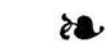
CHAPTER 1



MANY VIEWS OF READINESS

Browsing through the titles in the popular press, a certain theme seems to come up when people write about kindergarten:

> "Delay Kindergarten Until Tot Biologically Ready" (*The Tennessean*, Sunday, March 1984)
>
> "Too Much Too Soon?" (*Principal*, March 1984)
>
> "In Support of Academic Redshirting" (*Young Children*, January 1986)
>
> "Kindergarten: Ready or Not?" (*Rocky Mountain News*, Thursday, May 18, 1989)
>
> "The Redshirt Solution" (*Time*, November 13, 1989)
>
> "Why Kids Flunk Kindergarten" (*Parents*, February 1990)

Why so much press for readiness? It is probably because few topics in the early childhood community have such currency and so many audiences as the topic of readiness for school. Academics study readiness to determine the subdimensions that comprise it as a kind of psychological construct. They correlate the findings of readiness tests with later school outcome measures to determine the instrument's validity and they examine the effects of placement decisions that result from readiness judgments. Policymakers debate legislative actions related to readiness, advocating changes in the entrance age so that children must be older (i.e., more ready) and they mandate testing to determine whether children are ready for promotion between grades. The 1990 set of recommendations for education by the National Governors'

Association was headed by the objective that: "By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn." Teachers talk about readiness as they sort and rank students and make instructional and placement decisions. They weigh factors such as chronological age and sex to make judgments about relative readiness of individual children. Parents anguish over readiness when they make decisions about whether to put their child in kindergarten or wait a year so that their child will have "the gift of time." People with a stake in the education of young children are talking about readiness; it is such a shared idea that everyone assumes they are talking about the same thing.

But is readiness an identifiable characteristic? Is it the same thing in all children, in all classrooms, in all schools? For all the attention and discussion readiness receives, one would think so. A brief look at recent policy related to readiness provides an interesting entrance point to the discussion that is the focus of this book — what is readiness?

Trends in Policy Related to Readiness

Kindergarten policy has undergone dramatic change in recent years. Several policy issues can be traced to readiness concerns that have had profound impact on the nature of the kindergarten program: concern about age at school entrance, the development of readiness screening programs, and availability of extra-year programs in the public schools.

Kindergarten Entrance Age

In response to concerns that the youngest children in a group seem to do less well than their relatively older peers, school districts and states have slowly moved the kindergarten or first grade entrance age back, requiring children to be older to enter school. Moving from dates as late as February 1 thirty years ago, September 1 is now the most common entrance cutoff, with some states choosing dates as early as July 1 (Graue & Shepard, in press). The shift has resulted in the most popular legislated kindergarten entrance age of 5 years, up three months from the mode of 4 years, 9 months in 1958.

Has raising the entrance age resulted in more ready students? For a change in the entrance age to make an absolute difference in readiness for school, the "problem" of being younger would

need to be absolute, i.e., there would need to be a readiness threshold that a child would need to achieve to be successful in school and that threshold would have to be related to age. Instead, it appears that the youngness problem is *relative* in that if children are defined in twelve-month age cohorts for school, there will always be a younger group (Shepard & Smith, 1986). Studies comparing the youngest and oldest parts of first grade class age distributions find that there are small, short-term differences favoring the older children (in the range of 7 or 8 percentile points) (Shepard & Smith, 1986). With the shift in entrance date, the children who would have been in the youngest part of an age range under one enrollment date are in the oldest part with a new, earlier cutoff. Have the children changed with this new entrance date? No, only their relative ranking within the group has changed. Judgments of readiness become relative to an arbitrary cutoff rather than an absolute readiness characteristic.

