(Re) producing Meaning and Practice for Young Children's Readiness and Success In Context of Urban Reform

Jennifer Astuto

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2006

UMI Number: 3205023

ProQuest Information and Learning Company
300 North Zeeb Road
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirements for the degree for Doctor of Philosophy.

January 31st, 2006
Date

Joseph A. Glick
Joseph A. Glick
Chair of Examining Committee

January 31st, 2006
Date

Joseph A. Glick
Joseph A. Glick
Executive Officer

Anna Stetsenko
William Kornblum
LaRue Allen (reader)
Michelle Fine (reader)

Supervisory Committee

Abstract

(Re) producing Meaning and Practice for Young Children's Readiness and Success In the Context of Urban Reform

Jennifer Astuto

Advisor: Joseph Glick

In 1990 the President and 50 governors established 8 National Education Goals. The first goal stated "by the year 2000 all children in America will start school ready to learn". In 2002, George W. Bush initiated "No Child Left Behind" education legislation which provides schools a nationwide curriculum, methodology and law which penalize educational institutions which do not meet test score standards. This socio-political framework has shaped the national research agenda, educational policy and practice, and public expectations regarding "normative" benchmarks of school readiness for young children across America, regardless of the differing circumstance in which children and families live. The purpose of the study was to 1) explore how meanings of school readiness and success are produced in an urban school for early-childhood educators/school staff, 2) to examine the specific beliefs and values of early childhood educators/school staff about "readiness" when entering pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and first-grade and 3) to explore how local meanings of readiness and success impact the instructional practices and classroom activities. Teachers and school officials participated in interviews, formally and informally structured to document how beliefs about readiness and success for young children

are produced, as well as what those beliefs are. Participant observations of classroom practices and sites of decision-making for young children and fieldnotes were documented to capture how beliefs about readiness and success for young children shapes school practices, activities and decision making. Results suggest that the concept of readiness is nested within a complex system focusing on children and school-wide beliefs and practices. Readiness, in that form, clearly continues to exist as a conceptual framework. However, new factors, related to federal legislation and its anticipated funding impact on schools has emerged as a more central player in driving early childhood school practices. Administrative demands of complying with federal funding demands has become more important to school administrators (as a matter of survival) than ideas about development, teacher morale and/or the cultural relations of schools and communities. To some extent the concept of readiness has blended into the concept of "ready or not, here I come, and you'd better be accountable."

DEDICATION

Without hesitation this work is dedicated to my first mentor, Gloria Astuto. Her understanding and excitement of a daughter's experience although unlike her own; her capacity to nurture our similarities as well as celebrate and embrace our differences and her unforgettable and relentless encouragement has led me here today.

Acknowledgements

I did not take this journey alone. It would have been impossible to do so; I will never forget the people and experiences which guided me forward.

The patience and understanding of my family and close friends even when my choices and commitments seemed unfamiliar was bright and uplifting. The support, insight and commitment of "Ms. Douglas" an early childhood educator, will never stop inspiring me.

Along the way I have been fortunate to meet others who inexhaustiblely nurtured my development and believed in my work which led me to believe in it too. Joe Glick is one of these people. As a mentor he created a safe space for me to cultivate ideas and identities; as a friend he enabled me to struggle with and challenge myself and my work. I am eternally grateful for this unique, unforgettable experience. LaRue Allen, a mentor and friend who has graciously "raised me" intellectually will always remain a great source of inspiration, strength and honesty. The thoughtfulness, encouragement and support of Michelle Fine and Martin Ruck is always welcomed and never underappreciated. I want to also thank Anna Stetsenko and Bill Kornblum for their insight and guidance throughout my dissertation work.

Finally, I want to acknowledge a relationship which also matured within the context of this work, and continues to be a foundation of surprise, love, understanding and growth. To my friend and partner Cesar Zuñiga, thank-you….

