factors, consulting with others, and so on, while others do not view it as a decision at all, automatically sending their child as soon as the child is age eligible. Factors considered, as well as with whom to consult for advice, differed for Head Start and non-Head Start families as well as for families of girls versus families of boys. Additionally, families

already familiar with the school process by having older children in the family considered different factors than those who were first-time parents of kindergarten-age children.

Are We There Yet?: Factors Influencing Parents' Perceptions of Children's Readiness for Kindergarten

Each year, parents shuttle children off to kindergarten to start their formal school career. In all 50 states, there are laws advising parents and schools that by a certain date, children are eligible to begin school (Saluja, Scott-Little, & Clifford, 2000). The advent of the No Child Left Behind law (2001) has resulted in many state policy makers reviewing kindergarten entry age as a possible factor in improving student outcomes on state tests. However, concern among policy makers that kindergarten entry ages may be too low considerably predates NCLB. In fact, between 1975 and 2000, 22 states raised their entry age to some point earlier in the year. None made it later. Advocates of raising the entry age point to research that suggests that older children perform better on both standardized tests and other measures than their younger peers (Stipek, 2000; Spitzer, Cupp & Park, 1995; Stipek & Byler, 2001; Warder, 1999.) This issue has been taken up by not only in statehouses across the country but by groups including RAND, the National Association for the Education of Young Children and in the popular press (see Datar, 2003; NAEYC, 2001; and CBS News, 2003, respectively). While the debate rages, parents are quietly making decisions about when to send their children to school.

In Michigan, where this study was conducted, children may begin kindergarten if they turn five on or before December 1 of the entry year. While children may not start before this date, there is no law that children must start during this time period. In fact, in Michigan, children are not legally required to be present in school until the year they turn

six by December 1. As a result, some children start at their earliest opportunity while others are “held out” of school for another year before beginning kindergarten. Statistics regarding the number of children who are held out in Michigan are not available but the National Center for Education Statistics (2000) reports that nationally approximately 9% of children age eligible to begin kindergarten do not.

This creates kindergarten classrooms that may have children with a wide range of ages – in Michigan ranging in chronological age from four years 9 months to over six, as well as variation from district to district in the age range and mean age of children in kindergarten classrooms. As discussed in the following sections, this spread and variation may have a number of consequences throughout schooling for both the individual student and for the school, district, and state.

“Redshirting”

The practice of “giving children the gift of time” by holding them out of school for one year past initial eligibility was actually proposed by Jones and Sutherland (1981) as a simple, inexpensive, humane intervention to benefit children who seemed less ready for school. This was proposed as an alternative to retaining them in kindergarten, or a later grade, which was perceived to be more harmful. The practice is referred to as “redshirting”, a term borrowed from high school and college athletic programs that delay the active participation of a player until he or she matures for a year, under the assumption that time would result in better athletes. Jones and Sutherland suggested using the practice for kindergarten entry for children who appear to have academic or social delays, reasoning that they benefit from an additional year to develop those abilities outside the pressures of formal schooling.

While some see redshirting as a valuable tool designed to assist children, others disagree. The National Association for the Education of Young Children in a policy statement argues that “The only legally and ethically defensible criterion for determining school entry is whether the child has reached the chronological age of school entry (NAEYC, 1990).” Further, the NAEYC stand rejects the notion that children must be ready for school, rather, they argue, schools should be ready for children--however prepared or ill-prepared they come. Indeed, there is concern among some researchers that an increase in the incidence of redshirting, resulting in classrooms of older, seemingly more capable children, might encourage schools to ratchet up kindergarten curricula to look more like first grade’s, thereby making the situation worse instead of better for children who are less prepared for school and/or who do begin school when age eligible (Diamond, Reagan, & Bandyk, 2000). Additionally, some have voiced concern that children with developmental delays who are kept out of school for a year, hoping that maturation will have an impact on the issue, lose a year of intervention that might assist in the development of the child (Ferguson, 1991; Meisels, 1992). In addition, Datar (2003) suggests that delaying children’s entry can result in additional child care costs for the additional year that the child is not in kindergarten, either for the individual family or, in the case of low income families receiving public assistance, for the state.

Both the individual and policy consequences of redshirting remain largely speculative. Even the question of whether redshirting makes any long-term difference for the individual child or en masse, for the district, is not yet clear in the literature, as discussed in the following section.

Research on Redshirting

Who is Redshirted and Why?

As represented in Brent et al. (1996), the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that redshirting has traditionally been more common in affluent communities and in private schools, although Brent et al. (1996) suggest the practice may also be leaking into a broader range of communities and into public schools. Further, NCES indicates that parents of boys are more likely to “give them a year to grow” than parents of girls and that children born between June and December are more likely to be delayed than children born in the early part of the year (as reported in West, Meek, & Hurst, 2000). Additionally, white children are more than twice as likely as black children to have entered later than age-eligible (West, Meek, & Hurst, 2000).

Although researchers have guessed at why children might be redshirted, in groups or individually, the “why” remains unanswered in the current literature. The purpose of the current study is to investigate parents’ thinking on this.

The Impact of Redshirting

The impact of redshirting has been studied even though its reasons largely have not. Several studies have followed the experiences of children who were redshirted for kindergarten entry. In the short term, the results seem to be beneficial, with children performing academically and socially on par with or above their un-redshirted peers (West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000; Zill, Loomis & West, 1997). A study by Spritzer et al. (1995), also found that redshirted children may have more confidence and popularity among their classmates. In contrast, children who were retained and required to experience a second year of kindergarten did less well than their first and second grade peers. The benefits seem to hold through the first few years of schooling for some

children as they receive “less negative feedback from teachers about their academic performance or conduct in class” and continue to perform on par with their peers (West, Meek, & Hurst, 2000).

Both West and Spritzer speculate that even though successful, redshirted students may have a sense of alienation resulting from being larger or older than their peers. Additionally, there is evidence that some redshirted first through third graders required more support from special education services than their non-redshirted peers (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). Opponents of redshirting point to this finding as evidence that this practice keeps children from getting early intervention services that might result in eliminating the need for later support (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). Finally, although Zill, Loomis and West (1997) overall found effects that indicated children redshirted in kindergarten performed better in first and second grade, they caution that there are differences based on what the child experiences during the year he is held out of kindergarten. For example, a child who is held out and has the benefit of a rich learning environment such as a quality child care setting or an enriched home environment will perform differently than a child who spent another year in a less than stimulating environment.

It is not until adolescence that negative results of redshirting have been documented in the literature. A study by Byrd et al. (1997) suggests that teens whose kindergarten entry was delayed exhibited more behavioral problems than their classmates. Because this group also showed a higher rate of need for special education services, there is a good deal of speculation that these children had special needs misdiagnosed as

“immaturity” and that some intervention other than redshirting might have addressed the problem more successfully.

There is reason to think that redshirting has consequences for classrooms as well as individual children. Delayed entry for some results in classrooms with a greater range of ages. This may in turn result in a greater range of abilities, and more pronounced differences in boys and girls in the classroom (given that boys are more likely than girls to be redshirted). Group differences in rates of redshirting may lead to age and/or ability differences in classrooms by group, such as a disproportionate number of low income, African-American boys (less likely to be redshirted) being younger than their white, older more affluent peers. Research has yet to address questions related to the impact of group differences in redshirting, or questions about the impact of redshirting on those who were *not* redshirted.

Teachers in a national survey report that, on average, fully 48% of the children coming to them are not ready for the current kindergarten curriculum in their districts (NCEDL, 1998). Can it be possible that even in light of a significant percentage of children employing delayed entry, resulting in older, seemingly more ready children, the curriculum is still out of reach? One possible answer is that schools see older children in classrooms as more capable and therefore increase the difficulty of the curriculum to meet a perceived level of competence (Diamond, Reagan & Bandyk, 2000). Younger (although age eligible) students may perform less well in this new kindergarten cum first grade environment.

Just as one may have reason to believe that redshirting may cause classroom level variance in achievement, districts may have varying mean entry ages that might result in

district-level variance in achievement. For example, given the trend cited by West, Meek and Hurst (2000) for lower income children to attend kindergarten earlier than their more affluent peers, it is likely that lower income school districts will have younger children. State standardized tests and accountability measures, however, are universally applied to districts regardless of income and mean entry age. As a result, the poorest districts, perhaps already at a disadvantage, may be testing children at a significantly younger age on average than their affluent neighboring districts. Because age is significantly related to test scores (Stipek & Byler, 2001), this may partially explain chronically lower scores of low income districts. If indeed there are trends toward greater use of redshirting, and differential rates of redshirting in different communities, this may also make efforts to narrow achievement gaps more difficult.

Given the lack of definitive research indicating that redshirting is good or bad for children and given the complexity of the issue, it is no surprise then that some parents agonize over the decision to send their children to kindergarten. For some, the decision to send or not may be one of the biggest decisions parents make in the early childhood years. A quick internet search using Google, of “kindergarten readiness” yielded 397,000 sites (2005). These appear to be largely parent support sites designed to assist parents in making the decision to send or not to send their child to kindergarten including checklists, quizzes and materials for purchase. This angst is not surprising in the high stakes world of education. Every parent wants their child to succeed in school. It seems when their children begin school is seen as a consequential decision for some parents. While the research community works to gain better understanding and agreement on this issue, parents continue to have to make this decision.

While there may not be widespread agreement about the effects of delayed entry, there are certainly those who would like to influence parents' decisions. For example, as noted above, there is some concern that delayed entry might unintentionally keep children from much needed early intervention services. A child appearing "immature" may in fact have developmental delays or disabilities that would be supported through services. Better understanding of parents' thinking and subsequently better communication with families around their decision making would allow schools to address this issue as well as confronting other misconceptions that families may have about schooling.

Policy makers at the local and state levels are also making decisions about school entry age. As stated earlier, many states have considered, and changed their entry dates over the years. In Michigan, while this study was conducted, in light of pressure for greater academic achievement on state test scores, the legislature entertained a proposal to change the entry date from December to September (MiAEYC, 1999). As in the past, groups such as the state organization for the Education of Young Children have objected to that change, based on concerns for children "left behind" in the gap between September and December in any given year of policy change (MiAEYC, 2006). Further, the Michigan Association for the Education of Young Children's policy statement echoes the National Association's belief that schools should have a developmental perspective, welcoming children at whatever age and level they arrive (Ibid). Just as parents are making choices for their children with little knowledge, policy makers and those who influence them are relying heavily on theory and good intentions, not research.

Conceptual Framework

When examining the factors parents consider when making decisions, it is important to keep in mind that families may not be viewing the decision the same way. Differences in their previous experiences may influence their choices but it may also be more fundamental than that. It may be that families perceive the role of school differently and therefore their decision about when to send their children would be influenced by that. Lareau (2000) found that differences exist in parents' perceptions of the role they are to play in supporting their children's education. Working class families in her study were more likely to view teachers as experts than professional families. Professional families perceived themselves as equals to their children's educators. These differences played out in varying levels and types of parental involvement. Lareau concluded that varying levels of cultural capital, as it relates to the school system, result in some families feeling more comfortable being involved with their children's schooling while others feel they are best serving their children by leaving them in the hands of those they view as more qualified.

The concept of cultural capital, or rather parents' pursuit of it on behalf of their children, guides this study. First outlined by Bordieu in 1977, cultural capital is most commonly used to describe differences in class dynamics and the pursuit of high status cultural resources. A more refined version of cultural capital as it relates to the current study is found in Lamont and Lareau (1988). The researchers argue that activation of resources such as knowledge of the school system is necessary to acquire cultural capital. Many things can impact a family's ability to activate their resources. For example, families in rural communities may have limited access to services as a result of

transportation concerns. Some affluent families may have little time to activate resources as a result of working two demanding jobs. Either group may or may not be aware of resources available to them and thereby cannot activate them. It can be argued that all parents want success for their children but capacity to access the cultural capital leading to that success may vary. It might be expected, based on Lareau's work, that Head Start families are less likely to activate the cultural capital of, for example, consulting with a teacher to make the kindergarten entry decision. Conversely, it may be expected that middle or higher income families might be more likely to activate that resource. In this study, the activation of resources across groups is examined as well as the factors considered as a result of those influences.

Research Questions

This study addresses the questions:

- *What factors do families consider when deciding when to send their kindergarten age eligible children to school?*
- *Do the factors considered differ by child characteristics, including the child's gender and age, and family characteristics, including whether they are eligible for Head Start and whether they have older children who have been through kindergarten?*

Method

Because the purpose of this study is to understand parents' thinking and attitudes about kindergarten entry, a semi-structured interview methodology was the most appropriate choice (Weiss, 1995). That is, basic, open ended questions were crafted prior

to the interview along with a series of possible follow-up probes that allowed for the interview to chart territory that might not have been predicted by the prepared script.

While a survey would allow for study of a larger number of informants, interview methodology allowed for more probing, less directive investigation into parents' decision-making. Interview studies in other areas of parent research have yielded many important insights for the field (see Edwards's work on parent stories (1999), Moll's work on families' funds of knowledge (1993), or Bell's work on parents' thinking about school choice (2004), for example).

Context of study

This study was conducted across three school districts in central Michigan, one rural, one suburban and one urban. Within the rural and suburban districts, children could attend an alternative to kindergarten called Developmental Kindergarten, Young Fives or (deceptively) High Fives, depending on who was describing it. In this alternative, children are expected to complete this readiness year and then proceed to a kindergarten year the next year. (Very rarely, a child would be placed into a first grade program after a developmental kindergarten year. The included schools report that this occurs about as frequently as any other grade acceleration or skipping, however. Therefore in this study a year of developmental kindergarten taken when the child is in fact age eligible for regular kindergarten is considered "redshirting.") Additionally, in all the districts, Head Start provided the opportunity for an additional year of Head Start even when the child is age eligible for kindergarten if it was determined by Head Start teachers that the child would benefit from this experience before entering kindergarten. Since the urban district did not offer a developmental kindergarten option for its children, only those families qualifying

for Head Start were guaranteed free opportunities to attend an additional year of preschool. In addition to free, public options, there were several private and parochial schools across all the districts that offered admittance to children younger than the mandatory age for school entry. In short, families in the study all had options as alternatives to kindergarten entry for their children. However, as will be detailed later in this paper, families varied in whether they were aware of or considered these options.

Informants

Preschool programs were selected at random from a list of licensed child care centers and preschool programs, contacted by the investigator, and asked for referrals to families whose children were age-eligible to begin kindergarten (N = 5). Additional referrals of children came from colleagues of the investigator (N = 3), random meetings of families in fast food locations and community parks (N = 2) and by word of mouth through interviewed families (N = 6). Children enrolled in Head Start were referred by their Head Start teachers (N = 10). In each instance, it was emphasized that the children need not have any special characteristic other than age-eligibility for kindergarten and parents willing to discuss their thinking about sending their child to kindergarten. Families were contacted by phone in most cases (with the exception of the two families met by chance) and were told that the purpose of the study was to better understand what factors families consider when making the decision about sending their child to kindergarten. Families were invited to participate in the study and be interviewed. Four families whose children were enrolled in Head Start were contacted and declined involvement. The reason cited was that they didn't think there was a decision to be made

that their children were five and they were going to school. No other families declined involvement.

A total of 26 families were included in the study. (Twenty nine were interviewed but data was lost on three families when the tapes, although tested in advance, were inexplicably found to be blank.) Each family had a child who was age-eligible to attend kindergarten in the interview year, 2004-2005. For some, this was the second year of age eligibility; for others it was not. The children's ages ranged from 4.9 to 6.0 at the time of the interview (mean = 5.27 years). Ten of the families interviewed had been previously enrolled in Head Start, four rural and three each in the suburban and urban districts. Sixteen families either had a child attending a preschool program (other than Head Start) or a playgroup experience, three rural, six suburban and seven urban. In total, seven families were in the rural district, nine in the suburban district and ten in the urban district. There were a number of differences in demographic characteristics of families of Head Start and non-Head Start children (see Tables 1.1 and 1.2 for detail.)

Across the groups, four of the families were single-parent households. Two of the families were headed by grandparents rearing their grandchildren. Twenty families had made the kindergarten entry decision with other children in their families. In nine of the families, the focal child was male, in seventeen, female. One family was African-American, one Sudanese and Guatemalan, with the remaining being Euro-American.

Data Collection Procedure

I interviewed each of the families myself. Two parent (or grandparent) families were given the option of including both adults in the interview or having one parent represent them both. Only one family opted for having both adults present. Interviews

were conducted wherever the family felt most comfortable or found to be most convenient. Twenty one of the interviews were conducted in the family's home. One was conducted in my office, one at the parent's workplace, two in local coffee shops, and one in the parking lot of a child's tae kwon do lesson.

The interview questions were designed to elicit the broad range of factors that families might consider when deciding about school entry for their children. The questions themselves fell into several categories:

- Questions designed to describe the child, the child's family, the child's abilities and interests. Sample question: *What kinds of things does _____ enjoy doing?*
- Questions designed to elicit families' views of school readiness. Sample question: *What do you think children really should be able to do when they enter kindergarten?*
- Questions designed to elicit factors considered by families. Sample question: *When you were thinking about whether or not to send _____ to kindergarten this year, what kinds of things did you consider?*
- Questions designed to illuminate the process employed by families when making the decision. Sample questions: *Did you consider advice from others? Whose? Have you used their advice in the past?*
- Questions designed to draw out families' knowledge of the child's potential school. Sample questions: *Are you familiar with the kindergarten your child will attend? How did you learn about it?*

- Questions designed to elicit the parents' experiences with schooling. Sample question: *When you think about your own school experience, what comes to mind?*
- Demographic questions. Sample questions: *How much schooling did you have? What do you do now?*

The complete interview protocol is provided in Appendix A.