Readiness Screening

Citing work by the Gesell Institute (Ilg, Ames, Haines, & Gillespie, 1978) that has asserted that chronological age was no guarantee of school readiness, some school people were not satisfied that readiness would be assured with earlier entrance cutoffs. Developmental age, assessed by a readiness screening, would provide a better indicator. Screening programs were instituted before kindergarten or between kindergarten and first grade to assess whether children were ready for these experiences. In examining the psychometric properties of the readiness instruments used in these screening programs, it has been found, however, that they are not very good predictors of how children will perform at a later date. Most instruments used for screening or placement decisions have lower than adequate predictive validities, resulting in high rates of misidentification (Meisels, 1985; Shepard & Smith, 1986; Graue & Shepard, 1989; Ellwein, Walsh, Eads, and Miller, 1991). Children are identified as unready when in fact they would have made satisfactory progress.

Extra-Year Programs

Many states, districts, and schools came to the conclusion that to meet the needs of children that were not ready for the regular school experience, they should develop special programs. These programs typically involve providing children with a

different kind of curriculum and classroom structure that has a slower pace than the traditional kindergarten or first grade program. With this kind of placement, children would have time to develop more fully, so that they will be more ready for the demands of school. Children generally go through the extra-year program, then on through the traditional school track, requiring them to spend three years to get to second grade when it is usually a two-year sequence.

These extra-year programs can be policy-explicit, such as a developmental kindergarten or transitional first grade, in which the school provides classrooms and staff for children judged to need more time. Research on these extra-year programs finds no benefit for the special placements, with students either not doing as well or performing equal to their promoted peers (Shepard & Smith, 1988). Or extra-year practices can come from what Shepard (1990) has called *backdoor policies* because there are no official programs or criterion for placement. A popular unstated extra-year policy is the practice of academic redshirting or holding out. When children are held out of kindergarten, their enrollment is delayed when they are legally eligible to attend school according to their chronological age. Entrance to kindergarten occurs the following year, when the child is one year older. Decisions about holding children out are based on the idea that readiness only comes with time, so the best way to help children who lack sufficient readiness is to give them more time to develop it. It appears that children are not always enrolled in school when they are legally eligible and that decisions made by teachers and parents are based on individual judgments concerning readiness.

Readiness as a Child Characteristic

Whether academics, policymakers, teachers, or parents are using the concept of readiness, it is almost always conceptualized as a characteristic of an individual child that develops as the child grows. It is usually depicted as some combination of cognitive, psychomotor, and socio-emotional development that should be presented in a balance that is congruent with the child's chronological age. Different theories of readiness depict a variety of mechanisms for readiness development, but all seem to agree that readiness is something *within* a child that is necessary for success in school. It is seen as a stable, measurable capacity that

can be assessed by professionals who use results to make educational decisions, including those related to instruction and placement. We should be able to see readiness in children, quantify it, and provide placements that will increase it if there is a deficit.

But in gathering all the information related to readiness issues and policies, a question begins to form. In terms of the perfect school entrance age, readiness appears to be relative to the particular age cutoff chosen. Instruments used to screen for readiness are unable to match readiness judgments at the time of measurement (concurrent validity) or at some future point (predictive validity) and therefore often mis-classify children. When predictive validity is seen as part of construct validity, it becomes necessary to question the very use of the construct of readiness. When these issues are considered in conjunction with the questionable efficacy of extra-year programs, it begins to appear that readiness may not be what everyone thought it was. Perhaps readiness is *not* something within a child that can be measured in a standardized manner and used uniformly by decision-makers. Perhaps it is something else.

The study that is discussed in this book conceptualized readiness from a different perspective. Instead of a child characteristic, readiness was examined as a socially constructed set of ideas or meanings used to shape the first formal school experiences of children and their families. In examining the kindergarten experience in three communities, ideas about readiness were a distinguishing characteristic of the local communities. These ideas emerged from community values and expectations and they were related to individual children in terms of attributes like their age, sex, and preschool experience. Readiness test results also formed the basis of some ideas about readiness, but they represented only a small set of the skills, attributes, and attitudes that were believed necessary to school success. From these ideas representing forces both in and outside the school, children came to be understood in the context of a particular community's meaning of readiness.