Interviews were conducted in late summer or early fall. This was after families had made their decision regarding whether or not to send their child to kindergarten, but before their recollection of the decision-making process would have faded. This timing may also have prevented families' responses from being influenced by what was happening in their child's kindergarten (or developmental kindergarten) classroom, if they had indeed chosen to send the child. If interviews were conducted too late in the year it could have been difficult for families to separate factors they considered at the time with new factors emerging as their child experienced kindergarten. For example, a family might not have initially considered whether a child could listen to a teacher's directions when making their decision to send him to kindergarten but might later in the year, upon receiving feedback from the teacher, come to view that as an important consideration. Therefore, it is hoped, the factor would not inadvertently (and inaccurately, since questions are retrospective to decision-making prior to sending children to kindergarten) make its way into the interview. Families whose child had already experienced a "redshirting" year ($N = 3$), were asked to consider the decision made in the first year of eligibility as well as any thinking they currently had about entry. For these families, the portion of the interview dealing with the first year of eligibility

was more retrospective than for the other families so their recollections may indeed not be as thorough or accurate. All three of these families had chosen the previous year to send their children to developmental kindergarten during the “redshirting” year. Even although they were asked to recall the decision-making process prior to the developmental kindergarten year, it is possible that experiences in the developmental kindergarten year did influence in some ways their recollections of the decision.

During the interview, I took minimal notes as it has been noted that some informants, particularly those with previous bad experiences with schooling or “experts”, can feel threatened or intimidated by note taking (Weiss, 1995). Instead, I relied on audio recording and, during the interview, employed active listening strategies designed to draw out and clarify the informant’s position. The protocol, as given in Appendix A, was held constant for all informants to avoid disparity in responses by individuals or groups based on how the questions were asked or responded to by me, the interviewer. Of course, as indicated earlier, while the basic protocol was held constant, follow-up probes were varied based on the respondents’ answers.

Data Analysis Procedures

All family interviews were assigned a code number and then transcribed by a paid transcriptionist for later analysis by the investigator. The transcriptionist did not have information prior to the transcription about the families, including which families had a boy or girl child or whether or not the families had children attending Head Start. Of course, some families gave some of this information during the interview. Transcriptions included both the interviewer’s and the informant’s speech. All meaningful utterances were included as were pauses longer than 2 seconds (implying thoughtful consideration).

Vocal place holders (“um”, “er”, “hm”) were omitted unless they were repeated, which might denote hesitation or uncertainty in the respondent. This was done to distill the transcripts down to their meaning rather than their literal translation and to make the flow of the transcripts smoother. However, if interrupted by a child, the transcription reflected that and the talk was included in the transcript. In three instances, the tape was turned off: once so the parent could address the child and redirect him or her to another activity so that we could speak about the child without the child being present; once while a baby was crying in another room and needed to be tended; and once while a train roared by rendering the interview inaudible. When the child/baby/train left the area, the interview resumed and the tape was turned on.

While both Strauss (1987) and Miles and Huberman (1984) suggest that analysis begin during the data collection phase of interviewing, I did not begin formal analysis until all interviews were transcribed. I felt strongly that it was important to keep the interviews as consistent as possible from one to another; beginning analysis while still interviewing might have inadvertently influenced the interview procedures I used (e.g., follow up prompts) in later interviews. Of course, I did hear the interviews as I conducted them so that I may have unintentionally influenced my follow up prompts over time.

I developed initial categories for coding based on impressions developed during the interviews and expectations I had developed in planning for the study. I then applied these categories to the transcripts employing the method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Berkowitz (1997). As expected, the initial coding categories were incomplete and additional categories were necessary to fully capture the factors present in the data. For example, initial coding categories I had developed did not capture that some families

considered future factors such as size in high school when considering sending their children to kindergarten. Coding continued until an exhaustive set of categories was developed. In addition to coding for factors considered in the kindergarten decision, other coding was conducted with other foci not addressed in this paper.

The coding system was applied to each transcript. For example, consider the following passage:

...he was, um, a young boy. We didn't want him going in at four years old into kindergarten. And again, the fine motor skills were not there, so we wanted him to have another year behind him to grow emotionally, you know because he was young and to work on those fine motor skills. We didn't want to just throw him into a kindergarten program. His teacher at preschool said "Go ahead, he'll be fine. You know, he'll catch up." And we're like "No, that's not the plan we have for him because we don't want him to hopefully catch up or to be behind going into kindergarten. Our plan all along was "Okay, we are going to hold him back into a young five program."

This passage was coded as evidencing consideration of socio-emotional skills, consideration of the child's physical development, consideration of the child's birth date, consideration of advice from other people (even though it was dismissed). For each interview, the coding category was given a numeric assignment, yes = 1 and no = 0, and then entered into an SPSS database.

After entering the individually coded cases into a quantified SPSS database, I employed a sorting method described by Weiss (1995) to group the data and their representative cases by category. That is, categorical files were generated with excerpts

from individual cases reflecting each category. For example, the category “academic skills” included relevant excerpts of interviews with the 23 families identifying that as a factor. This combination of purely quantitative with qualitative representation allows for a richer depiction of the data. The quantified database allows for numeric groupings while the qualitative collection of excerpts facilitates looking across the text of the interviews themselves.

I did both the coding and data entry of all data. To assure reliability in the coding system however, three interviews were randomly selected for an outside coder to analyze. The coder was asked to read the entire interview but code only the passages reflecting factors considered by the families. This coding was compared to mine and found to be in 91% agreement.

To determine reliability in data entry, three randomly selected interviews were blindly double-entered into the database, that is, the original entries were not visible during entry of the second round of entries. The second round of entries were compared against the 192 original entries and found to be 99.48% accurate.

After investigating reliability of coding and entry, data was analyzed in two major ways. First, I examined the occurrence of each code across respondents. Second, I examined the number of factors considered by any one family. To ascertain frequency of occurrence across respondents, I calculated this both in number (e.g., 23 out of 26 families) and in percentage (e.g., 88% of families) as well as in relation to child characteristics of gender, age, and whether the child attended a Head Start program. I also examined the decision the family made. These categories are reflective of the previously discussed trends of affluent families with boys born in the latter half of the year being

more likely to redshirt their sons (Graue, 2000). In this case, Head Start attendance serves as a proxy for income level. Finally, because I suspected families that previously made the decision with another, older child might have differing views of the decision, I looked at families with older siblings relative to families that did not.

In an effort to see how different factors and child characteristics were related, cross tabulation was conducted, resulting in chi square tests for each factor. Major assumptions of chi square testing were met except that the sample was not drawn randomly from the population (Howell, 1997). This violation is mitigated somewhat, however, by the inclusive approach to sampling used in the study. However, in a number of instances, cell size was small; therefore chi square results should be interpreted with caution. The factors tested included the age of the child, family structure, the social network consulted (preschool teacher, other teachers, family and friends, none), academic skills, socio-emotional factors, and the physical size of the child. I also investigated whether the parent had knowledge of other families going through the same decision, and whether or not parents considered their own experiences with schooling. Factors and characteristics were tested against gender, age, enrollment in Head Start, decision made and the presence of older siblings. Where appropriate, Fisher's Exact test was applied by SPSS. When SPSS reported Fisher's Exact Test, those are reported. When SPSS reported chi squares, those are reported.

Results

Families in this study differed in several important ways. While some families perceived the entry decision as very complex and high stakes, others did not. The number and type of factors influencing parents' decision making varied across families, with

some families reporting considering only a few factors while others wrangled with many factors, with a range of two to ten factors considered, and with great angst. Contrast these two responses:

Honestly, if I had known I would agonize over it this much, I would never had had a child in September...I know that sounds really neurotic, but it was that monumental, I just didn't want to screw up. I wanted to give him all the tools to be successful. *[Referring to her redshirted previous child who had a September birthday]* (Mrs. Porter¹, 8/09/04)

There was nothing to think about. She was just ready. *[Child's birth date: 9/24/99]* (Ms. McCormick, 8/26/04)

Elsewhere in these interviews, both parents talk in very caring and loving ways about their children but both have a very different view of the decision making process and the factor(s) they considered.

In the following sections, I dig deeper into the parents' decision making as follows. First, I report the decisions parents made about whether or not to send their children to kindergarten the first year they are eligible. Next, in answer to the first research question, regarding the factors considered, I identify the factors the families considered as they made the decision: academic, social, physical size of the child, birth date, advice from others, others in the family redshirted, familiar with the kindergarten, knows others making the same decision, parents' experience as a factor, the child's gender, and in one case, the opinion of the child on her own readiness. Then, in answer to the second research question, regarding whether the factors considered vary by group, including the child's gender, the child's age, the family's enrollment in Head Start, the

¹ All family and children's names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

presence of older siblings, and the decision to redshirt or not, I look across all factors for differences in pattern.

Redshirting

In total, this study included six families who redshirted their children. Three were entered into developmental kindergarten in the year prior to the study and were now entering kindergarten. Three more were being redshirted at the time of the interviews, entered into developmental kindergartens to attend regular kindergarten the following year. Of these six, five were boys. These children were all born in the later half of the year: two in September, two in October and one each in August and December. One child of the six was from the urban district where no developmental kindergarten was offered and his family placed him in a private developmental kindergarten program offered at a preschool program. The other five were from the suburban and rural districts and were in public settings. The factors considered by these families will be included throughout the following discussion of individual factors as well as a summary contrasting the families who redshirted with the families who chose to send their children in the first year of eligibility.

Factors Considered

Families reported considering 11 factors in deciding about their child's readiness. Factors considered by one or more families are represented on the chart in Figure 1.1. In the following sections, the factors considered by several families will be described. The final sections will address the individual nature of some of the decision making and variation in factors considered by groups.

Factors Considered: Academic Factors

When asked what factors they considered when making their decision, 23 of the 26 families (88%) indicated some aspect of academic skills as an influence on their thinking. For some, the responses were brief:

She's just ready. She's really smart. I really think she's ready to go. (Ms. McCormick, 8/26/04)

For others, specific details were offered:

[I was concerned about] only writing, ya know, I'm not really sure, what a kid, how a kindergartener should be writing, or how a preschooler should be writing. She, that's just not one of her strengths, like actually forming the letters and forming the numbers and stuff. She doesn't do very well at all except with her letters of her name. But we haven't worked on it very hard either (laughs). (Mrs. Bridges 8/19/04)

Other academic skills mentioned were that the children knew or did not know their alphabet or parts of it, could write their names, could count, could read or knew basic shapes and colors. See Table 1.3 for a display of academic skills parents mentioned and their frequency, along with specific socio-emotional skills parents identified, which will be discussed later in this paper. Clearly their children's academic skills are associated with most parents' views of their children's success in schooling.

One might wonder about the three families that did not report considering academic skills as a factor. Among the three families, one of them considered only the child's age when making the decision. The other two considered other factors such as social skills and the child's physical size. Most interesting, none of the three families were familiar with their child's potential kindergarten.

Analyses of consideration of academic factors by different groups found no statistically significant relationships. There was little difference between Head Start and non-Head Start families in considering academic skills with Head Start families, 90% (N= 9), non-Head Start, 87.5% (N= 14). Parents of boys were somewhat less likely (78%, N = 7) to consider academic factors than parents of girls (94%, N = 16), but again, not at a level of statistical significance. No statistically significant differences were found between families who had had older children go through kindergarten (N = 20; 90% considered academic factors) and those who did not (N = 6: 83% considered academic factors.) Notably, of parents who had 2 or more older siblings (27% of sample, N=7), 100% considered their child's academic skills as part of the decision (see Figure 1.2 for detail). This may be due in part to better understanding of the expectation of schools, where academic factors are emphasized. Finally, of parents of 4 year olds, 60% (N = 5) of them considered academic factors with 95% of parents of 5 year olds (N = 19) and 100% of parents of 6 year olds (N = 2) considering academic factors.

Factors Considered: Socio-emotional Factors

Second only to academic factors, children's socio-emotional readiness was most frequently remarked upon by parents, with 19 of 26 reporting that this was considered. This category was challenging to code as the questions, "Did you consider your child's social skills? If so, what thoughts did you have about them?", were designed to get purely "social" skills like sharing or turn taking but I found that some respondents seemed to include what I would characterize as emotional factors or self help skills in their responses. For example:

She wanted Mom to be with her, she had been in a child enrichment center her last year of preschool and she had done fine academically, got along fine with teachers, but separation continues to be an issue, she does not like it when I leave her. (Mrs. Sutton, 7/10/04)

To address this range of responses, this category encompasses a range of behaviors including social and emotional behaviors. It also includes children's self help skills such as being able to tend to own needs in dressing or bathrooming.

Parents feeling their child was ready for kindergarten often indicated some concern over socioemotional skills, although their concern was mitigated by either reassurance from a preschool teacher, as with the first parent quoted here, or by reflections on the child's past experiences or behaviors, as with the second parent quoted.

Well, at home he has fits sometimes and [he'll] get mad and yell at us, but the teacher said not once did she ever have to get after him or was he in timeouts. So I thought maybe he was just playing us. If he knew at school that it was time, you know, to do the school thing. So I had to consider that. (Mrs. Mosher, 7/22/04)

Being shy, I kinda worried a little about that, but, um but I know that she usually does well when she, ya know, gets comfortable. (Ms. Mills, 10/4/04)

Responses in other categories such as physical development, discussed later, also indicate a long term interest in children's success in social situations.

Not all families reported this as a consideration, however. Among parents of 4 year olds, 60% (N = 3) of them considered socio-emotional factors with 74% of parents of 5 year olds (N = 14) and 100% of parents of 6 year olds (N = 2) considering socio-

emotional factors. There was little difference in consideration of this factor by gender of child. Among families with boys, 78% (N=7) reported having considered socio-emotional factors. While among families with girls, 71% (N=12) reported this as a considered factor. Families whose children were enrolled in Head Start were far more likely to consider socio-emotional factors than families whose children were not enrolled in Head Start, with 90% (N=9) and 63% (N=10), respectively, reporting having considered this factor. You may recall that among parents of children with two or more older siblings that 100% (N=7) of them considered academic skills. Among this same group, only 57% (N= 4) considered socio-emotional factors. Contrasting this with the six families with no older siblings, we find 83% (N= 5) of those families considered academic skills. The same percentage considered socio-emotional skills as part of their decision. It appears that the influence of some parents' experience with their older children's schooling has bearing on what they consider relevant. As before, no statistical significance was noted.

Factors Considered: Birth Date

I think...you're hard pressed to find a kid that's not ready to go to kindergarten, ya know? When parents are like, 'Oh, they're ready! Oh they're ready!' but I always look at down the road when they're thirteen, ya know? And if they're immature, it doesn't show when they're five or they're four. It shows when they're older and if they're the youngest. I worry about down the road if they were too young. I have a September baby who will be staying home when he is five. But my March kids...so I really look at age first... (Mrs. Carson, 07/19/04)

This parent was concerned about how the child's age would locate him at the bottom or top of his class's age line up – not so much now but later on in schooling. This factor was discussed by 17 of the 26 families. This factor is actually one that is often mentioned along with other issues, such as the child's size or maturity. In short, birth date can be simple or complex but certainly oft considered.

Among parents of boys, 78% (N= 7) considered birth date a factor, whereas only 59% (N= 10) of parents of girls characterized birth date as relevant to their decision making. Among parents of 4 year olds, 80% (N = 4) of them considered birth date with 58% of parents of 5 year olds (N = 11) and 100% of parents of 6 year olds (N = 2) considering birth date. Only 50% (N= 5) of the Head Start families and 75% (N= 12) of non-Head Start families considered the child's birth date, (not statistically significant). There was no notable difference between families with older siblings 67% (N = 13) and families without older siblings, 67% (N = 4), in considering their child's birth date.

Factors Considered: Advice from Others

This area represents the most striking difference among families. Some families reported seeking out the advice of everyone they could think of: family, friends, the child's preschool teacher, other educators they knew, while other families reported not having discussed their decision with anyone at all. It is important to clarify that there were two different, yet similar questions in the protocol. One addresses advice from others and the other asked if the respondent discussed the decision with others. The focus of this section is on identified "advisors" not just people with whom the respondent conversed about the decision. Figure 1.3 provides data about information sources reported by respondents.

Family. In this study, the activation of resources across groups is examined. While one might think that family would be a consistently activated resource, it actually falls below other factors, with only 46% (N=12) of respondents indicating family as a factor considered. Even within the “Advice from Others” category, family advice falls short of friends’ and is only slightly ahead of teachers’.

That does not lessen the influence of the advice when present, however. One family reported that her mother’s advice was “pretty much what I considered”. Other families may also have strongly considered advice from family members but that was not evident in the interviews. Moreover, although not reported by families directly, within advice from family there may be an influence of the culture of families around the decision.

While analyzing by gender, only 41% of the families with girls (N= 7) considered advice from family while 55% of families with boys (N= 5) reported considering this, though not statistically significant. Among parents of 4 year olds, 40% (N = 2) of them considered advice from family with 47% of parents of 5 year olds (N = 9) and 50% of parents of 6 year olds (N = 1) considering family advice. Fifty-five percent of families with older siblings (11 of 20 total families with older siblings) indicated they had considered advice from family, while only 17% (N=1) of families without older siblings sought that advice. Of the Head Start families, just 30% (N=3) indicated they considered advice from family while 56% of their non-Head Start counterparts (N=9) reported considering familial advice. Again the variation was not statistically significant.

Friends. Of the 26 families in the study, 58% (N=15) report discussing their decision with their friends, making this the most common group with whom families

talked about the decision. The role of friends' advice varies across families. Some indicate that the only advice they sought was from friends, others sought advice from other sources as well. Most sought-after was the advice of friends who had either recently gone through the decision-making process or were making it at the same time as the respondent.

Of the 15 families reporting that they consulted with friends, 33% (N=5) chose to keep their children out of kindergarten. We cannot draw from the data exactly what advice was given, however, only that they discussed the decision with their friends.

Of the fifteen families in this category, 7 were families with boys and 8 were families with girls. That is, of families with boys, 78% of them considered advice from friends, while only 47% of families of girls did. Among parents of 4 year olds, 60% (N = 3) of them considered advice from friends with 58% of parents of 5 year olds (N = 11) and 50% of parents of 6 year olds (N = 1) considering friends' advice. Neither of these previous two categories, child gender and age, yielded statistical significance in relation to advice from friends. There appear, however, to be sharp differences among the Head Start families and the non-Head Start families. Of the non-Head Start families, 81% (N=13) report having discussed their thinking with friends while only 20% (N= 2) of the Head Start families had such discussions (Fisher's Exact Test = .004). This finding is confounded with family structure in that neither the single parent families nor the extended families (families in which parents were living with other adult relatives) were inclined to talk with friends about their decision $\chi^2(2, N = 15) = 5.720, p = .057$. Both of those family structures fall exclusively within the Head Start group. Instead, it would appear that the Head Start families were more reliant on the next category for their

advice. Families with older siblings were also a bit more inclined to consider friends' advice than families whose oldest child was eligible to attend, although not at a level of statistical significance. Fifty percent (N=3) of first time families considered friends' advice while 60% of families with older children considered this factor.

Preschool teacher. While most children experienced a preschool year before age eligibility, several families when asked, "Did you consider advice from others?" did not name the preschool teacher as among the people consulted. In fact, there seems to be an inverse relationship with the amount of schooling parents had and the likelihood that a parent would consult with the preschool teacher. However, it should be noted that more families may have consulted with the preschool teacher than reported or realized it when asked directly about seeking advice from others. In four cases, the parent discusses having a conversation with the teacher that could be considered "consultative" elsewhere in the interview, yet responded negatively when asked if she considered advice from others. Two of those cases are among Head Start families and two are among non- Head Start families. For example:

(When asking about sending her child to kindergarten:)

Interviewer: What did you think about when you made that decision?

Mother: Well, I based it on the evaluations. They did two a year at Head Start. That helped me decide. Plus I talked to his teacher and she said that he did really good. She never had no problems. He only missed three days of school the whole year. He was the one with the best attendance and she said his social skills were really good. He interacted with other kids so that helped a lot. Plus I seen him at

home, the way he would do things and help other people, so I thought he's ready for kindergarten.

(After asking about individual factors:)

Interviewer: Okay. And have you considered advice from other people?

Mother: Umm. Not really. (Mrs. Mosher, 7/22/04)

Even though she clearly had consulted his teacher (and was coded as such), this mother didn't perceive the conversations with the teacher as "advice". It may be that the parent viewed the conversation as a fact-finding discussion rather than "advice" per se.

Other families report weighing heavily the advice from their child's preschool teacher(s). In one case, advice from the child's preschool teacher appeared to be the greatest or only influence on the family. For example:

Interviewer: What did you think about [when you made that decision]?

Mother: Just the way she did in Head Start. Um, and what they've told me. I've met with them an awful lot so I knew she was ready. (Ms. Mills 10/4/04)

More often, the preschool teacher is one of several influences on the parent's decision as in the example in the next section.

In total, ten of the families reported having considered advice from the preschool teacher. Parents of boys 44% (N=4) were slightly more likely to consider preschool teacher's advice than parents of girls, 35% (N=6). Among parents of 4 year olds, 40% (N = 2) of them considered advice from a preschool teacher with 37% of parents of 5 year olds (N = 8) and 50% of parents of 6 year olds (N = 1) considering family advice. Head Start families were more likely to discuss their decision with a preschool teacher (50%, N = 5) than their non Head Start counterparts (31%, N = 5) although no statistical

significance is noted. Families having already made the decision with older children (40%, N=8) were more likely to have consulted the preschool teacher than families whose first child was entering kindergarten (33%, N=2), again with no statistical significance.

Other Teachers. In 10 cases, families talked with other educators in addition to or instead of the child's preschool teacher. For example, consider this mother who talked with her daughter's preschool teacher, the prospective kindergarten teacher, the mother's sister and sister-in-law, who are elementary school teachers:

It seems I know a lot of teachers. So, one of my patient's moms is a high school teacher and I actually talk to her quite a bit and she really said go with your gut. Um she gave me a totally different side. She teaches like ninth, she must teach tenth and so, tenth grade math and I said, "Okay, so tell me some of your best students. How old are they?" And she said, 'Interestingly enough, they really are the younger ones.' So she said the opposite of the coin. And she said, ' Ya know,, don't worry too much about it, I have these kids that do really, really well and they are very young, so, she was again very, um, very good at presenting both things. My sister and sister-in-law were pretty well, give her the extra year, so it was interesting to be able to talk to her, too. And a high school teacher at that!

(Mrs. Sutton, 7/10/04)

However the consultation was configured, ten families saw the input of educators other than the preschool teacher worthy of consideration. This number, only 38% of the informants, seems low.

There were some differences within this category however, although none of statistical significance. Of families with boys, five of the seven (71%) report having considered advice from other teachers while only five (29%) of the 17 families with girls considered this input. Among parents of 4 year olds, 60% (N = 3) of them considered advice from a teacher with 32% of parents of 5 year olds (N = 6) and 50% of parents of 6 year olds (N = 1) considering teacher advice. Additionally, of the 10 Head Start families, only three (30%) considered advice from teachers other than their preschool teacher while seven of the 16 non-Head Start families, or 43%, considered this. Surprisingly, there was little difference in accessing non-preschool teachers among the group of families with older siblings and those without older siblings, 40% (N=8) and 33% (N= 2) respectively. One might expect families who have greater access to teachers through the schooling of their older children might consider advice from that quarter but that does not appear to be true here.

As outside sources, it would seem that educators are not perceived by many families to be a resource when making the decision. Families and friends are viewed as a significantly greater resource for some families.

Factors Considered: Knowledge of school/teacher

Many parents (73%, N=19) in this study were familiar with the school and/or teacher their child would be with for the upcoming year. For some, this knowledge came from having previous children in the school (62%, N=16). For others, they carefully interviewed and selected the school and teacher their child would have. Several families commented specifically on the sense of relief they felt with this knowledge:

[The child's older sister] went there and then we went to the pre-registration and so they showed us some of the classrooms there and I feel it was very helpful that we got a letter from her classroom teacher which is actually addressed to [child]. That made her feel really good to get mail and it was the teacher describing what their goals were and a list of things they could bring to school and be helpful, and pictures of her and the teaching assistants, so I thought they did a great job there.

(Mr. Davis, 8/28/04)

Another family had a different take on familiarity with the school, "...and her brother's gonna be there. That's a big factor for me." (Mrs. Cooley, 7/21/04)

In part, familiarity with the school might tie into a family's sense of control over the situation. Understanding the expectations might offer more assurance that they can navigate the system successfully. Of course, having other children already go through a program would reinforce that as well.

Factors Considered: Physical development

A total of nine families (35%) indicated they considered their child's physical development. Some worried about their children being small or uncoordinated in the kindergarten year while others consider physical development as it relates to some future experience. The only child whose parents indicated that he had poor fine motor control was enrolled in a developmental kindergarten. (Parents of the little girl discussed earlier, who were concerned about her writing, didn't seem to think of it as a physical issue so much as an academic one.) His parents believed that behavior and the fact that he was a boy of small stature linked to his social acceptance. Not all relevant factors were about

the child's imminent kindergarten experience. Two of the families (22%) referred to considering current issues as they relate to future issues. For example:

We considered his size compared to other kids. That was an issue. My husband was a late bloomer. Um, and so in high school he very much looked like a junior high kid and so we considered that that could be in his [their son's] future. And that on top of being the youngest child in the class, he could quite possibly be a very small child in the class come junior high or high school. That was a concern for us because at this age it doesn't seem to matter much, but in future years, it will probably be something that will matter. (Mrs. Linn 8/19/04)

Another family shared this:

I had a neighbor who was a teacher in, I think, middle school or high school, and she said, 'It's not so much the age of kindergarten. You know, are they ready now?' She goes, 'Think about in high school. They're gonna be a year behind everybody. A year behind emotionally, physically. Do you want him to be the smallest kid on the team and he can never do anything like the other kids? Or is she gonna be underdeveloped from the other girls?' Based on, you know, all of it, so I've kind of thought of that with all my kids. (Mrs. Andersen, 8/21/04)

Each family is evaluating the child standing before them for their kindergarten readiness but they are also trying to predict the child's future, ten years hence, with respect to physical factors. Those factors, which on the surface appear to be concerned simply with the child's birth date and future size, are actually more complex, encompassing perceived future social relationships.

Of the 9 families reporting that physical size entered into their thinking, 6 of those were families with boys. Fully 67% (N=6) of the families with boys thought about physical size while only 17% (N=3) of the families with girls considered this. Among parents of 4 year olds, 60% (N = 3) of them considered physical development with 32% of parents of 5 year olds (N = 6) and no of parents of 6 year olds (N = 0) considering physical size. There was little difference among Head Start families and non-Head Start families with 33% (N=3) and 37% (N=6), respectively, reporting this as a factor considered. Of the 6 families with no older siblings, and therefore less experience with school, 3 reported considering physical size as part of their decision. This represents a much higher percentage (50%) than the 6 of 20 families (30%) with older siblings who considered this factor. No statistical significance is noted for any of these groups, however.

Again, while the families reported considering their child's physical size, it is not certain if they are thinking about the child's current size or contemplating some interconnection of factors such as current size, future size, and their relationship to other factors such as social skills. Some families were explicit in discussing this but others may have responded only to the size portion of the question while considering, but not mentioning, size as it relates to social skills, or some other factor.

Factors Considered: Previous Redshirting in the Family

The presence of other family members having been redshirted is a factor for some. Five families (19%) in the study had family members, other than the focal child, that had been redshirted. Of those families, only one redshirted the focal child. This mother, who enrolled her child in a developmental kindergarten, reported that her own

mother had always said, "Don't start them too soon." (Mrs. Sanders, 8/12/04) This woman had herself been held out until she was nearly six before beginning kindergarten. As a result of her own experience, she saw no stigma attached to delayed entry and, in fact, perceived it as a positive contribution to her child's success.

Of the five families who had previous redshirting in the family, four of them were families of girls; all of them had older siblings; four of the families were Head Start families and the one who redshirted her own child, a five year old son, was a non Head Start parent. Only one of the children was four with the rest five year olds. There were no relationships of statistical significance.

Factors Considered: Parents' Experience with Schooling

As with the parent quoted earlier regarding his own struggles with his size in high school, some parents remember their own experiences when making choices for their young children. This was true of families that had both positive and negative experiences. Sixteen of the families (62%) indicated that they were influenced by their memories of their own schooling. Three of those (19%) were negative experiences and thirteen (81%) were positive.

Mrs. Jarvis, who decided to start their son in their home school kindergarten curriculum, indicated:

Well, early elementary, I well, hmm, I thought it was a difficult experience as far as, you know I didn't really do well in a lot of subjects....Some kids, there's some hereditary issues so I wanna make sure my kids have a good experience. (8/13/04)

Her perception of how best to do that rested in providing the experience herself. As a college graduate, she perhaps felt capable of providing a more positive schooling

experience for her child than she could count on him having in the local public school. Contrast that view with Mrs. Sharif who had immigrated to the United States and had mixed experience with schooling, the mother having dropped out of high school and the father having earned a college degree in his home country. The mother, who looked forward to starting her child in the local public school, had hopes for a different experience for her son:

I hope he's not like me! 'Cause I drop out of school in my country. I then finished tenth grade over here...So I wish the best for him, like finish college, everything.

(8/30/04)

In her comment, "I hope he's not like me" she seems to be saying that the difficulty that caused her to drop out of school was not a factor of the school, but of herself. So in her "wish" for "the best", she is sending him to public school, in the hopes that he is more capable or successful than she was. Both families want positive experiences for their sons but each family has different views of the role of kindergarten entry age in the path toward their child's success. Mrs. Jarvis seemed wary of public school after her own difficult personal history, and chose to home school their child, at least for kindergarten. Mrs. Sharif also had a difficult history, but seems to have faith that the public school would be the right choice for her child. Both were influenced by their own experiences and decided to start kindergarten for their sons but made different choices about what kind of kindergarten experience to provide.

Families with positive experiences were similarly influenced. Some who had wonderful experiences wanted to assure the same for their children. This manifested itself in one parent sending her child to kindergarten after interviewing 26 different elementary

schools to find the best fit for her child and another keeping her child in his preschool for another year before sending him to a kindergarten experience.

Overall, parents of four year olds were more likely to consider their own experience than parents of older children, $\chi^2(4, N = 15) = 14.163, p = .007$. In fact, four of five parents (80%) with four year olds considered their own experience in school while only 12 (57%) of parents of 5 year olds did. It should also be noted here that the youngest children in the sample also were less likely to have older siblings and were more likely to be enrolled in Head Start, so it is difficult to know if the child's age or some other factor or factors determine whether parents consider their own experiences in school.

Differences in Decision Making by Decision Made

As indicated earlier, at one point, either in the current year or in the previous year, 6 of the 26 (23%) families made the decision to withhold their child when eligible to begin school. These 6 families differed from the other 20 families in the study in several ways, although none were statistically significant. The first difference was that all six children had birthdays in the final third of the year, making them among the youngest children in their eligibility year. Secondly, all six come from two parent families. None enrolled in Head Start. All had had previous experience with some other environment for care or preschool outside the home. Additionally, all six families were familiar with the school where their children would go.

To contrast, of the 20 families that did not choose to redshirt their children, 65% (N=13) of the families were two parent families. Only 75% (N=15) of these families had children who had experienced some other care or preschool outside the home and only

80% (N=16) of them were familiar with the school where they would eventually send their child. Again, none of the 10 Head Start families redshirted their children.

As a group, the families who chose to delay entry for their children approached the decision differently than the families that chose to send their children in the first year eligible. These differences were reflected in the consideration of individual factors considered as well as how they came to the decision. For example, every redshirting family considered birth date, but only 55% (N=11) of non-redshirting families considered this factor. Redshirting families also considered their own experience with schooling more than non-redshirting families did (80% (N=4) v. 55% (N=11)). They considered academic factors less than non-redshirting families (67% (N=4) v. 95% (N=19)) and social factors more (83% (N=5) v. 70% (N=14)). Their children's physical size was more frequently considered by redshirting families (50%) (N=3) than non-redshirting families (30%) (N=6).

Perhaps most interesting is the way the redshirting families approached the decision-making process. Fully 83% (N=5) of the redshirting families reported considering advice from others while only 40% (N=8) of the non-redshirting families did. Discussing the decision with a teacher was important to 67% (N=4) of the redshirting families but only 30% (N=6) of the non-redshirting families. All of the redshirting families indicated that they knew other families making the decision while only 55% (N=11) of the non-redshirting families knew others with children the same age. Surprisingly, given the previous results, only 50% (N=3) of the redshirting families reported familiarity with the potential kindergarten. Contrast that with 80% (N=16) of the families who sent their children the first year eligible.

Overall, the redshirting families considered more factors in a tighter range than their non-redshirting peers. The redshirting families considered between five and ten factors while the non redshirting families considered between 2 and nine factors. For the redshirting families, not only was the outcome different, but the process was as well.

Diversity in Factors Considered Across all Families

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the data is how different the influences on individual families' decision-making are. Some families were highly and exclusively influenced by a single factor such as the advice of the preschool teacher. Other families were influenced by a whole host of factors.

A case of multiple factors.

Mrs. Collins, a single mother rearing her children in her parents' home, reports that her daughter Amelia, has two older brothers. Like her brothers, Amelia has gone to Head Start for two years but is now looking forward to attending kindergarten. Amelia is four.

Her mother describes her as a social little girl that loves to play both active and quiet things. She enjoys being read to and writing. When asked what she considered when deciding what to do with Amelia in the kindergarten year, Mrs. Collins said that she considered that having been in Head Start for two years that she thought Amelia was ready for "deeper learning" in kindergarten. She considered that Amelia is taller than many children her age (her dad is 6' 4") and that she also thought

...as much as she sits down and writes and can be very attentive and the wanting to learn and that, I knew she was ready. And she can grasp what you tell her, so, I think that's a big step if they're willing to learn. Take it when you can get it!

‘Cause they’re like a sponge (laughs)! If they’re willing to listen, give ‘em as much as they want as long as they’re willing to sit there. (9/8/04)

She additionally indicates that a big factor in her thinking was that Amelia would have the same teacher, a man, that her brothers have had. Evidently Amelia has expressed that she really likes this teacher and Mrs. Collins was able to put in a request to be placed in his classroom.

She also considered waiting a year, as she had with one of her sons but dismissed it as Amelia has a June birthday and is already tall so Mrs. Collins thought that would make her stand out as both too tall and too old.

Mrs. Collins reports having considered several factors here but reports that the strongest factor for her was the comfort her daughter felt with the known teacher. Other families in the study reporting considering multiple factors may also have weighed some more heavily than others but did not report that.