This view of readiness clearly departs from the commonly held notions used among teachers and parents, policymakers and academics. It represents a change in view of and response to the child that is framed from a cultural and social perspective. To understand why this shift was necessary, it is helpful to think about the theories that are the foundation for our common use of the term readiness and the practices that come out of those

views. The next section reviews psychological theory related to readiness and the research and policy representations of the readiness construct that have shaped much parenting and educational practice.

Readiness

Educational research on readiness has relied on underlying views about child growth and development. Four general schools of thought can be distinguished related to readiness: maturationist, environmentalist, joint consideration of maturation and environment at the individual level, and constructivist. These underlying psychological theories have profound implications for the readiness conceptualization and educational applications that follow.

Those who take a maturationist orientation see readiness as biological. Exemplified best by the writings from the Gesell Institute, readiness is portrayed as a biological unfolding of psychomotor, cognitive, and emotional structures that are the foundation of child behavior. Classification of behaviors, grouped by age, have formed the basis for postulated developmental patterns and sequences. From these guidelines, instructional tasks are presented to children that match their developmental level. Teachers are advised to delay the introduction of activities for which the child is unready (i.e., beyond his/her developmental level). Time for growth is the only mechanism for enhancing readiness. In a journal article titled "Not Ready! Don't Push Me!", Carolyn Hall Hammond exemplified the maturationist approach:

> Why would any parent want to send a child to school who is "Not Ready" and commit that child to an experience that may very well prove to be harmful? Some parents equate intellectual capacity with development. If they do acknowledge that intelligence and development are separate, they feel that intelligence is all one needs to have in order to be a school success. Some believe that development can be taught. Some believe that the child can be "beefed-up"! *Development is something that cannot be rushed!* Time will take its course and the development will happen naturally... "School Readiness" is like a loaf of bread. Flour, water, sugar, shortening, and milk are some of the ingredients needed in a loaf of bread. But if the yeast has been omitted, the bread won't rise. Unconditional love, trust, an average intelligence and a birth date that falls on or before January 2 are some of the ingredients any child needs in order

> to experience school success. But when the developmental age of 5 has been omitted, the child may not be able to "rise" to the expectations of parents and teachers (1986, pp. 278-9).

From the environmentalist perspective readiness is understood as skills or experiences that must be comprised in a certain way for school success. The ready child is a puzzle with all the pieces in place. If skills are seen as the pieces of the puzzle, the key to fixing the readiness problem is to (1) identify the missing pieces and then (2) provide instruction to generate their placement. Teachers and caregivers are viewed as having a pivotal role in developing readiness by assessing readiness problems, providing experiences that fill in deficits, and matching abilities with those required by the school. This approach is often used to justify programs for children identified unready due to what has been called at different times in our educational history culturally disadvantaged, environmentally deprived, or at-risk. It is thought that some children come to school unready because they lack the experience to be successful. The school works to fill in those holes by providing extra services for these children: school attendance before the legal entrance age, extended attendance during what is normally a half-day kindergarten program, smaller class sizes, additional staff. The difference between this view of readiness and the maturationist perspective rests in both the mechanism of readiness and remedy for problems: in one case educational intervention is forbidden, in the other it is vital. An example of the environmentalist approach to readiness is the Early Prevention of School Failure program, used in many communities for students thought to be at-risk.

Ausubel (1963) articulated a theory of learning that addressed the issue of readiness as a composite of environmental and biological forces. Ausubel's ideas about readiness were focused on specific tasks but have been broadened to notions of readiness for school:

> By readiness is meant the adequacy of existing cognitive equipment or capacity at a given age level for coping with the demands of a specified cognitive task. It can therefore be considered the developmental aspect of cognitive structure. Empirically, readiness is indicated by ability to profit from practice or learning experience... Readiness is a function of both general cognitive maturity and of particularized learning experience (pp. 29-30).