A Case of a Single Factor

In another family, this one headed by a single mom, Ms. Kincaid, has a very different view of the decision. Her daughter Bailey has been enrolled in Head Start for the last two years while Ms. Kincaid completes her degree in nursing. Bailey’s grandparents have regularly provided child care for her since her birth. Bailey is the younger of two sisters. Her mom describes her this way:

Bailey and Britney are like night and day. They’re totally different, but Bailey is smart. She catches on. But she’s kinda stubborn and she’s more relaxed in her learning, where Britney is eager to learn and always asking questions. Bailey, you have to sit her down and say, ‘Okay, let’s do your ABCs.’ When she learns it, she

likes to show off, but sometimes it's a struggle to get her to actually sit down and focus on learning if it's something she's not interested in learning. (8/29/04)

Ms. Kincaid goes on to describe Bailey as very verbal and comfortable talking with anyone, including confronting people in the grocery store that might cut the line. Her mother also describes Bailey as short statured, getting her size from both parents, but very athletic. She's skilled in fine motor tasks such as cutting as well. While she enjoys active games, she is most fond of quiet activities such as dress up and being read to. Her favorite books and TV shows both feature Dora the Explorer.

When asked what she considered when deciding whether to send Bailey to kindergarten, Ms. Kincaid replied,

Well, I never really thought there was an option of not sending her. And so, I just, I really didn't think about it. It was like, 'she's going.' The choice is gonna be is she going to [a local school] or a different school? That was more of what my decision process was. It was never am I gonna send her or am I not gonna send her.

Ms. Kincaid reports that all she really considered when making this decision was Bailey's birth date. Having sent Britney to school when she was five, Ms. Kincaid thought that was what everyone was doing. Ms. Kincaid indicates that she feels that though she was familiar with her other daughter's school, Bailey's school will be different since Britney's school has closed. She made a point to attend the school's open house to learn more about the school. She indicates though, that she's not worried. She thinks Bailey will do fine, but she plans to be vigilant about the schooling her girls receive. Ms. Kincaid feels like her own schooling was substandard and wants to make

sure she “stays on top” of what goes on with her children to avoid the problems that she had.

While Ms. Kincaid appears a no less caring and interested parent, the decision making she reports is less complex than other families. In her mind, she was really only considering one thing, her child’s age eligibility. It appears, though, she is investigating and monitoring other aspects of the schooling opportunities.

Both of these cases reflect thoughtful consideration but they vary in the reporting of how many factors were considered. Of course it may always be difficult to parse out exactly how many factors a parent considers as they themselves may be uncertain.

Differences in Factors Considered by Child Gender

Recall that previous research has found that parents of boys are twice as likely to redshirt their sons as parents of girls (West, Meek & Hurst, 2000). Respondents in this study align with those findings as only parents of boys reported even considering gender when making the entry decision (see Figure 1.4.) The two respondents in this study who considered gender opted to redshirt their child either in the current year or in the previous year by placing their sons in a developmental kindergarten program. One family referred to future ramifications of being a young boy and another simply referred to variance in development across boys and girls, with girls coming out ahead. (Interestingly, the parents of the two redshirted girls in the study did not report taking gender into consideration when making their kindergarten plans.)

While only two parents reported that gender was a factor in their decision-making, there were some differences in others factors considered that varied by whether the child was a boy or girl (see Table 1.4 for a summary of findings by gender). Most

dramatically, 66% (N=6) of the parents of boys considered physical size a factor while only 18 (N= 3) of parents of girls found size relevant (Fisher's Exact Test = .028). Conversely, academic skills were important to only 78% (N= 7) of parents of boys while they were important to 94% (N=16) of parents of girls (not statistically significant). Additionally, there are gender differences regarding the significance of the child's birth date, as discussed previously.

Differences across Head Start and Non-Head Start Families

In many of the factors considered, there were differences noted in the way that Head Start families approached the decision making process and in the way that non-Head Start families considered the decision. This section will summarize those differences. Table 1.5 illustrates this summary.

By definition, families eligible for services through Head Start were at poverty level. While non-Head Start families were not asked directly about their income level one can surmise that it was higher as they were enrolled in preschool programs based on tuition. In addition to economic differences, the aggregate education level varied for each group with all of the 16 non-Head Start families identifying at least one parent with college degree and only one of the ten Head Start families having a member who graduated college. All the non-Head Start families were two parent households while in the Head Start group, 40% (N=4) of the families were headed by a single parent, 40% (N=4) were two parent households and 20% (N=2) had extended family living with them. No families enrolled through Head Start reported having other family members redshirted while 38% (N=6) of non-Head Start families had a family member (other than the focal child) redshirted previously.

The children themselves differed in that 70% (N=7) of the children enrolled in Head Start were in the youngest half of the sample while only 38% (N=6) of the non-Head Start children were in this younger half. Of the Head Start children, 7 (70%) had an older sibling while 13 (81%) of the non-Head Start children had older siblings.

Of the families in my study, all of the Head Start families (N = 10) sent their children in the first year they were eligible while only 62% of the non-Head Start families (N = 10) sent their child at the earliest possible time. Factors considered varied across groups, as demonstrated in Figure 1.4. When making this decision, 90% (N= 9) of Head Start families considered academics while 88% (N=14) of the non-Head Start families did. Head Start families were slightly more inclined (90 %, N= 9) to consider social skills than their non-Head Start counterparts where only 63% (N=10) considered social skills. Many fewer Head Start families, 50% (N=5) than non-Head Start families, 75% (N=12), considered their child's birth date as part of their decision. Similar numbers from each group 30% Head Start (N= 3) and 37% non-Head Start (N=6) considered their child's physical size.

The most striking differences were the differences in influence of others, see Figure 1.3 for detail. Only 30% of Head Start families (N= 3) considered advice from others as a factor while 63% (N=10) of the non-Head Start families considered such advice. The figure illustrates that while families in both groups discussed the decision with others, who they discussed it with varied by group, with Head Start families more likely to have discussed the decision with their child's preschool teacher than the non-Head Start families (50% v. 38%, N=5 for each), and less likely to have discussed their decision with families (30% v. 63%, N=3 and N=10 respectively). In spite of their

children being in classes with other same-age children, only 30% (N= 3) of the Head Start families indicated that they knew other families making the same decision, while 88% (N=14) of non-Head Start families knew other people going through this process.

Again, none of the children enrolled through Head Start were redshirted, while six of the non-Head Start children were redshirted either in the current or previous year.

Discussion

For many families, the decision to send or not send their age-eligible child to kindergarten is anxiety producing. On the surface, it might appear that some see the decision as fraught with import while others seem to take the decision lightly without much consideration. Upon deeper examination, this study indicates that each family weighed one or more factors and every family seemed to be concerned with their child's potential for success.

This study reveals that families consider a variety of factors. These factors include academic factors, social factors, physical factors, the child's birth date, whether or not others were redshirted in the family, the child's gender, advice from others (including the preschool teacher, family, friends, another teacher), the parent's own experience with school, familiarity with the prospective school, and in one case, whether the child thought she was ready for school.

Analyses revealed that factors were considered with differing frequency by subgroups, specifically by gender of the child, age of the child, presence of older siblings, and enrollment in Head Start, as well as by the decision made. For example, families whose children were enrolled through Head Start were more likely to have discussed the decision with their preschool teacher than other families did. Families who redshirted

their children were far more likely to have considered their child's birth date than the other families. Families with boys considered physical size more than families with girls.

Recall that the conceptual framework for this study is based on Bourdieu (1977) and Lamont and Lareau's (1988) work on cultural capital. Traditionally, cultural capital relates to class differences in activation of resources. There do appear to be some differences in factors considered between class-related groups in this study – specifically between families whose children are served by Head Start and families who do not qualify or at least did not chose to enroll their children in Head Start. However other group differences are seen as well, specifically in gender. For example, parents of boys were less likely to consider socio-emotional factors than parents of girls, regardless of Head Start enrollment or not.

Lamont and Lareau's (1988) notion of activation of cultural capital seems relevant to these findings in that significant differences exist among Head Start and non-Head Start families in the degree to which they sought the advice of others (a way of activating cultural capital) when making the kindergarten entry decision. Although both Head Start families and non Head Start families report discussing the decision with others (60% of Head Start families and 75% of non Head Start families), who they discussed the decision with was quite different. With 60% more non-Head Start families than Head Start families discussing the decision with friends, and 30% more non-Head Start families discussing the decision with family, the decision making process in this respect seems very different across the two groups. Head Start families were more reliant on the preschool teacher than any other social influence while the non Head Start families indicated that as the *least* accessed source of advice. The role of social contacts in

decision making seems fundamentally different for each group. The non-Head Start group activates their social connections to process the decision while the Head Start group seldom does. It would seem that the preschool teacher plays a larger role for Head Start families than for non-Head Start families and while this might seem to be an activation of the cultural capital, Head Start's structure of required meetings between teachers and families, minimizes the actual "activation", or agency of the family. In short, the family may or may not have instigated the contact. Regardless of the initiation, the influence is present and while Head Start families reported discussing the decision with few others, fully half of them discussed the decision with the preschool teacher. In light of Head Start's requirement for parent participation in classrooms and family attendance at family education events, a surprisingly small number of Head Start families were aware of other families making the kindergarten decision. Of the seventeen families reporting that they knew others making this decision, only three of them were Head Start families. It may be that Head Start is focusing on connecting parents to their own children through parent night events, but not to other families. This may be worthy of reconsideration, particularly since those families also don't seem to be talking to other friends or family about the decision, either. Interestingly, only 30% of Head Start families report having considered advice from others while actually making the decision.

Findings in group differences by enrollment in Head Start or not, gender, and child's age seem consistent with research reported earlier in this paper regarding differential rates of redshirting for different groups. More importantly, this study reveals differences in the factors considered by these groups. As noted previously, national trends in redshirting seem to favor withholding boys more frequently than girls and for more

affluent families to withhold more frequently than less affluent families. While this study reinforces that assertion, with five of the six children redshirted being boys and all being non Head Start families, this study illuminates that families of boys are considering different things than families of girls and that Head Start families are making the decision with different influences than their non Head Start, possibly more affluent, counterparts. Additionally, although not noted in the previous research, families with older siblings appear to consider some factors differently than families who are making the kindergarten decision for the first time.

In part, this may be related to the way families frame the decision making process. Lakoff (2004) suggests that the way a family frames their understanding of a concept can impact how they receive new, possibly conflicting, information about the concept. If the Head Start families frame the decision to send or not send their children to school as a private matter, they may not seek outside advice, outside influence may not affect their thinking, and/or they may not identify outside influences as affecting their thinking. In other words, the decision is theirs. This ties into the earlier finding that some families received information about their children's development from their child's preschool teacher, and discussed this information in their interview yet, when asked "Did you get advice from anyone?" did not name the preschool teacher as someone consulted. The information may not have been considered "advice." Lakoff suggests that in the cases in which outside influences agree with the family's frame, they don't consider that an influence. Where outside influences do not agree, the influence "bounces off" the frame as irrelevant.

Families' frames of social capital for their children may be the best conception of what is going on in their evaluation of the various factors presented here. Each family has a view of what they want their child to achieve or become later in life, whether that is at the end of kindergarten or in high school. They hold that frame up to the range of factors that might affect that outcome and make their decision with that in mind. For some, there are few relevant factors and for others, many. Each family however, decides based on what they believe is linked to their child's success. This would also explain some of the differences found in the decision making of the families with old siblings relative to those without older siblings. Families with more experience in the school setting may frame success differently than those without previous experience. They evaluate the decision differently based on their view of the social currency needed for academic success.

Limitations of the current study

Although this study elicited data about many family characteristics, there may be other important family characteristics that were missed. For example, the age of parents was not obtained and it became evident over the course of the interviews that there were substantial differences in parents' ages, including what appeared to be significant differences between the Head Start parents' ages and the non-Head Start parents' ages. Future studies might investigate the age of the parent as a factor.

Even using a semi-structured interview approach, it may be that some families considered factors that they did not report because they did not think of it in relation to the questions asked and/or because they felt uncomfortable reporting it. In addition, answers to questions could sometimes be interpreted in more than one way. For example, when asked if they considered a factor, parents may have responded negatively because

they really did not consider the factor at all or parents may have responded negatively because their child showed no deficit in that area and therefore it did not seem to warrant consideration. These mean slightly different things, as in the latter case there is in fact some consideration of the factor, at least enough to dismiss it as a concern. As another example in which there could be multiple ways of interpreting an interview response, consider the following comment: "She's five. It's a no-brainer." This might indicate that there is no decision to make because the family perceives that the child must attend at that age. It might also mean that she is solidly displaying the behaviors of a five year old child and therefore a good fit in their local kindergarten. While I probed when I noticed ambiguous responses such as this, naturally not all were recognized at the time. Future studies could include a procedure for follow-up interviews to clarify ambiguous responses.

Another possible limitation of the study is that the process by which parents were identified for participation in the study varied for Head Start versus non-Head Start settings, with former involving teacher referrals and the latter involving a mix of referrals from teachers, friends, my own colleagues as well as by happenstance in two cases. Perhaps this resulted in a different group of families/children than would have been found if other means of referral had been used. Also, since Head Start teachers were asked specifically for parents who might be willing to be interviewed about their decision, those nominated may have had a better relationship with the teachers than those not nominated and, as a result, the factors regarding discussing the decisions with the teacher may have been over represented among the Head Start families.

Additionally, while the sample is adequate for descriptive statistics and use of quotations, inferential statistics should be interpreted with caution.

Finally, there may well have been issues associated with race or culture that were not captured by this predominantly white sample. (Recall that national trends in retention varied along race lines (West, Meek & Hurst, 2003)). A future study might investigate potential differences by systematically designing the informant pool in terms of race, ethnicity, home language, gender and age of respondent.

Strategies for Supporting Parental Decision Making

The following discussion is based on the assumption that the more informed a parent is about his child's skills and development, the expectation of schools, and the school environment, the better that parent can make choices for that child. In the absence of expert agreement on the "right" decision regarding delaying or beginning kindergarten, there is near agreement among experts from NAEYC to the popular press that individual families should gather information and give careful consideration when making this decision for their individual child (see Keith, 2006; Ihejirika, 2006; Beginner's Guide Staff, 2006; CBS News, 2003, for examples). While there is no scientific evidence that any decisions made are better than a random decision making a process (heads=you go to kindergarten, tails=you stay home another year), there is fairly widespread belief that informed choices are better than uninformed ones. That being said, it is important to note that while the families in this study may have varied in the number of factors considered, there is no reason to believe that more factors considered leads to better decision making. The differences in decision making does tell us that families approach the decision in different ways and that perhaps offering more ways to gain information may reach more

families. The following recommendations may assist schools and families in making the best choice for their incoming kindergarteners.

In light of the broad range of factors that families consider and the variance of factors across families, educators should consider a multi-faceted approach to discussing kindergarten entry with families. It seems evident, based on Thelen's work (2004), that readiness for one class does not necessarily mean readiness for another. Thelen found that kindergarten teachers, even within the same building, had vastly different ways of viewing readiness, even disagreeing on what factors to consider. By preparing families with a single list of behaviors that "Every Kindergartener Should Know", parents receive the false message that there is uniformity in kindergarten and that children can be ready for it. Offering families multiple strategies for making the decision is the most reasonable path. Whenever possible, families should be advised to:

- Meet their child's prospective teacher(s). Several families in this study commented on feeling confident about sending their children to school because they knew the teacher.
- Keep in mind that the results of studies on effects of redshirting are mixed, and in general little difference has been found among early kindergarten entry and delayed kindergarten entry children in either academic or social adjustment after kindergarten. The stakes aren't as high as they may think.

Head Start programs should consider:

- Head Start families were less likely to have consulted anyone about their decision than non Head Start families in all categories ("others", a teacher-not the preschool teacher, family, friends) *except* the preschool teacher category.

Half of families with a child in Head Start discussed their decision with the Head Start teacher. (Contrast that with 31% of non Head Start families discussing the decision with their child's preschool teacher.) It would seem the role of the Head Start teacher in decision making is a significant one.

- Head Start families in this study reported not knowing other families making the decision to send (or not) their child to kindergarten. (Recall that only 30% of the families indicated knowing someone else making the decision.) It seems that while families are required to engage in parent involvement opportunities, these events may not be focused on promoting social connections among families.
- The Head Start families in this study reported that they did not contact other teachers, including their potential kindergarten teachers, when making this decision. As a result, Head Start programs may want to take a more active role in facilitating the relationship with the potential kindergarten.

Schools should be advised to:

- Reach out to prospective families helping them understand the expectations of the kindergartens in their building. Families in this study reported feeling most comfortable with their decision when they knew more about the program.
- Make contact with families, by letter or phone in the summer prior to children's starting kindergarten. Again, families in this study appreciated knowing the teacher in advance of enrollment.

- **Make special efforts to connect with families who are new to the district or are “first time” parents in the school. These parents do not have the experiences of their previous children to help them in their decision-making. Families in this study who did not have older children considered different factors than families who did. Schools wanting to influence decision-making may want to consider these differences.**
- **Recognize that preschool teacher’s influence, while considered by some families in this study, may not carry the same weight as family or friends for some families. Create a network of parents who can advise in-coming kindergarten families about what to expect.**
- **Consider the ramifications of wide ranges of ages in classrooms and whether they want to influence parental decision making one way or the other. If they do want to influence parental decision making, some of the recommendations take on particular importance.**
- **Urge families to consult with preschool teachers and consider their advice as part of the decision. This study reflects variation across groups in parents accessing preschool teachers’ advice.**
- **Work with families, and other agencies, to identify cases in which possible developmental delays would benefit from early intervention. The families in this study who chose to redshirt their children were less familiar with the school than their non-redshirting counterparts and might have missed out on opportunities for their children as a result.**

- Carefully consider creating a kindergarten transition plan to support children's entry (Pianta & Bennett, 1997). This may be especially important for families in Head Start who are seemingly more isolated in their decision-making and may know less about the potential kindergarten.

Policy makers should consider:

- That a child's age is a factor that families consider. (Recall that in this study, 17 of the 26 families considered age when making the decision.) As states are debating the age of entry issue, they would be wise to hear what families have to say on the matter.
- Differential rates of redshirting by different groups reflect differing factors considered. Policy makers interested in influencing rates of redshirting need to consider these factors and the decision making processes.
- Asking that standardized test results be controlled for the child's chronological age at time of testing. Unless and until that occurs, given the relationship between age and test scores, districts with high redshirted populations will be at an automatic advantage in test scores over less affluent districts. Although the numbers in the current study were small, they replicate the larger national findings of more affluent families retaining their children in the eligible year. (Recall that none of the Head Start families in this study retained their children.) Districts with higher populations of affluent families are likely to have classes of older children where districts with families of modest means may have classes of younger children. Given all the other benefits of affluence on education,

this trend adds insult to injury for children in poverty. Controlling testing for age will at least partially level the playing field.

Directions for Future Research

In the course of the interviews, parents discussed their perceptions of their child's readiness for school. The study did not investigate the accuracy of those perceptions by assessing children's abilities and dispositions across academic and social factors. Future studies might investigate parents' ability to accurately evaluate their children's abilities and the subsequent decisions they make for their children's schooling.

This study suggests that a family's social relationships have some influence on their decision making. Further studies to actually track the influence, perhaps asking families to keep a log of any discussions they have with anyone, news items regarding kindergarten entry, speakers they hear present, and so on during the year prior to the kindergarten entry decision. Deeper understanding of those influences, and parents' thoughts on those influences, might yield a more in-depth sense of the decision-making process employed.

In part, the current study focused on families enrolled in Head Start and families that were not enrolled in Head Start. An interesting study might be to examine differences and similarities of Head Start families and low income families not enrolled in Head Start. While some of the non-Head Start families in this study may have been low income, I did not expressly select families to look at that possibility and probably few were. It would be interesting to see what impact, if any, Head Start had on the decision making process when controlled for income.

Other possibilities include longitudinal studies investigating decisions parents made when children were age eligible, and how they made them, and then involving parents and others in re-evaluating those decisions a year, five years or fifteen years later. Studies like these can be correlated to student achievement patterns as well as parental decision making practices.

As suggested previously, a similar study examining differences or similarities in decision making controlled for race, ethnicity, language, etc. would likely yield information that allows for better understanding across groups of families. While the current study gets at some of this thinking, it is limited by its nearly exclusively Euro-American informant pool.

Finally, examination of standardized testing data across states might reveal that some districts' scores are affected by student entry age. In light of the high stakes nature of state testing in many areas, this, more than any other study, may result in efforts to better understand and respond to redshirting.

Conclusion

The kindergarten entry decision is considered by some families to be among the highest stakes decision they can make in the early childhood years. In the families' eyes, unlike choosing the wrong stroller or baby food, this decision has long term ramifications that are difficult to un-do. Once a child starts school he is unlikely to stop. Other families see school entry as just another part of what happens in the early years without many factors to consider. This study points to significant differences in parents' thinking about entry particularly among parents of boys, families who are enrolled in Head Start, and those with older siblings.

These differences may result in differences in children's experiences, class composition, and subsequent student achievement. As education researchers wrestle with the growing differences among achievement results across children, schools, and districts, we have examined many factors that may speak to the issue. But redshirting has received little attention. With respect to this area, researchers need to get off the bench and get into the game.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol for Kindergarten Study

Before the interview, at the initial phone call to set up interview, confirm child's birth date as being on or before December 1, 1999.

Upon meeting family, visit a bit to establish rapport. Be honest in purpose for interview and invite honesty from the family.

TURN ON TAPE.

Thank you, _____ for agreeing to be interviewed for this study. This interview will be audiotaped so that I can analyze the interviews later. Do you agree to be audiotaped?

Please remember that you don't have to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable and you can stop the interview at any time. Are you ready?

{SECTION 1: THE CHILD}

My first questions are about your child. Remind me, when is his/her birth date?

Who lives here with you and your child?

Who does your child play with?

- Are they family?
- Friends?
- What ages are they?

What are your child's academic skills like?

What are your child's social skills like?

How does your child's size compare to others his/her age?

What are your child's physical skills like?

- Is s/he pretty coordinated?
- How does s/he do with running, jumping, climbing, etc.?
- How does s/he do with small motor tasks like holding a pencil or cutting with scissors?

What kinds of things does your child enjoy doing?

- Does s/he choose activities that are active or would s/he rather be quiet?
- Does s/he like to be read to? If so, what kinds of things does s/he like?
- Does s/he watch TV? What are his/her favorite shows?

How does your child handle new situations?

Has your child ever been left somewhere without you? How frequently? Tell me about that environment. How long has s/he been going there?

{SECTION 2: THINKING ABOUT DECISION}

When children are your child's age, people sometimes send them to kindergarten in the fall and sometimes keep them home for another year. Have you considered what you'll do for {child's name} in the fall?

{If sending to school, go on. If not, ask:

What will you do with him/her instead?

What did you think about when you made that decision? OR What kinds of things are you considering while you are making this decision?

PROBE {repeat until parents respond no}:

Is there anything else you have considered in making this decision?

POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP PROBES:

- Did you consider your child's academic skills? If so, what thoughts did you have about them? Did you have any concerns about them?
- Did you consider your child's social skills? If so, what thoughts did you have about them? Did you have any concerns about them?
- Did you consider your child's physical size? What did you think about it?
- Did you consider advice from others? Whose? Have you trusted their advice in the past? How did that turn out?
- Did you consider something I haven't asked about?

- What concerns do you have about them?
- How do you feel about your child's physical size?

How have your friends and family responded to your thinking?

Do you know other families in your family or community that have gone through this process?

- Did you talk with them about their decision?
- What did they share with you?
- What did they do/ are they doing?

{SECTION 3: PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL}

These next questions are about the school where your child will eventually go.

In general, what do you think goes on in kindergarten?

What do you know about the kindergarten your child will attend?

How did you learn about it?

Do you have other children in school? How old were they when they entered kindergarten? What were their experiences like?

What do you think a child really should be able to do when s/he enters kindergarten?

{SECTION 4- PARENT'S BACKGROUND}

These last questions are about you and your own experiences.

How old were you when you entered school?

How was your own transition to school? IF APPLICABLE: Do you know if your spouse/partner had a similar experience?

- Why do you think you had the experience you had?
- Did you consider your own experience when deciding what to do for (child's name)?

When you think about your own schooling experiences, what comes to mind? IF APPLICABLE: Do you know if your spouse/partner had a similar experience?

How much schooling did you have? IF APPLICABLE: How about your spouse/partner?

What do you do now? IF APPLICABLE: What does your spouse do?

{SECTION 5: FINAL THOUGHTS}

Is there anything you'd like to add to help me understand your thinking about sending {child's name} to kindergarten?

Thank you very much for your time! If you think of anything you'd like to add or change, please let me know. Here is my card and you can reach me at anytime.

TURN OFF TAPE.

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Table 1.1

Family Demographic Information

Family Composition			Highest Education in Household				
	1 Adult	2 Adults	Extended Family	High School	Some College	Undergraduate Degree	Advanced Degree
Head Start	40%	40%	20%	30%	60%	10%	0%
Non-Head Start	0%	100%	0%	0%	18.75%	31.25%	50%
Family Employment							
	Unreported	Hourly	Stay at Home	Student	Self-Employed	Management	Professional
Head Start	12%	62%	13%	13%	0%	0%	0%
Non-Head Start	8%	12%	19%	4%	8%	15%	34%

Table 1.2

Demographics of Children in Sample

Gender	Boys 9	Girls 17
Age of Child Median = 5yrs, 2 mos.	5 yrs, 2 mos. and younger 13	5 yrs, 3 mos. and older 13
Type of School	Head Start 10	Non-Head Start 16
Siblings	No older siblings 6	Older siblings 20

Table 1.3

Specific Factors Considered: Academic and Socio-emotional

Academic		Social-emotional	
Comment	Frequency	Comment	Frequency
Alphabet	11	Potty Trained	3
Numbers	11	Separate from Parents	3
Write name	8	Get along with others	2
Colors	7	Self Care	2
Listen	5	Sit	2
Shapes	5	Respect authority	2
Know their own name	3	Dress Self	1
Recognize some words	3	Follow Directions	1
Address	1	Friend	1
Interest in numbers and letters	1	Interact with others	1
Opposites	1	Not be disruptive	1
Phone Number	1	Not be harmful	1

Table 1.3 (continued)

Specific Factors Considered: Academic and Socio-emotional

Sizes	1	Brush Teeth	1
		Respect peoples' property	1
		Sharing	1
		Social things	1
		Tell how they're feeling	1
		Tie shoes	1

Table 1.4

Summary of Findings by Gender

	N		Parents of Girls		Parents of Boys	
	17		9		5.41	
Mean age of child	5.32		78%		7	
	Networking with Others		71%		12	
Discussed with others					7	
Discussed with teacher			35%		6	
Discussed with family			41%		7	
Discussed with friends			47%		8	
Knows others making the same decision			59%		10	
Discussed with preschool teacher			35%		6	
Others in family redshirted			24%		4	
					11%	
					1	
	Factors Considered					
Academic factors considered			94%		16	
					78%	
					7	
Social factors considered			70%		12	
Physical size considered			18%		3	
Birthdate considered			59%		10	
Advice from others a factor			47%		8	
Parents' experience a factor			44%		7	
Reported being familiar with kindergarten			88%		15	
					44%	
					4	

Table 1.5

Summary of Findings by Head Start and Non-Head Start

	N	Head Start	Non-Head Start
Mean age of child		10 5.21	16 5.44
	Networking with Others		
Discussed with others		60%	75%
Discussed with teacher		30%	44%
Discussed with family		30%	63%
Discussed with friends		20%	81%
Knows others making the same decision		30%	88%
Discussed with preschool teacher		50%	31%
Others in family redshirted		0%	38%
	Factors Considered		
Academic factors considered		90%	88%
Social factors considered		90%	63%
Physical size considered		30%	38%
Birthdate considered		50%	75%
Advice from others a factor		30%	63%
Parents' experience a factor		50%	67%
Reported being familiar with kindergarten		70%	75%

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Figure 1.1 Factors considered by families

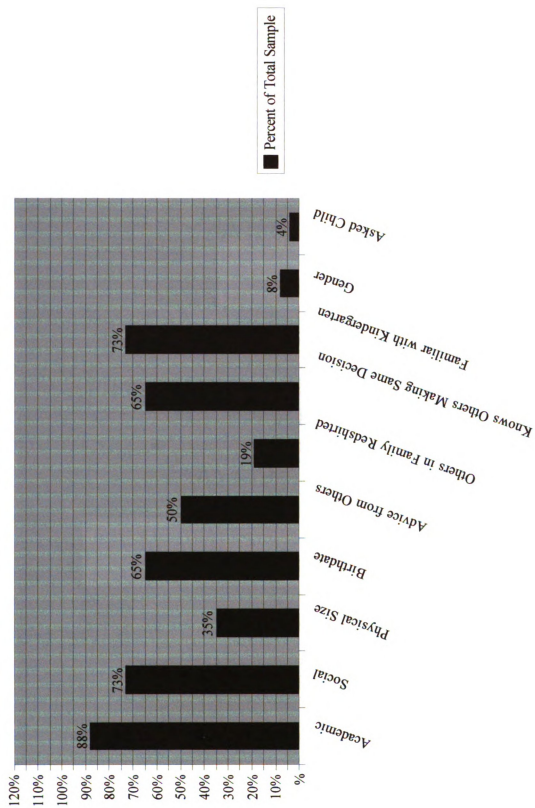


Figure 1.2 Influence of older children in the family on consideration of academic and socio-emotional factors

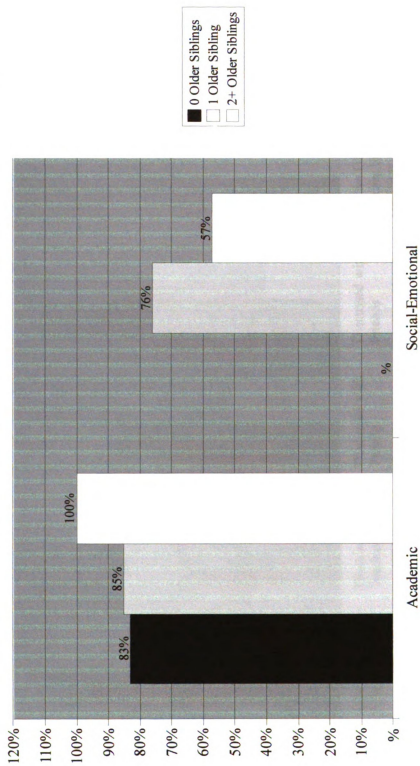


Figure 1.3 The role of social contacts in Head Start and non-Head Start families

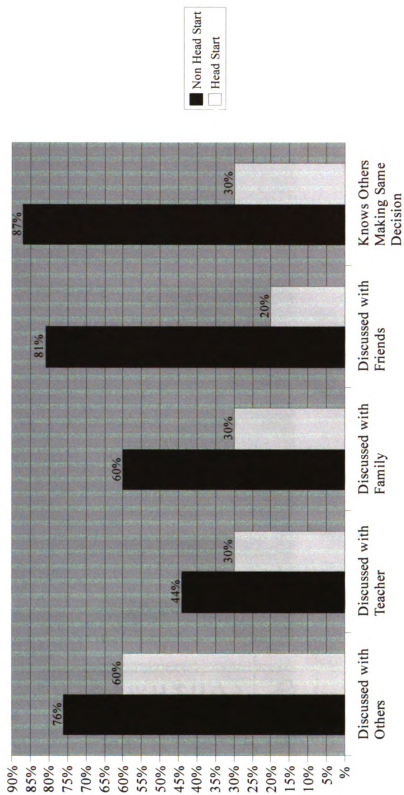
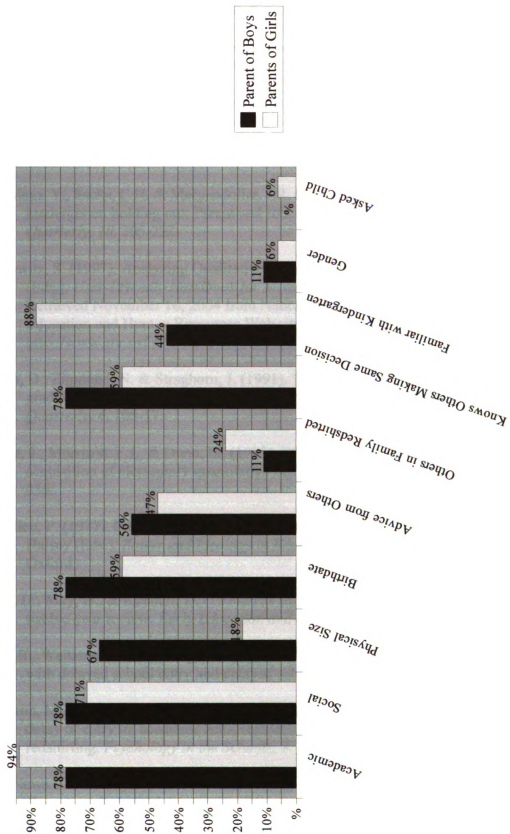


Figure 1.4 Factors considered by parents of boys and parents of girls



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CHAPTER 2

WHAT LIES AHEAD?: PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF KINDERGARTEN

By

V. Susan Bennett-Armistead

Parents make decisions about their children's readiness for kindergarten with varying levels of knowledge of and experience with current kindergartens. In light of recent changes in the demands of kindergartens, parents making this decision may not have an accurate view of the kindergarten their child will enter. This interview study, part of a larger study on parent decision making around kindergarten entry, examines the conceptions of kindergarten held by 26 families whose children will be age eligible to enter kindergarten in the focal year. Some of the families seemed aware that kindergarten has become more academic in nature while others describe the kindergarten their child will enter reflecting little actual knowledge of the kindergarten. The most frequent depictions of more academically focused, less play based kindergartens, appeared in families who had older children, families of boys, families not enrolled in Head Start, and families whose children were among the older half of the sample.

PARENTS' (MIS)CONCEPTIONS OF KINDERGARTEN

When most parents of today's preschoolers were in school, kindergarten looked quite different than it does today. It may have included a rest time, milk and graham crackers, an introduction to the alphabet and writing names, and an outside play time. The kindergartens of 25 years ago have been transformed (Freeman and Hatch, 1989; Hitz and Wright, 1988; Shepard and Smith, 1988). The views of kindergarten of some of those former kindergarteners have not. Not surprisingly, some adults are unaware of the evolution of kindergarten in the last generation. This lack of awareness may have implications for families making decisions about sending their children to kindergarten, about how families prepare their children to attend kindergarten, and about how families interpret information coming from the school about their child's progress (Graue, 1992). For example, families envisioning kindergarten as a welcoming play-based environment might send a child to school sooner than if they thought of the school as structured and imbued with academic rigor. Families that see kindergarten as an academic setting might work with their child to gain certain skills and dispositions that they expect would come in handy in that setting, such as letter identification or counting to 20. Families perceiving kindergarten as preparation for later learning in first grade, and not academic in its own right, might dismiss information about a child struggling academically in the kindergarten year as irrelevant and premature, thereby potentially missing opportunities for early intervention. Families' perceptions of kindergarten may matter, in the decision to have their child enter, how they prepare that child for entry, and how they perceive the experience while the child is enrolled.

A Brief History of Kindergarten

Friedrich Froebel started the first kindergarten in Germany in 1840. The program was designed as an opportunity for young children to explore their world and play materials, which he called “gifts” rather than toys, with gentle support from caring adults (Brosterman, 2002). Froebel’s vision was brought to the Boston area in the late 1800s by Elizabeth Peabody. Here, she advocated for a “genuine kindergarten” that is “a company of children under 7 years old, who do not learn to read, write, and cipher.” Alternatively, “false” kindergartens focused on academics (Weil, 2007). This play based design held steady in many kindergarten classrooms until the mid 1980s.