When readiness is conceived as having both environmental and biological components, remediation of readiness problems is more complex than if the mechanism is based on either one in isolation. In addition, Ausubel introduces a third component: task requirements. Readiness becomes a function of balancing the physical developmental level and the past experience of the learner with the demands of a given task. The question of readiness begins to include "Ready for what?"

The final view of development is very broad and has been called constructivist. From this perspective, the key to development is the interaction between the individual and the environment. Readiness is not an issue for constructivists who focus on the active individual constructing knowledge. The readiness threshold holds no importance. Although very different in their approaches to development, the work of Piaget (incorporated into the Bank Street or High Scope early education models) and Vygotsky (represented by the Kamehameha Early Education Program) could be seen as examples of constructivist perspectives. This developmental view is mentioned here because it has had such a powerful impact on academic curriculum work and it represents some of the most promising theory in the field.

From the description of developmental theory, it can be seen that views of child development are related to conceptions of readiness, including its developmental mechanism and proper intervention strategies. While there has been much work done on readiness in educational research, the focus of almost all of it has been from either the maturational or environmental perspectives. From either view, readiness is treated as if it were a child characteristic. There is a sense that children are ready (or not), that the level of readiness can be assessed, and that some kind of intervention program can be developed and used to increase readiness.

Research on Practices Related to Readiness

Examining the literature on readiness is of interest for more than the traditional review purpose. The image of readiness presented in the literature indicates not only how the academic community has conceptualized the construct but can also be seen as shaping readiness ideas in other communities as well. Examining research on readiness over time helps us track the changes in ideas about readiness and provides the foundation for its treatment in this work.

The literature on readiness can be divided in a number of different ways. In terms of this study, readiness was conceptualized as a global category; a multidimensional construct that is implicitly analogous to competence or maturity.[1] The implicit definition of readiness is interesting in this research because authors very rarely *define* readiness. It appeared that most authors assumed that readiness was accepted as an idea to such an extent that its meaning was universally known. Readiness for school was often operationalized as performance on a kindergarten-administered test or by comparing younger and older children on performance (grades, teacher ratings, test scores).

Prior to 1985, the literature on readiness tended to be limited to individual studies speaking to single readiness-related policies. In general, these studies fell into four categories: the impact of age on performance or youngness research, studies based on youngness work that examined the kindergarten entrance age, studies of kindergarten readiness testing and the examination of extra-year programs.

Youngness

Following the idea that younger children in a group are at a disadvantage relative to their older peers, much research has compared the performance of the youngest and oldest children at various points in their school careers. In these studies, readiness is the ability to perform at some later date (usually first grade) and there is an assumed relationship between readiness and age (Shepard & Smith, 1986). For these comparisons, the youngest children in a group almost always fare less well than their older classmates (Bigelow, 1934; King, 1955; Green & Simmons, 1962; Carroll, 1963; Hall, 1963; Halliwell & Stein, 1964; Beattie, 1970; Davis et al., 1980; Kalk, Langer, & Searls, 1981). The differences between younger and older students were never as large as the talk in the early childhood community would imply (in the range of seven or eight percentile points) and the gap usually disappeared as the children got older (Miller & Norris, 1967; Langer, Kalk & Searls, 1984). An interesting factor in these studies was noted by Weinstein (1968-69) and Gredler (1980). They suggested that the use of outcomes like retention and referral to special education could very well be biased because they were influenced by teacher expectation and belief about the relationship of child age and performance. Teacher willingness to deal with various ability ranges becomes the key issue. Therefore, in studies that find that

the youngest children were more likely to be retained (Langer et al., 1984; Uphoff, 1985), referred to special education (DiPasquale, Moule, & Flewelling, 1980) or labelled learning disabled (Maddux, 1980; Diamond, 1983), the outcomes are very likely the result of teacher ideology.