Change in kindergarten design and focus began in earnest at that time and was met with varying responses. In Spodek’s *Today’s Kindergarten* (1986), he summarizes the debate in the introduction:

Some educators have argued that since most of the children in kindergarten already have had 1 or even 2 years of prior education, kindergarten programs ought to be modified to take this learning into consideration. Kindergartens could become more educationally advanced. What has been taught in the primary grades might now be taught in kindergarten. Others argue that whatever the prior educational experience, kindergarten children as 5-year-olds are not any more mature than they ever have been and the traditional kindergarten programs, which have always served 5-year-olds well, will continue to do so. (p. vii)

Additionally, perhaps in part in response to increasing numbers of children enrolled in full day child care prior to kindergarten, full day kindergartens started to appear around

the state in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Debate raged about the appropriateness of a full day kindergarten for such young children and what the content of such a kindergarten should be. Programs such as Developmental Kindergartens, Beginnergartens, and Young Fives classrooms popped up to offer environments for children perceived as not yet "ready" for the traditional kindergarten.

Take Michigan, where this study took place, as a case. In Michigan, kindergartens have altered significantly in the last 25 years. While today we have kindergarten grade level content expectations (Michigan Department of Education, 2007), in the 1980's, when many of the parents in the current study would have been in kindergarten themselves, no statewide standards existed. Individual districts generated their expectations for kindergarten outcomes. The Michigan Association for the Education of Young Children published *The Developing Kindergarten: Programs, Children and Teachers* (1990) to publicly discuss the issues associated with the changing kindergarten.

Given the range of opinions among experts on the topic, it's not surprising that the Michigan state standards for early education (defined as pre-kindergarten through second grade) were not in place until 1992 (Buch, 2004). These new standards reflected the discomfort of the field in their necessary vagueness, which allowed individual districts to continue to decide full day or half, and what the content should be (Michigan Board of Education, 1992). For example, while there is much space dedicated to what children *can* do, what children are expected to do remained open with language such as, "Children will...understand that oral language can be recorded....begin to develop an understanding of purposes for writing...increase in the understanding of sound/symbol relationships" (Michigan Board of Education, 1992). These standards were written to

address the continuum of development from preschool through second grade rather than with specific expectations children should meet by the end of kindergarten.

Today, graduating kindergarteners in Michigan are expected to know all the letters, upper and lower case, and begin to associate letters and sounds, have a developing sight word bank, understand how books “work”, ability to share their ideas in writing using phonetic spelling, ability to count to 30, Although not named in the Michigan standards, in my experience, schools also continue to expect young children also master such basics as knowing their colors and ability to care for their own dressing and toileting needs. In all, there are 59 language arts standards and 18 math standards for kindergarten (Michigan Department of Education, 2007). We’re way past milk and graham crackers.

Other states have struggled in their own way with these issues. Walsh (1989) chronicles the changing kindergarten in Virginia, noting more children repeating kindergarten, increased use in screening instruments to sort out “readiness”, increase in districts offering a prekindergarten or Young Fives program, and increasing numbers of schools focusing on academic skills. Still other states (22 total) have confronted the change since the 1975 by increasing the school entry age (Saluja, Scott-Little, & Clifford, 2000).

Some might point to the No Child Left Behind Act with its national attention to test scores in the early years of elementary school outcomes as party to the increased attention on academics in kindergarten. In order for third graders to be reading at grade level, second grade, first grade, and kindergarten all become years to prepare to meet this benchmark. The reality is of course that this trend started long before NCLB arrived on the scene. Spodek (1982) documents an erosion of play in kindergartens in favor of

increased attention to academic topics. Walsh (1989) echoes it a full decade before NCLB.

This change in the climate of kindergarten has not gone unnoticed by educators. At the same time, educators are not in agreement about what it means for kindergarten. Nationally, differences in teachers' perceptions of what children need to be ready for kindergarten were noted by Lin, Lawrence, and Gorrell (2003). By investigating 3035 kindergarten teachers in the Early Childhood Longitudinal study, these researchers found that younger teachers were more inclined to describe readiness in academic terms while older teachers focused on social aspects of readiness. There were regional differences as well, with teachers in the south expecting higher academic preparedness than those in other parts of the country. In one study conducted in one of the districts also used in the current study, Thelen (2004) found that even teachers in the same building didn't necessarily agree on what skills children should have when entering kindergarten.

We do not know to what extent parents are also uncertain. Given that the kindergartens they themselves experienced existed a generation ago, they may or may not be in touch with the current climate. As stated earlier, this may matter as families are making choices about sending their children to school, preparing them for success in that setting, and responding to information coming home about the child's success or struggles in that environment.

Why Parents' (Mis)Conceptions of Kindergarten Matter

Just as there is controversy about the content and structure of kindergarten, there is also a raging debate about what it means to be "ready". The issue comes down to a discussion of where the "readiness" lies. The National Association for the Education of

Young Children stance rejects the notion that children must be ready for school, rather, they argue, schools should be ready for children...however prepared or ill-prepared they come. NAEYC in its policy statement argues that “The only legally and ethically defensible criterion for determining school entry is whether the child has reached the chronological age of school entry” (NAEYC, 1990). Parents in the meantime have been making the decision themselves for decades, weighing a variety of factors as discussed in another paper from this study. For several years, the popular press has noted parental anxiety regarding the decision to send their children to kindergarten (see Ihejirika, 2006, for example). My own mother-in-law recounts the worry that her oldest child, with a fall birthday in 1960, wasn’t ready for school. Although she sent him when eligible, she continues to wonder how his life might have been different had she retained him for a year. Would he have had all the issues of poor judgment as a new driver? Would he have stayed in college were he not nearly two years younger than everyone else? Although he eventually did complete college and has proven to be a contributing member of society, the parental guilt still nags at her 40 years after the decision was made.

Other parents might decide to take a different actions to prepare their child quickly, such as buying academic workbooks for their prekindergarten child or enrolling them in enrichment classes, in the hopes that teaching their child academic skills would assist them in preparedness for the kindergarten year. These actions may depend on what they think the kindergarten will be like.

Still other parents, like me, might argue that while their child is ready, the pressure of the school environment is so great that we do not want to prematurely expose our children to it. I withheld my fall birthday child for just that reason. This practice of

delaying entry for a year, called “redshirting” after the practice in athletics, although controversial, appears to be on the rise among some groups as noted by Graue and DiPerna (2000). In particular, affluent, Caucasian, families with boys, families with children born in the later half of the year are more likely to choose delayed entry. The redshirting trend is beginning to cross those old borders however, with up to one in 11 children being delayed (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). Evidently, in some affluent parts of the country, these numbers are much higher. Weil (2007) reports a district in North Carolina with a 26% redshirting rate. It seems that families are increasingly deciding their children are unready for formal school, or perhaps, like me, that school is unready for their children.

This practice has caused concern among some researchers that an increase in the incidence of redshirting, resulting in classrooms of older, seemingly more capable children, might encourage schools to ratchet up kindergarten curricula to look more like first grades, thereby making the situation worse instead of better for children who are less well prepared for school and/or who do begin school when age eligible (Diamond, Reagan, & Bandyk, 2000). In the already ramped up kindergarten, this might leave many more parents in doubt about the readiness of their children...if they are aware of the changes.

As a preschool teacher and administrator for nearly twenty years, I learned firsthand that families regularly worry about when a child should go to kindergarten. Every year, around February, parents would ask, “Do you think _____ is ready for kindergarten?” Curiously, families never asked about the kindergarten itself. It would seem that the other side of the question is what do parents think their children should be

ready for? In other words, what do families think goes on in kindergartens? If school districts are to adequately advise families thinking of sending their children to kindergarten, in part, helping them understand what they are signing up for is essential. It may be that some families continue to view kindergarten as play-based as they themselves may have experienced years ago, not anticipating the level of rigor demanded by many 21st century kindergartens. This raises several concerns. First, is that such families would simply send their children to kindergarten without even investigating the program or seeking advice about readiness. While the National Association for the Education of Young Children would applaud that, children might well get caught in the crossfire of the readiness debate. Second, parents might not be preparing their children for entry into a more academic setting by taking advantage of home- or preschool-based opportunities to promote academic skills such as letter recognition or phonemic awareness through word play or read alouds. Third, once the child is enrolled, communication from the school around academic topics might be read with a jaundiced eye if families perceive the school as departing from what the parents experienced themselves. In short, parents perceiving school as largely social and play based might view comments regarding academics as premature and not feel the need to act on that information.

In an effort to better understand parents' thinking about readiness, this study seeks to explore what families think is happening in contemporary kindergartens.

Research Questions

This study addresses the questions:

- In what ways do families with age eligible kindergarten children describe kindergarten?
- Do the descriptions of kindergarten differ by child demographic information, including presence of older siblings, school district in which the child lives, and whether or not the child attended Head Start?
- In what ways, if any, do families report learning about their children's potential kindergarten programs?

Method

Because the purpose of this study is to understand parents' perceptions about kindergarten, a semi-structured interview methodology was the most appropriate choice (Weiss, 1995). That is, basic, open ended questions were crafted prior to the interview along with a series of possible follow-up probes that allowed for the interview to chart territory that might not have been predicted by the prepared script.

Even though a survey would allow for study of a larger number of informants, interview methodology allowed for more probing, less directive investigation into parents' views of kindergarten. Interview studies in other areas of parent research have yielded many important insights for the field (see Edwards' work on parent stories (1999), Moll's work on families' funds of knowledge (1993), or Bell's work on school choice decision-making (2005) for example).

Context of study

This study was conducted across three school districts in central Michigan, one rural, one suburban and one urban. Within the rural and suburban districts, children could attend an alternative to kindergarten called Developmental Kindergarten, Young Fives or

(deceptively) High Fives, depending on who was describing it. In this alternative, children are expected to complete this readiness year and then proceed to a kindergarten year the next year. (Very rarely, a child will be placed into a first grade program after a developmental kindergarten year. The included schools report that this occurs about as frequently as any other grade skipping, however. Therefore in this study a year of developmental kindergarten taken when the child is in fact age eligible for regular kindergarten is considered “redshirting.”) Additionally, in all the districts, Head Start provided the opportunity for an additional year of Head Start even when the child is age eligible for kindergarten if it was determined by teachers that the child would benefit from such an experience before entering kindergarten. Since the urban district did not offer a developmental kindergarten option for its children, only those families qualifying for Head Start were guaranteed free opportunities to attend an additional year of preschool. In addition to free, public options, there were several private and parochial schools across all the districts that offered admittance to children eligible age for kindergarten. In short, families in the study all had options as alternatives to kindergarten entry for their children. However, families varied in whether they reported awareness of these options.

Informants

A total of 26 families were included in the study. (Twenty nine were interviewed but data was lost on three families when the tapes, although tested in advance, were inexplicably found to be blank.) Each family had a child who was age-eligible to attend kindergarten in the interview year, 2004-2005. For some, this was the second year of age eligibility; for others it was not. The children’s ages ranged from 4.9 to 6.0 at the time of

the interview (mean = 5.27 years). Ten of the families interviewed had been previously enrolled in Head Start, four rural and three each in the suburban and urban districts. Sixteen families either had a child attending a preschool program (other than Head Start) or a playgroup experience, 3 rural, 6 suburban and 7 urban. In total, seven families were in the rural district, nine in the suburban district and ten in the urban district.

Preschool programs were selected at random from a list of licensed centers, contacted by the investigator, and asked for referrals to families whose children were age-eligible to begin kindergarten (N = 5). Referrals of children not enrolled in Head Start came from colleagues of the investigator (N = 3), random meetings of families in fast food locations and community parks (N = 2) and by word of mouth through interviewed families (N = 6). Children enrolled in Head Start were referred by their teachers (N = 10). In each instance, it was emphasized that the children need not have any special characteristic other than age-eligibility for kindergarten and parents willing to discuss their thinking about sending their child to kindergarten. Families were contacted by phone in most cases (with the exception of the two families met by chance) and were told the purpose of the study was to better understand what families consider when making the decision about sending their child to kindergarten. Families were invited to participate in the study and be interviewed. Four families whose children were enrolled in Head Start were contacted and declined involvement. The reason cited was that they didn't think there was a decision to be made that their children were 5 and they were going to school. No other families declined involvement.

Table 2.1 details the variation of demographic characteristics of the participating families. These differences are framed by enrollment or non-enrollment in Head Start.

Two of the families were headed by grandparents rearing their grandchildren. Twenty families had made the kindergarten entry decision with other children in their families. Table 2.2 indicates the demographics of the children in the study. In nine of the families, the focal child was male, in seventeen, female. One family was African American, one Sudanese and Guatemalan, with the remaining being Euro-American.

Data Collection Procedure

I conducted all the interviews. In the cases of two parent (or grandparent) families, they were given the option of including both adults in the interview or having one parent represent them both. Only one family opted for having both adults present. Interviews were conducted wherever the family felt most comfortable or found to be most convenient. Twenty one of the interviews were conducted in the family's home. One was conducted in my office, one at the parent's workplace, two in local coffee shops, and one in the parking lot of a child's tae kwon do lesson.

The interview questions and responses that are the focus of this paper are as follow:

- Designed to explore families' perception of kindergarten: *In general, what do you think goes on in kindergarten?*
- Designed to elicit families' views of school readiness. Sample question: *What do you think children really should be able to do when they enter kindergarten?*
- Designed to draw out families' knowledge of the child's potential school. Sample questions: *Are you familiar with the kindergarten your child will attend? How did you learn about it?*

These are a subset of questions from a larger interview focused on parents' decision making about whether or not to send their child to kindergarten, including factors families consider when making that decision. The complete interview protocol is provided in Appendix A.

In an effort to minimize any influence that experience actually attending the kindergarten classroom might have on the families' responses, I conducted the interviews in late summer or early fall. This was after families had made their decision regarding whether or not to send their child to kindergarten, but before their view of kindergarten would have been influenced by their child's experience. If interviews were conducted too late in the year, their experience in the kindergarten may color their report of decision making. Three of these families had chosen the previous year to send their children to developmental kindergarten during the "redshirting" year. It is possible that experiences in the developmental kindergarten year did influence in some ways their thinking about kindergarten.

I took minimal notes as it has been noted that some informants, particularly those with previous bad experiences with schooling or "experts", can feel threatened or intimidated by note taking (Weiss, 1995). Instead, I employed active listening strategies designed to draw out and clarify the informant's position. The protocol, as given in Appendix A, was held constant for all informants to avoid disparity in responses by individuals or groups based on how the questions were asked or responded to by the interviewer.

Data Analysis Procedures

All family interviews were assigned a code number and then transcribed by a paid transcriptionist for my later analysis. The transcriptionist did not have information prior to the transcription about the families, including which families had older children or whether or not the families had children attending Head Start. Of course, some families gave some of this information during the interview. Transcriptions included both the interviewer's and the informant's speech. All meaningful utterances were included as were pauses longer than 2 seconds (implying thoughtful consideration). Vocal place holders ("um", "er", "hm") were omitted unless they were repeated, which might denote hesitation or uncertainty in the respondent. This was done to distill the transcripts down to their meaning rather than their literal translation and to make the flow of the transcripts smoother. However, if interrupted by a child, the transcription reflected that and the talk was included in the transcript. In three instances, the tape was turned off: once so the parent could address the child and redirect him or her to another activity so that we could speak about the child without the child being present, once while a baby was crying in another room and needed to be tended, and once while a train roared by rendering the interview inaudible. When the child/baby/train left the area, the interview resumed and the tape was turned on.

While both Strauss (1987) and Miles and Huberman (1984) suggest that analysis begin during the data collection phase of interviewing, I did not begin formal analysis until all interviews were transcribed. I felt strongly that it was important to keep the interviews as consistent as possible from one to another; beginning analysis while still interviewing might have inadvertently influenced the interview procedures I used (e.g.,,

follow up prompts) in later interviews. Of course, I did hear the interviews as I conducted them.

I developed initial categories for coding based on impressions developed during the interviews and expectations I had developed in planning for the study. I then applied these categories to the transcripts employing the method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Berkowitz (1997). As expected, the initial coding categories were incomplete and additional coding was necessary to fully capture the factors present in the data. For example, initial coding categories I had developed did not capture that some families viewed kindergarten readiness as being able to respect authority. Coding continued until an exhaustive set of categories was developed. In addition to coding for parents' perceptions of kindergarten, other coding was conducted with other foci not addressed in this paper.

The coding system was applied to each transcript. For example, this passage was coded as including academic descriptors and social descriptors, but not play descriptors:

Based on knowledge from my older son. School , it's a lot more intense I guess than you would think, we used to think of kindergarten. I feel like they already should know the basics, the alphabet, counting. A lot of it's rules, learning how to work together as a group. Reading skills. (*Mrs. Coolidge* 8/31/04)

Each code was given a numeric assignment, yes = 1 and no = 0, and then entered into an SPSS database.

After entering the individually coded cases into an SPSS database, I employed a sorting method described by Weiss (1995) to group the data and their representative cases by category. That is, categorical files were generated with excerpts from individual cases

reflecting each category. For example, the category reflecting “academic description” included excerpts of interviews from the 20 excerpts of families that used academic terms in describing kindergarten. This combination of purely quantitative with qualitative representation allows for a richer depiction of the data. The quantified database allows for numeric groupings while the qualitative collection of excerpts facilitates looking across the text of the interviews themselves.

As the investigator, I did both the coding and data entry of all data. To assure reliability in the coding system however, three interviews were randomly selected for an outside coder to analyze. The coder was asked to read the entire interview but code only the passages reflecting parents’ perceptions of kindergarten. This coding was compared to my own and found to be in 92% agreement.