Kindergarten Entrance Age

In response to the youngness research, many states and districts enacted policies that resulted in an older kindergarten population. Policymakers reasoned that children would be more ready for school if their kindergarten enrollment were delayed. In response there has been a steady trend to require children to be older before starting school. A 1958 survey found that most districts had either December or January 1 cutoffs, allowing children to enter school at about the age of four years eight months (Educational Research Service, 1958). By 1985, state-level data showed a substantial shift in entrance polices, with a September 1 cutoff the most popular and two-thirds of the states having an entrance date on or before October 1 (Education Commission of the States, 1985). This results in a modal kindergarten entrance age of four years eleven months. The students in the window between the two entrance dates move from being in the youngest part of the kindergarten age cohort to being in the oldest part of the age cohort. Because of the belief about the relationship between age and readiness, children that would have, in general, been seen as the least ready would now be judged to be the most ready. In addition, this move in the entrance cutoff requires a delay in entrance for approximately 25% of the kindergarten population who falls between the old and new cutoff.

Gredler (1975) responded to these trends by pointing out that the issue of the "optimal" kindergarten entrance age has been overblown by the educational establishment as it is a relative rather than an absolute problem. He noted that no matter what entrance cutoff is set, there will always be a youngest group who will do a little less well than the oldest children in the class.

Heightening awareness of the relative nature of readiness judgments, Gredler broadened the scope of entrance age studies by looking to policies in other countries. Citing a study by Jinks (1964) Gredler noted that British educators categorized younger and older children in the same way that American educators would, i.e., the older students were seen to be more competent than their younger peers. Noting that in Britain, with its entrance

age of 4½, "the *older* group which is found to do so well in Jinks' investigation is the *younger* group in American studies! This obviously points up the relativity of the judgments being made" (p. 209).

Readiness screening

With a persistent concern about fixing readiness problems, policymakers turned with increasing frequency to the adoption of screening programs to identify at-risk children. Broadening their focus beyond early intervention models that were developed for the handicapped (for placements under PL 94-142) or the disadvantaged (for placements in Head Start programs), screening began to focus on issues of readiness or developmental immaturity (Meisels, 1987). Readiness screening focused on removing unready using something more precise than chronological age; they chose a readiness indicator embodied in a test.

A key question raised about these tests is whether they are valid enough to use for individual placement decisions. Meisels made an important distinction between developmental screening tests and readiness tests that focuses on their use: developmental screening tests "provide a brief assessment of a child's developmental abilities" while readiness tests "are concerned with those curriculum-related skills a child has already acquired" (Meisels, 1987, p. 4). The former are useful for identification of children in need of some kind of intervention program (should Jack be placed in developmental kindergarten?) while the latter are helpful in curriculum planning (should these children be introduced to the alphabet at this time?). Unfortunately, the two types of tests have been used interchangeably, which is not appropriate. Developmental screening tests are not valid for readiness testing and vice versa. Not every test with the word readiness in its name is appropriate for placement decisions.

A recent predictive validity study of the *Brigance Kindergarten and First Grade Screen*, the *Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning-Revised*, the *Daberon Screening for School Readiness*, and the *Missouri Kindergarten Inventory of Developmental Skills* conducted in Virginia examined these tests' predictive validity. Ellwein, Walsh, Eads, & Miller (1991) found that males, children of color, low SES and relatively younger examinees were much more likely to be identified as unready or at-risk. None of the screening tests had impressive predictive validities, with classification errors a necessary danger.

Extra-Year Programs

To deal with children found to be unready by test results or professional judgment, schools have frequently developed programs to give students what is often called "the gift of time." These alternative programs include holding children out of school for a year, in-school prekindergarten programs, retention in kindergarten, or transitional programs between kindergarten and grade one. In making the case for extra time, Donofrio (1977) suggested that it is better to allow unready children to "mark time" until they are able to meet the demands of a classroom with children who are like them in terms of their developmental age, a euphemism for a concept that describes a child's level of maturation rather than chronological age.

In contrast to the beliefs of most parents and educators (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1984), the results of research about extra-year programs have been primarily negative. When compared to children of the same ability who were promoted, retained students do not perform as well on measures of academic or social-emotional level (Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983; Holmes & Matthews, 1984). Nor does retention reduce the variability of student ability in classrooms (Bossing & Brien, 1979; Haddad, 1979).