To determine reliability in data entry, three randomly selected interviews were blindly double-entered into the database, that is, the original entries were not visible during the second round of entries. The second round of entries were compared against the 192 original entries and found to be 99.48% accurate. After investigating reliability of coding and entry, data was analyzed to ascertain frequency of occurrence of the type of descriptors used (play, social or academic) across respondents, as well as in relation to child characteristics of age, whether or not the child had older siblings who might have attended kindergarten previously, and whether the child attended a Head Start program. Additionally, the data was analyzed by frequency of occurrence across districts and subgroups within districts. Descriptive statistics and interview excerpts are used to report results.

Results

In the following section, I report on parents' perceptions of kindergarten in general including the content of their descriptions and the complexity of their descriptions. This section will also address the nature of the descriptions, in particular whether they focus on kindergarten as academic, as social, as play-based, or some combination of these. Additionally, in subsequent sections, these responses will be parsed out by groups including individual districts; those families whose children were enrolled in Head Start and those who were not; and families who had older children having already experienced kindergarten and those families who did not. Finally, it is useful to note that families reported a number of skills as necessary for children to be ready to begin kindergarten. Table 2.3 outlines those skills and the frequency of the families' reporting.

Variation in the Perceptions of the Role of Kindergarten

Parents varied a great deal in their perception of what goes on in kindergarten. While some families indicated they didn't know about the kindergarten, others described kindergarten in terms of opportunities to play, learn academics and/or social skills (see Table 2.4). It is important to note that some families had more than one response to this question and therefore more than one of these three categories might have been represented in their answers. For example, some families indicated that the kindergarten was focused both on academics and social experiences. The following sections are broken down by those responses. If a family had responses that fell into more than one category, I discuss those in the sections of combined categories and do not include them in the discussions of individual categories (i.e. play only, academic only, social descriptors only).

No Descriptors

There were two interviewees who provided no descriptors for this kindergarten. One was a Head Start parent; one was a non Head Start parent, both from the suburban district. While offering no actual descriptors, this Head Start parent did indicate a knowledge of kindergarten change:

Um, well, I think, it's not like how it used to be when I went to school and I, when I went to kindergarten. There's not a lot of play time anymore. So ah, I know they get their recess, but other than that... (Ms. Mills, 10/ 4/ 04)

Mrs. Mills describes kindergarten as not play based and could indicate that she thinks it is academic instead. She is not explicit enough, however for us to be sure of her views. Although both parents in this group indicated that they didn't know about kindergarten in general, both went on to say they were familiar with the kindergarten where their child would attend.

Play-Based Descriptors

Of those families who described kindergarten with a single descriptor, two described it as play-based. Both were Head Start parents, one from a rural district and one from the urban district.

A play-based case. Ms. McCormick is a single mother of two children, Taylor, age 7 and Katie, whose birthday is in late September. Katie attended Head Start in the two years prior to kindergarten. Her mother describes her as very smart, able write everyone's name in the family, knowing the alphabet as well as colors and shapes. Ms McCormick reports that though Katie doesn't like to share, she's a people person who makes friends quite easily. As her mother describes her, physically, Katie is taller and

heavier than her peers, but active and skilled in both fine motor tasks such as cutting and large motor tasks such as climbing and running. Katie also enjoys being read to and watching *Clifford*, *Rugrats*, and children's videos. When Ms. McCormick goes to work, Katie stays with her grandpa.

When asked what Ms. McCormick was planning to do with Katie during the eligibility year, Ms. McCormick quickly reported that Katie would be attending the neighborhood kindergarten, indicating that little thought was necessary about the decision, "She's just ready. She's really smart. I think she's ready to go." Her only concern about Katie was her ability to share. "Sharing's a big deal. She really got to learn how to share."

She was far more detailed in what she thinks children should be able to do in kindergarten however, "Be able to write her name, know the alphabet, colors, shapes and be potty trained."

Although Katie's birth date will make her one of the youngest children in her class, Ms. McCormick indicates that she never thought about that, instead focusing on how smart Katie is. Katie will start kindergarten at age four years, eleven months, fully six months younger than Taylor was when he began school. (8/26/04)

Katie will be having the same teacher that her brother Taylor had two years ago. Her mother reports, "He's really awesome. He's a man so I like that because her dad's not always around so that's a really good role model, and um, he's an awesome teacher." Taylor had a positive experience that his mother equates with his being smart. "He was in first grade last year. He read at a sixth grade level. He's just very smart." Despite her previous experience with this kindergarten, indeed, this teacher, when asked what she

thinks goes on in kindergarten in general, Ms. McCormick stated, “A lot of hands on playing. Um, I have no idea.”

Ms. McCormick presents a case of a parent with some knowledge of a classroom through her previous experience but still a bit unclear about the nature of that kindergarten. Her response to what children should be able to do is fairly academic yet she reports that kindergarten is play-based. Her added focus on Katie’s ability to share might make us wonder if she thinks social skills will or won’t be a focus of instruction in the kindergarten. The other parent who indicated that play was part of the classroom was similarly vague. It is difficult to know whether this vagueness comes from unfamiliarity or from a lack of vocabulary to describe what goes on in a play-based setting. In any event, her comments are at least mixed and make analysis difficult.

Academic Descriptors

Six parents used only academics to describe the role of kindergarten. Three of them were Head Start parents; three were non Head Start parents. Of these one was from the rural district (non Head Start), one was from the suburban district (Head Start) and four were from the urban district (2 Head Start and 2 non Head Start). One such parent, of a child who was not in Head Start in the rural district, said

A whole lot of nothin’! They get their ABCs. They get their 123s and their safety and stuff like that, I think, is um great. I know they’re doing a lot more than I did as far as computers. I just think they’re way ahead, that they don’t need to be doing that right now. (Mrs. Landon, 10/5/04)

Mrs. Landon is indicating mixed feelings about the change. Evidently Mrs. Landon preferred a somewhat less academic-focused kindergarten.

A Head Start parent, who was in the urban district, described it this way, “What goes on in kindergarten? Um, they learn the letters, the numbers, and ya know, colors, ya know, the basics, stuff to get them ready for first grade.” (Mrs. Sharif 8/30/04) While academic in focus, Mrs. Sharif retains a view of kindergarten as a readiness year in preparation for first grade.

An academic-based case. Nina Anderson is five years, one month at the time of the interview. She lives in a suburban neighborhood with her dad, who works in advertising and her stay at home mom, along with her two brothers, one of whom is older and one younger than Nina. Nina’s mom describes her as very social and a person who enjoys being in charge, often leading her brothers or nearby cousins in made-up games. Her parents see her as competent physically and academically. She enjoys drawing and reading but her favorite activity is making up games.

Nina has been involved in a community play group in which her mother was present while the children played nearby. She has never been left with people that were unfamiliar to her. If extended care was required, she stayed with a grandparent, an aunt or family friend.

Nina’s parents decided to send her to kindergarten in her first year of age eligibility. They based their decision on the fact that she’s already five and can’t wait to learn.

She keeps asking me to write things, how to spell things, yet she won’t sit down with me and have me...she’ll practice enough with me if I ask her to write a letter a certain number of times. She wants it from a teacher, not her mom. *Laughs.* And

her older brother was in school last year and she came a lot, you know. I'd help out in the classroom, so she's anxious to be in that classroom setting.

Mrs. Anderson reports that in addition to thinking about her academic skills, she worried about Nina being able to take direction from another adult or be able to ask for help if she needed it. Mrs. Anderson decided that Nina is fine and is capable of handling herself in the classroom.

Because Mrs. Anderson volunteered in her son's classroom, the previous year, she was familiar with the full day kindergarten that Nina will attend. "To be honest, I don't know how they stretch it for a whole day, but they do a lot of group time, a little play time, rest time, they learn their, you know, ABCs, the basics, counting and telling time." She went on to share, "He actually had homework in kindergarten that I would see when he came home...so I was very on top of what they were learning."

The Andersons chose this school, a parochial school, to reinforce the values they have at home. When asked what a child should know when she enters kindergarten, Mrs. Anderson replied,

I think they need to be able to explain themselves and be able to um you know tell the teacher and other kids how they're feeling. I think that's a lot of kids, well a couple of kids in my son's class who just threw tantrums. They would not listen. It was like a home setting. It was awful and I thought, well, great if my son picks up these behaviors, I'm taking him out. I am because this isn't what we accept at home, so I think they need to be able to listen, follow direction and just respect the authority of the teacher and then, you know, do the work that's set before them and if they have a problem, to explain that they need help.

While Mrs. Anderson's description of Nina's school includes several references to academic aspects, her discussion of what children need to be able to do is heavily on social skills or perhaps more accurately, knowledge of how school "works". It is interesting that Mrs. McCormick describes readiness largely in academic terms yet kindergarten in social terms. Mrs. Anderson describes readiness largely in social terms yet the kindergarten is described in largely academic terms. Other families in this study were also interested in social dimensions of kindergarten as outlined in the following section.

Social Descriptors

None of the parents seemed to have a view of kindergarten as promoting social skills alone. The parent (actually a grandparent) who comes the closest was living in the rural district with her granddaughter, Susie, who attended Head Start.

Susie lives in a small town in a rural school district with her grandparents who are her primary guardians. She shares her home with her three siblings, two older brothers and a younger sister.

Her grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Crossman, indicate that Susie enjoys both active and quiet activities such as water play and dress up. She also likes to play school and bike ride. Primarily, she plays with her siblings and some of the neighborhood children who are two to three years older than she is. Mrs. Crossman reports that Susie likes to be read to regularly and while she enjoys listening to almost anything, she's particularly drawn to fairy tales.

The Crossmans plan to send Susie to their neighborhood school, which is just around the block from their home. Mrs. Crossman is familiar with the school since

Susie's older brothers attended it in the previous year. When asked what goes on in kindergarten, she replied, "I think their personality and their skills develop much more and I think with Susie, she has, you know, like when uh Nate was in kindergarten and she's walked with me when she was really little when Tommy was in kindergarten and you know, I don't think she's going to have a problem." There was some concern about Susie's comfort with being left some place without her grandparents but Mrs. Crossman feels that since Susie loves school and is familiar with this school in particular that it won't be a problem for her. Based on her excitement in attending Head Start for two years, the Crossmans are confident that the kindergarten transition will be a comfortable one for Susie. "She was so excited. She was always ready on time. And if the bus was a little bit late, she wanted me to call and find out [when it would come]." (7/22/04)

While this parent did not explicitly respond to the specific question of what goes on in kindergarten, because of her reference to her granddaughter's "personality and skills", it indicates that her view of kindergarten is one in which her granddaughter's social skills will play a role and will develop. However, she seems to also have some sense that academics are addressed – she indicated that one of the things that she likes about the kindergarten is that they have a mentoring program for the children. This mentor "helps them with whatever they're having a difficulty with academically and I think it helps their social skills, also." (7/22/04)

In all, 80% (N=8) of the Head Start parents used a single characteristic to describe kindergarten, and of them, about half (43%, N=3) chose academics as their single characteristic. Of the 16 non Head Start parents, 25% (N=4) used a single characteristic to describe kindergarten. All of them said kindergarten was academic. Fourteen of the 26

parents (56%) used multiple characteristics in describing kindergarten. Those results are outlined below.

Play and Academic Descriptors

No Head Start parents described kindergarten as involving play as well as academics. Two non Head Start parents did however. These were in two different districts (one rural, one urban, respectively).

Uh, I know their biggest thing is to let them play. Let them enjoy and learn as they're playing. Um, so I know that he will get a lot of that. Um, but I know that they do sit down and do different things as far as using the scissors and writing and learning new words and counting, so I know he gets that too. But they're really, you know into the the ...make sure that they can play and that they're having a good time and then everything else will just come with that. (Mrs. Denton 8/26/04)

I think they learn their ABCs, probably early phonics stuff, um some of 'em. Some programs I'm sure teach the kids how to read. Um, I think they do counting and simple addition. I think they do an awful lot of playing. I think they are exposed to, you know, trips to...they do fieldtrips, trips to the zoo, nature walks type stuff. Let's see, oh I don't know, probably leaning um some coordination type things dribbling a ball, um you know, running. I don't know. Skipping, those sorts of things. I don't know. That's what I think mainly goes on in kindergarten programs. (Mrs. Selby 8/19/04)

Academic and Social Descriptors

Of the ten Head Start families, only one parent (10%) described kindergarten as promoting academic and social skills. Eight non Head Start parents (50%) used that pair of descriptors. Four of them were in the suburban district and four were in the urban district. The following examples are reflective of the group:

I think they do quite a bit of learning, the phonics, I know my son got pushed up on so much last year, and the alphabet and we, so they have an easier time learning how to read. But beyond the learning part, I think one of the biggest things, that is gonna be primary in every kindergarten in the whole USA is structure, consistency, the rules, sharing, getting along with the other kids, a routine of, this is what you're gonna be doin' for the next thirteen years, you go to school and ya know, it's the same every day, structured. (Mrs. Collins, 8/14/04)

Um, the, they continue to learn the, the alphabet, and, actually start working on reading, usually at the end of the year, I know that. Um, numbers and I'm, a lot of it's social skills. (Mrs. Sailors, 8/30/04)

Based on knowledge from my older son, um, school , it's a lot more intense I guess than you would think, we used to think of kindergarten I feel like they already should know the basics, the alphabet, um counting, a lot of it's rules learning how to work together as a group. reading skills. (Mrs. Coolidge, 8/31/04)

Play-Social-Academic Descriptors

There were two parents--one Head Start and one non Head Start-- who used play, academics and social skills as descriptors of the role of kindergarten.

I think they do a lot of play but also in combination of learning like, playing with other kids and um, learning, grouping, colors and numbers. (Mrs. Thompson, 9/8/04)

I think, I would think it probably varies to a degree because of the fact that some children have had Head Start and other children are just going into a classroom environment for the first time, so I'm thinking they'd probably start with uh more just making the kids feel comfortable and more like uh initiating some entertaining ways of teaching like reading books to 'em and showing pictures and then getting them physically active with maybe touching things, you know, shapes and sizes and getting naps involved. (Mr. Davis, 8/24/04)

Mrs. Thompson and Mr. Davis, who have other children in school, seem confident in their responses. The influence of older siblings will be addressed further when discussing how the families learned about kindergarten.

Variation by Home District

One might hypothesize that families in the same district would describe kindergarten in the same way, given that they might share knowledge of the same schools. Instead, I found variance *within* the districts. In fact, each district was similar to the others in how the descriptors were used. About half (43% N=3) of the parents in the rural district chose a single descriptor, 44% (N=4) of those in the suburban district and 40% (N=4) of those in the urban chose a single characteristic to describe kindergarten. Slightly less than half (43%, N= 3) of the parents in the rural district used multiple

descriptors. Similarly 63% (N=5) of those in the suburban district and 60% (N=6) of those in the urban district chose multiple characteristics to describe kindergarten.

However, there was some variation between Head Start and non Head Start families. The home district was largely irrelevant given that all non Head Start families, regardless of the district, used academic descriptors. Among the Head Start families, the numbers are too small to draw any conclusions with Head Start parents in the rural district 50% (N=2) describing kindergarten in academic terms. In the suburban district, 33% (N=1) did so, and in the urban district it was 100% (N=2). Consider these three quotes from families in order by rural, suburban and urban families not enrolled in Head Start.

I think they do a lot of play but also in combination of learning like, playing with other kids and um, learning, grouping, colors and numbers. (Mrs. Thompson 9/8/04)

Um, the, they continue to learn the, the alphabet, and, actually start working on reading, usually at the end of the year, I know that. Um, numbers and I'm, a lot of it's social skills. (Mrs. Sailors, 8/30/04)

Well, I think a lot of it is kinda early literacy things and learning about relationships and just exploring different material. Having lots of exposure, um, learning some of that social stuff about turn taking and listening and following directions. (Mrs. Sanders 8/12/04)

Each of these women point to a blend of social and academic experiences in the kindergarten classroom. And although from different districts, their responses are more alike than different. It seems to be Head Start more than non Head Start that distinguishes families, rather than district (see Figure 2.1).

Responses by Enrollment in Head Start

As noted in previous sections, there appear to be several differences among the responses of families enrolled in Head Start and those not enrolled in Head Start (see Figure 2.4). Half of Head Start families described kindergarten as promoting academics, 40% (N=4) viewed it as promoting social skills, and 40% (N=4) also viewed it as play based. Among parents not affiliated with Head Start, 100% (N=15) viewed kindergarten as academically focused and 60% (N=9) of them saw it as promoting social skills. Only 27% (N=4) described kindergarten as including play.

Additionally, Non Head Start families seemed to convey a more complex view of kindergarten as well. Of the Head Start families, 3 out of 10 (30%) chose multiple descriptors (both Academic and Social, for example). The remaining 70% chose either one or 0 attributes to describe kindergarten. The result for non Head Start families is nearly the exact opposite. Only 20% (N=3) chose only one descriptor (always “Academic”), the remaining 80% (N=12) had multiple descriptors and all of them included “Academic” (see Table 2.4). These variations were not mitigated by district, only by Head Start status.

Sources of Information about Current Kindergartens

Of the twenty-six families in the study, 22 reported that they were familiar with their child’s kindergarten. Four families indicated that they did not know about the

kindergarten program their child would attend. Paradoxically, one of those mothers reported having interviewed 26 schools in the area before selecting one.

When asked how they learned about the kindergarten that their child will attend, 16 reported that they had an older child in the school that had recently experienced that program. In fact in the rural district, two families expected the focal children to have the same teacher that their older child had. Five of the families, including families with older children, chose to attend school open houses or visited the school where they received information about the school and what to expect. Four families reported learning about their anticipated kindergarten experience through friends or acquaintances.

This variation suggests that while families indicated knowledge of the school, the source of that knowledge, its amount and quality varied.

Discussion

Summary

While there is variation in description across other subgroups, the most significant finding of this study is that Head Start families and non Head Start families think differently about kindergarten. Only 50% of Head Start families thought of kindergarten as teaching academic skills, and 33% of them reported that kindergarten taught social skills. By contrast, those parents who came from a wide variety of prekindergarten experiences (non Head Start) uniformly regarded kindergarten as promoting academic skills and 60% of them thought that kindergarten taught social skills as well. At the very least, the difference should be noted by those working in Head Start to design transition plans from Head Start to the public schools.

Why might these differences exist? It has been noted that families of differing socioeconomic status may view schooling differently. Lareau (2000) notes that families' perceptions of schools may be influenced by their own status. For example, working class families in her study perceived schools and their staff as experts on education and trustingly turned their children over to the experts to educate, with little interference from the homes. Conversely, families from upper class, professional homes perceived themselves as capable of educating their children and when they turned their children over to the schools, it was not with the idea that the schools were expert but that the children would benefit from a collaboration between the school and the home. The subsequent parent involvement rates were quite different across schools.

In the current study, it may well be that the families enrolled in Head Start, by law families that are low SES, have not been given much information on what kindergarten will be like. They may trust Head Start to prepare their child for kindergarten and see little need to consider the goodness of fit. The uni-dimensional responses (just play, just academic, just social) provided by the families in Head Start might be indicative of less information about what happens in kindergarten. Contrasted with the woman who interviewed 26 schools, there may be a big difference in how the two groups are viewing the kindergarten as well as what it means to be familiar with the school.

The question remains, would it make a difference to the Head Start families to know that kindergartens may be different from what they might recall from their childhood? In some cases, it would not matter as the families would send their children to kindergarten regardless of what the kindergarten might be like. They simply cannot afford to keep them at home another year and may not be aware that an additional year of

Head Start may be an option for their child. For others, they might choose to make other arrangements such as another year of child care, pursuing private developmental kindergartens or remaining home for another year. Still other families might choose to act on additional information about the kindergarten might preparing a child socially, perhaps by visiting the school or reaching out to potential classmates, or academically, perhaps through more at-home focus on academic skills. Most assuredly however, they can't make a fully informed decision without the knowledge of options and possibilities. Of course as Thelen's (2004) study pointed out, with significant variation among classrooms, children may or may not be ready for the particular classroom to which they are assigned.

Recommendations for Schools

It has been noted that many families struggle with the decision of whether to send their children to school or not. In short, parents wonder if their child is "ready" for kindergarten. Given the shifting nature of kindergarten, schools would do well to help families recognize that "ready" has changed over time as well. Public schools should connect with preprimary programs, including, but not limited to, Head Start, in their district. The purpose being to reach out to families prior to enrollment in kindergarten to help articulate a kindergarten transition plan that includes helping families understand what to expect from kindergarten and what their role can be in promoting their child's success (Pianta & Cox, 1999). Head Start has wisely started to mandate "Kindergarten Transition Plans" that do exactly this. Meeting with local school districts, the Head Start staff gain information about the district to pass along to families to ease their child's transition. Unfortunately, it appears from this study, that the Head Start families were less

aware that the climate of kindergarten has shifted to a more academic environment. Reaching out to families in a variety of ways, informational mailings, home visits or phone calls might assist families in having a more accurate view of what to expect from kindergarten for their child.

Limitations of the Study

This greatest limitation of this study is that the interviews on which it was based were not designed to exclusively capture this information. As part of a larger study, the questions that addressed the parents' view of kindergarten did not probe as deeply as other parts of the interview. More questions with deeper follow up would likely yield much more detailed information about parents' perceptions.

Additionally, a larger, more diverse pool of respondents would enrich a future study. This study happened to have almost exclusively Caucasian families born in the United States. Families of color, from a variety of countries of origin might have very different views of kindergarten.

Although I did not collect data on parents' age, it became evident that there were large differences in the ages of the respondents. Especially in light of generational differences in their own experiences with kindergarten, there may have been a relationship between the age of the parent and the response given that was missed in the analysis.

Data on the kindergartens that the children would attend was not collected for this study but would have allowed for an examination of the validity of the parents' perceptions of the school. While the state standards exist, there is always the possibility of a teacher who teaches to a very different set of goals. For example, there may well

have been an individual classroom in which the teacher still approaches kindergarten as entirely for play and social development.

For families with older children, it would have been useful to find out what that child's kindergarten had been like and how long ago they attended. Even "current" data ages quickly in this time of kindergarten change.

Directions for Future Research

Given the above limitations of this study, future studies of this topic would do well to interview a larger group of families with an eye toward racial, ethnic, economic, educational and age diversity of respondents. Such an interview should be crafted to fully probe the respondents' own experiences with schooling in general and kindergarten in particular, as well as capturing the families' views of their current kindergarten program and what children need to be able to do to be ready for it. Questions designed to get at *why* parents believe what they do might provide useful information that might assist designing transition plans for families.

A larger, and perhaps more compelling, question is actually to what degree does the parent's perception of school in general, kindergarten in particular, affect their perceived role in preparing their child for schooling (and presumably, success in that environment)? This question might be probed either through an interview study or a survey but both would have to be designed not only to get at the perceptions of school but families' views of their responsibilities toward "readiness". As above, such a study should capture the widest swath of parent diversity possible. As a longitudinal study, this data could be correlated with later student achievement.

Conclusion

As kindergartens continue to shift and evolve, families sending their children to school for the first time are put in the position to hit a moving target. The kindergartens of today may be very different from the kindergarten the parent was last involved with...even if only a few years ago. Given that, schools should make every effort to help families understand the programs their children will enter, offering recommendations that assist the family in preparing the child for the anticipated school environment, particularly reaching out to families new to the district and “first time” families. In addition, Head Start programs should work to assist families in making knowledgeable transitions to kindergarten. Families making the decision about readiness need to know that “ready” has two sides...the child and the environment the child will enter.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol for Kindergarten Study

Before the interview, at the initial phone call to set up interview, confirm child's birth date as being on or before December 1, 1999.

Upon meeting family, visit a bit to establish rapport. Be honest in purpose for interview and invite honesty from the family.

TURN ON TAPE.

Thank you, _____ for agreeing to be interviewed for this study. This interview will be audiotaped so that I can analyze the interviews later. Do you agree to be audiotaped?

Please remember that you don't have to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable and you can stop the interview at any time. Are you ready?

{SECTION 1: THE CHILD}

My first questions are about your child. Remind me, when is his/her birth date?

Who lives here with you and your child?

Who does your child play with?

- Are they family?
- Friends?
- What ages are they?

What are your child's academic skills like?

What are your child's social skills like?

How does your child's size compare to others his/her age?

What are your child's physical skills like?

- Is s/he pretty coordinated?
- How does s/he do with running, jumping, climbing, etc.?
- How does s/he do with small motor tasks like holding a pencil or cutting with scissors?

What kinds of things does your child enjoy doing?

- Does s/he choose activities that are active or would s/he rather be quiet?
- Does s/he like to be read to? If so, what kinds of things does s/he like?
- Does s/he watch TV? What are his/her favorite shows?

How does your child handle new situations?

Has your child ever been left somewhere without you? How frequently? Tell me about that environment. How long has s/he been going there?

{SECTION 2: THINKING ABOUT DECISION}

When children are your child's age, people sometimes send them to kindergarten in the fall and sometimes keep them home for another year. Have you considered what you'll do for {child's name} in the fall?

{If sending to school, go on. If not, ask:

What will you do with him/her instead?

What did you think about when you made that decision? OR What kinds of things are you considering while you are making this decision?

PROBE {repeat until parents respond no}:

Is there anything else you have considered in making this decision?

POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP PROBES:

- Did you consider your child's academic skills? If so, what thoughts did you have about them? Did you have any concerns about them?
- Did you consider your child's social skills? If so, what thoughts did you have about them? Did you have any concerns about them?
- Did you consider your child's physical size? What did you think about it?
- Did you consider advice from others? Whose? Have you trusted their advice in the past? How did that turn out?
- Did you consider something I haven't asked about?

- What concerns do you have about them?
- How do you feel about your child's physical size?

How have your friends and family responded to your thinking?

Do you know other families in your family or community that have gone through this process?

- Did you talk with them about their decision?
- What did they share with you?
- What did they do/ are they doing?

{SECTION 3: PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL}

These next questions are about the school where your child will eventually go.

In general, what do you think goes on in kindergarten?

What do you know about the kindergarten your child will attend?

How did you learn about it?

Do you have other children in school? How old were they when they entered kindergarten? What were their experiences like?

What do you think a child really should be able to do when s/he enters kindergarten?

{SECTION 4- PARENT'S BACKGROUND}

These last questions are about you and your own experiences.

How old were you when you entered school?

How was your own transition to school? IF APPLICABLE: Do you know if your spouse/partner had a similar experience?

- Why do you think you had the experience you had?
- Did you consider your own experience when deciding what to do for (child's name)?

When you think about your own schooling experiences, what comes to mind? IF APPLICABLE: Do you know if your spouse/partner had a similar experience?

How much schooling did you have? IF APPLICABLE: How about your spouse/partner?

What do you do now? IF APPLICABLE: What does your spouse do?

{SECTION 5: FINAL THOUGHTS}

Is there anything you'd like to add to help me understand your thinking about sending {child's name} to kindergarten?

Thank you very much for your time! If you think of anything you'd like to add or change, please let me know. Here is my card and you can reach me at anytime.

TURN OFF TAPE.

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Table 2.1

Demographic Information of Sample

	Head Start	Non Head Start		
N	10	16		
Mean Age of Child	5.21	5.44		
Family Demographics				
	Percentage	N	Percentage	N
Single Parent Household (N=4)	40%	4	0%	0
Two Parent Household (N=20)	40%	4	100%	16
Extended Family Household (N=2)	20%	2	0%	0
Education Level of Household				
No College Graduates in Household (N=9)	90%	9	0%	0
At Least 1 College Graduate in Home (N=17)	10%	1	100%	16
Household Setting				
Rural (N=7)	40%	4	19%	3
Suburban (N=9)	30%	3	38%	6
Urban (N=10)	30%	3	44%	7

Table 2.2

Demographics of Children in Sample

Gender	Boys 9	Girls 17
Age of Child Median = 5yrs, 2 mos.	5 yrs, 2 mos. and younger 13	5 yrs, 3 mos. and older 13
Type of School	Head Start 10	Non-Head Start 16
Siblings	No older siblings 6	Older siblings 20

Table 2.3

Skills Parents Reported as Necessary for Kindergarten Readiness

Comment	Frequency	Comment	Frequency
Alphabet	11	Potty Trained	3
Numbers	11	Separate from Parents	3
Write name	8	Get along with others	2
Colors	7	Self Care	2
Listen	5	Sit	2
Shapes	5	Respect authority	2
Know their own name	3	Dress Self	1
Recognize some words	3	Follow Directions	1
Address	1	Friend	1
Interest in numbers and letters	1	Interact with others	1
Opposites	1	Not be disruptive	1
Phone Number	1	Not be harmful	1
Sizes	1	Brush Teeth	1
		Respect peoples' property	1
		Sharing	1
		Social things	1

Table 2.3 (continued)

Tell how they're feeling	1
Tie shoes	1

Table 2.4

Frequency of Descriptions of Kindergarten

	No Response	Play	Academic	Social	Total with a Single Descriptor	Total Single Descriptor or Unresponsive
Rural (N=7)	0	1	1	1	3	43%
Suburban (N=9)	2	1	1	0	4	44%
Urban (N=10)	0	0	4	0	4	40%

	Play and Academic	Play and Social	Academic and Social	Play, Academic and Social	Total with Multiple Descriptors	Total Multiple Descriptors
Rural (N=7)	1	0	1	2	4	57%
Suburban (N=8)	1	0	4	0	5	56%
Urban (N=10)	1	1	4	0	6	60%

	No Response	Play	Academic	Social	Total with a Single Descriptor	Total Single Descriptor or Unresponsive
Head Start (N = 10)	1	2	3	1	7	70%
non-Head Start (N=16)	1	0	3	0	4	25%

	Play and Academic	Play and Social	Academic and Social	Play, Academic and Social	Total with Multiple Descriptors	Total Multiple Descriptors
Head Start (N = 10)	0	1	1	1	3	30%
non-Head Start (N=16)	3	0	8	1	12	75%

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Figure 2.1 Descriptors of kindergarten by school district

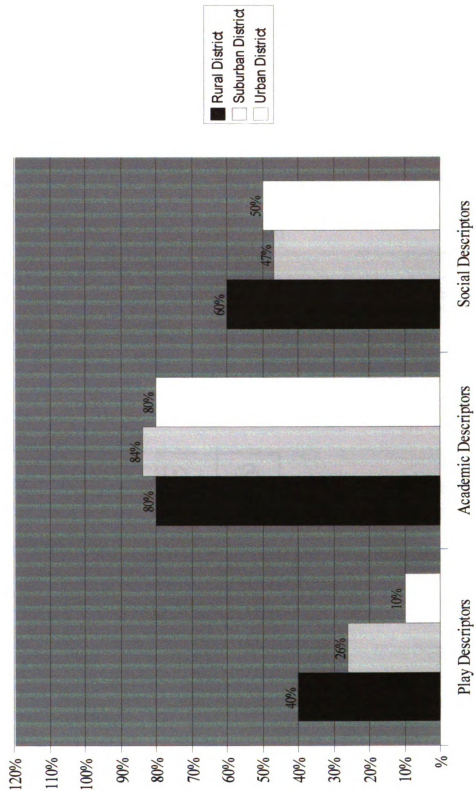


Figure 2.2 Descriptors of kindergarten by parents of children with older siblings or no older siblings

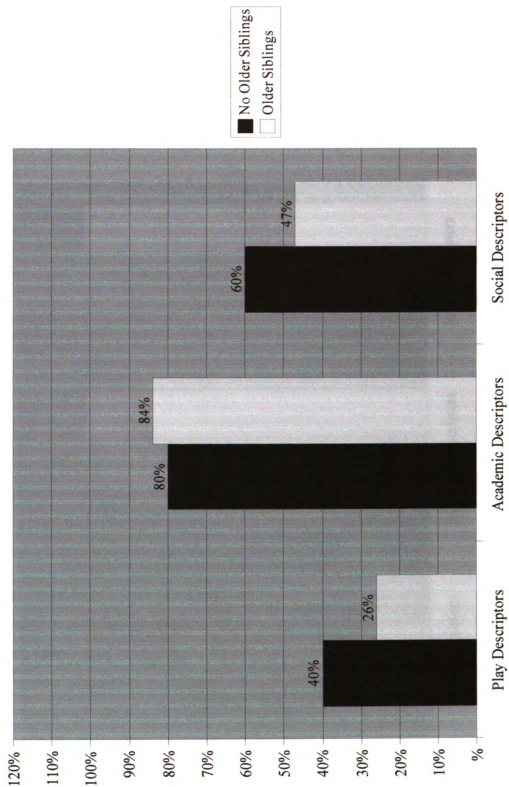


Figure 2.3 Descriptors of kindergarten by family structure

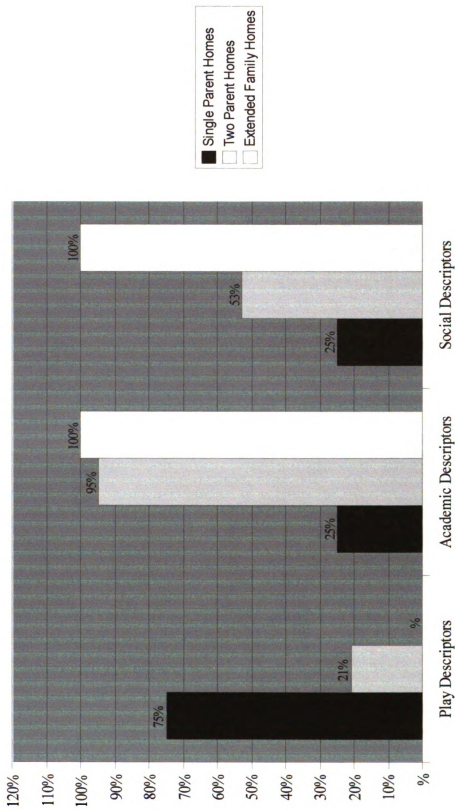
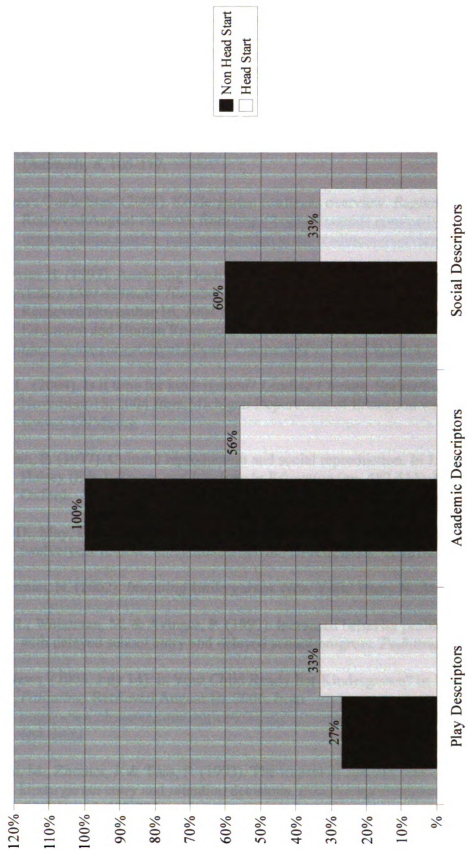


Figure 2.4 Descriptors of kindergarten among Head Start and non Head Start families



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