An interesting problem with these studies is that they confound the validity of the readiness construct and the validity of the treatment. In many cases, it is impossible to disentangle the utility of the assessment instrument used to determine readiness and the extra-year program that follows the identification. The extra-year programs may look ineffective either because children are misidentified or the treatment does not work.

There is argument among those in the developmental placement community about whether all extra-year programs are equal. Is it the same to retain a child in kindergarten as to place her in a transitional program? Separate analysis of transitional programs was completed by Gredler in 1984. Of the five studies he reported, four found no difference between the children placed in extra-year programs and those who had been recommended for the transition program but had been placed in first grade. The one positive study (Raygor, 1972) had differences in favor of the transition program students that disappeared by grade three. A study by Leinhardt (1980) compared the performance of (1) transition room children who participated in an individualized instruction program with (2) at-risk children who were promoted with no special instruction and (3) children recommended for

transition room placement who were promoted and received individualized instruction. There were no differences between the first two groups and the group that had the best performance was the promoted group with special instruction. Lower self-esteem and self-confidence were found in transition room children than was reported for at-risk children who were promoted (Bell, 1972). Finally, May and Welch (1984) studied a developmental placement program in which children who were identified as unready by the *Gesell School Readiness Test* were recommended to "Buy-a-Year" and spend an additional year before entering second grade. Children who refused this special placement were called "Over-placed." On both the state achievement test at the end of third grade and the *Stanford Achievement Test* given in second, fourth, and sixth grades, there were no differences between the two groups who had both been defined as at-risk. In addition, on the Stanford there were no differences between these initiallyhese results, May and Welch called into question both the predictive validity of the Gesell School Readiness Tests and the treatment validity of the extra-year placement program.

Studies that examine the unstated policy of holding out are more recent. Only three studies were found in a review of literature during the period of 1970 to 1990. In an evaluation of a district kindergarten program, Katz, Raths, and Torres (1987) found a pervasive concern about holding out voiced by teachers, parents, and district administrators. Longitudinal data from within the district indicated that the average age of kindergartners in the district was rising, which could be seen as evidence of delayed entry of significant numbers of students. Recommendations of the evaluation team included enrollment of age eligible children into unscreened kindergarten programs, using age as the sole criterion for entrance.

Cameron and Wilson (1990) focused on the effects of chronological age at school entrance and gender on academic achievement and retention. Students who entered kindergarten a year after they were legally eligible were compared with students who entered in their first year of eligibility and who were classified by birthdate. Results on the *Cognitive Abilities Test* in first grade were used as a covariate. There were significant differences in second grade performance on the *Iowa Test of Basic Skills* reading and composite scores for those students who were oldest in their kindergarten cohort (had a birthdate between September 15 and December 15, with a September 15 entrance cutoff) and the rest

of the kindergartners (including redshirted students). These differences held up in measures of performance in grade four, although they diminished in size. For children retained in grade, there were no differences in frequency of retention by gender or age group. The authors noted that:

> those students we described as redshirts did not appear to gain competitive advantage as a result of delaying entry to school. We concluded that delay of school entry is not advisable in this district and should not be encouraged by administrators or teachers as a means of insuring better academic performance (pp. 262-263).

In a study of kindergarten age distributions, Shepard, Graue, and Catto (1989) surveyed 19 Colorado school districts, representing approximately two-thirds of the state kindergarten population. Estimates of holding out, calculated from the proportion of children missing from the youngest six months of the kindergarten age range, were developed and compared to the proportion of students overage for their grade placement. Patterns of holding out were more prevalent for boys than for girls and appeared to be more pronounced for districts with September entrance cutoffs than those with either summer or late fall dates. In the one district that contributed individual student SES data, there was no relationship between SES and being overage for girls, while for boys the correlation was .18. When only those schools with holding out effects greater than 10% were included, the correlation rose to .37. This follows the common perception of early childhood specialists that more advantaged parents are more likely to hold their sons out of kindergarten.

A Change in the Representation of Readiness Issues

In 1985, the Boulder Valley Kindergarten Study addressed the issues of readiness and retention from a more integrated perspective of policy analysis, rather than the previously splintered, single issue approach (Shepard & Smith, 1985). In response to a request from the local school district to examine the process by which children are retained in kindergarten and measure the effects of extra-year kindergarten programs, Shepard and Smith designed a study that took a holistic approach to the main aspects of readiness that had been represented in the literature: youngness

(the relationship between child age and retention decisions as well as school performance), entrance age (the search for a good entrance age), readiness testing (validity and reliability of the *Gesell School Readiness Test*), and extra-year programs (cognitive and emotional benefits of retention, child characteristics that lead to a retention decision, and characteristics of developmental and transition classrooms). The authors went beyond the normal cause and effect examination of a single problem in a local setting and assessed the assumptions surrounding the main questions and their attendant sub-questions.

The existing literature did not support academic or social-emotional benefit from retention of "immature" children. These results held up in the local study, with the only positive result coming in a one month gain in reading when children who had been retained were compared with like children in low retaining schools. From parent survey data, no benefit was found for either kindergarten retention or extra-year kindergarten programs on first grade performance, school attitude, peer interaction, or readiness for second grade.

In addition, a new dimension was added to the study of readiness. The nature of teacher philosophies about child development, the characteristics of unready children, descriptions of their kindergarten program, and their views of kindergarten retention were joined to develop a picture of readiness as a belief held by teachers. Teacher belief about readiness as related to retention varied along a dimension of nativism.[2] Teachers ranged from those who saw child growth and development as solely a biological process, to those who viewed it as a product of the environment. Teachers tended to utilize their beliefs about readiness in practices like retention, with teachers holding the biological view having higher retention rates. At a school level, teachers in the same building tended to share readiness beliefs.

From this point, readiness was more frequently addressed in terms of the related policy issues, especially in the practitioner-oriented press. With increasing public attention focused on early education, a parade of review articles appeared pulling together research on readiness, examining the policies (like setting an entrance age or implementing a screening program) that come out of assumptions and beliefs about readiness (Shepard & Smith, 1986; Connell, 1987; Meisels, 1987; Peck, McCaig, & Sapp, 1988; Charlesworth, 1989; Bredekamp & Shepard, 1989; Freeman, 1990).

These reviews consistently found that the previous patterns of results held in the more recent studies.

In terms of the youngness research, several studies have found that the youngest in a class do not do as well as their older classmates in academic achievement and adjustment (Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986; Karweit, 1988), but Kinard & Reinherz (1986) noted that initial differences at school entry disappeared by grade three. In a review of twenty-one studies on children admitted to school prior to the mandated entrance age, Proctor, Black, and Feldhusen (1986) found no apparent harmful effects. In a review of entrance age policies, Graue and Shepard (in press) showed that trends to require children to be older before starting kindergarten continue. For example, one state (Missouri) moved to a July 1 entrance cutoff, requiring children to be five years two months old before entering school.

National professional associations (NAEYC, 1988; National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1990) have issued strong criticisms of the use of standardized testing with kindergartners, including the readiness tests that have become so popular. Meisels (1987) outlined the appropriate testing practices with young children and warned against the use of tests for purposes other than what they were designed and proven to be useful.

In a review of research on kindergarten extra-year programs, Shepard (1989) extended the number of studies examined by Gredler in 1984 and did separate analyses of retention and transition programs. The overall finding agreed with Gredler's that retention and transition rooms are not effective interventions. There was no difference between the performance of children who had been placed in transition classes and those who had been recommended but had refused placement. In measures of academic performance, differences between transition room and control students disappeared in follow-ups that examined their work in third or fourth grade. On social-emotional measures (which were rarely included in these studies), extra-year students were the same or showed negative effects when compared to controls.

In an international comparison of readiness policies and issues, Engel (1989) reviewed five areas of interest in Australia, Britain, Japan, New Zealand, the Soviet Union, Sweden, Switzerland, and West Germany. In terms of school entrance age, children started school as early as four years old in Great Britain and Australia and as old as seven in Sweden. Age-related differences in performance within groups were found with British,

U.S., and Swedish children, who entered school at age 5, 6, and 7 respectively, indicating that the advantage of being relatively older existed regardless of entrance age. Adoption of an entrance age comes as the result of historical, political, and climate forces rather than for educational reasons. Readiness testing was not required at the national level in any of the countries included in the study. However, at the state and local level, there were a number of assessments of readiness used that ranged from checklists to standardized tests. Examining the use of ability grouping in kindergarten, Engel found that New Zealand and Britain had some kind of ability grouping in place, while Sweden and Japan explicitly did not participate in that practice. Although Japan and the Soviet Union did not retain students in grade, West Germany, Switzerland, and New Zealand retained children (with rates as low as 5% and as high as 33%). The content of the kindergarten curriculum was debated in England, Japan, and the Soviet Union as it was in the United States. It appears that readiness is an international topic, not just an issue in the U.S.

In an ERIC document on Readiness for Kindergarten, Nurss (1987) echoing Ausubel, defined readiness as

> a term to describe preparation for what comes next: readiness for kindergarten involves both the child and the instructional situation. Any consideration of the preparation a child needs to be successful in kindergarten must take into account the kindergarten program and the teacher's expectations of the child (p. 1).

After exploring social and behavioral, sensory-motor, cognitive and language expectations as well as chronological age and the kindergarten curriculum, Nurss concluded:

> Readiness for kindergarten depends on a child's development of social, perceptual, motor, and language skills expected by the teacher. It also depends on the curriculum's degree of structure, the behavior required by the instructional program, and expectations of what is to be achieved by the end of the program (p. 2).

This definition, in a document often disseminated to practitioners, stressed the contextual nature of readiness. Nurss identified both the child and the instructional situation (including teacher expectations) as salient in a determination of readiness, not just an inherent child characteristic.

In a NAEYC Public Policy Report, Willer and Bredekamp (1990) called for a redefinition of readiness as an "Essential Requisite of Education Reform" (p. 22). Citing the fact that recent reform efforts have tied readiness assessments to school accountability measures, the authors noted that this promoted the idea of readiness as a gatekeeping mechanism which is antithetical to the goals of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. They focused on how faulty assumptions about readiness lead to this gatekeeping mentality and asserted that the focus should move from determining whether children are ready for school, to ensuring that children are ready to succeed. Again this piece was an attempt to address the issue of readiness through the policies that come from assumptions about how children learn. It was followed closely by a position statement by NAEYC (1990) on the topic of school readiness issues that addressed practices in schools related to readiness and emphasized the importance of the school being ready for all children.

Readiness has often been conceptualized in the literature and policy arena as a characteristic of a child which must be assessed to determine whether that child can benefit from certain school experiences. Changes in the late 1980s shifted the way that readiness is represented in the literature. With increasing frequency, it was discussed in terms of the policy implications of the child characteristic model and finally in terms of a teacher belief system that influences instructional and policy decision making. It is this view of readiness that makes the concept of social construction in the conceptualization of readiness particularly compelling.

The next chapter provides an overview of social construction theory, with a discussion of its application in contemporary research. In addition, a theoretical framework is proposed that is compatible with the social constructionist perspective, as well as a description of how readiness might be studied from a social and cultural orientation. Chapter 3 describes methods used in this study to examine readiness meanings. Chapter 4 analyzes the stated curriculum in the Thomas School District, the site of this study. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are case descriptions of the construction of the meaning of readiness in the communities of Fulton, Norwood, and Rochester, respectively. The final chapter compares these meanings across settings and posits implications for this new view of readiness.