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter One
Overview

The history of school reform in this country is marked by political fervor and hope. Accompanying the waves of educational policy shifts is the development of reform rhetoric which shapes research, practice, and policy efforts. Over the past decade, early childhood reform specifically, has embodied the rhetoric of "school readiness". Gaining national prominence after the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) indicated in goal number one, "By the year 2000 all children in American will go to school ready to learn", school readiness definitions have been the center of current early childhood reform in many ways (National Education Goals Panel, 1990). Initial concepts of school readiness were viewed to be narrow, uni-dimensional and inappropriately placing the burden of proof on the child. As a result, caution from those interested in the successful development of children from diverse backgrounds emerged. For example, the National Association for Educating Young Children (NAEYC) suggests that any discussions of school readiness must consider at least three critical factors:

1. the diversity of children's early life experiences as well as inequity in experiences;
2. the wide variation in young children's development and learning; and
3. the degree to which school expectations of children entering kindergarten are reasonable, appropriate, and supportive of individual differences (NAEYC Position Statement on School Readiness, 2005 retrieved on June 12, 2005 at http://www.naeyc.org/about/positions/psredy98.asp).

The socio-political framework of reform rhetoric shapes the national research agenda, local educational policy and practice, and public expectations regarding "normative" benchmarks of school readiness and success for young children across America. Still today, with many efforts to support a contextualized analysis of readiness for young children, current educational policy pays little attention to the enormous variability in which diverse children and families live and are educated.

The purpose of the current study was to explore how meanings and practices related to the concept of readiness and success for young children were produced and related to the adaptation of local reform in early childhood education in an urban school community. Specifically, this study was designed to understand how the concept of school readiness is developed by teachers and schools staff as reflective of the kind of meanings and practices that were salient within their "culture" or current experience. The second aim was to explore how these meanings and/or beliefs relate to current local educational policies and practices regarding readiness and success for young children.

The specific aims of the study were:

1. To explore how beliefs about school readiness or success are produced within the context of an urban school community for early-childhood educators and school/district staff.
2. To examine the specific beliefs, notions and values of early childhood educators, and school/district staff about what children should know

and be able to do when entering pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and first-grade.

3. To explore how local beliefs of readiness and success relate to the practices and activities which involve young children's opportunities for learning and development.

As the study evolved it became evident that although "school readiness" existed as a conceptual framework, factors related to federal legislation became the driving forces behind early childhood school practices. Overall, the concept of readiness was operating within the context of "accountability" dismissing the treatment of young children's readiness from a developmental point of view. By capturing how school-level practices were situated and produced within a specific political, social and cultural framework, the real life experiences of teachers, school staff and children buried beneath a cleanly defined set of constructs related to school readiness were revealed. An examination of how notions of readiness and success, in the context of accountability, structure the opportunities, influence decisions and create or obstruct pathways of learning for young children is presented.

Chapter Two
Literature Review

A HISTORY OF "READINESS"

Approximately fifteen years ago, a federal priority to support and define "readiness" for young children for school was established. Empirical research soon followed, suggesting that children who begin school without the necessary "readiness" skills are more likely to have difficulty throughout their school careers, academically and socially (e.g., Entwistle & Alexander, 1993) than those who enter with the necessary skills. Similarly, children who are "ready" in pre-k and kindergarten are more likely to achieve "school success" commonly defined as scoring average or above on standardized achievement tests in early grades. Yet despite years of interest in getting children ready for school, progress toward this goal has been slow: for example, between 1993 and 1999, the percentage of 4-year-old children who could recognize all letters of the alphabet remained stable, at 28%. Looking at a broader range of emerging skills (recognizing all letters, counting to 20 or higher, writing one's name, and reading or pretending to read), researchers found only a 4% change in six years, from 65% to 69%, among 5-year-olds about to enter kindergarten (Chandler, Nord, Liu, & Lennon, 1999).

The effort to move all children in America towards a successful model of "readiness" was apparently failing. In 1995, the NEGP responded to this trend by

streamlining the definition of the concept of readiness into 5 components: 1) physical development, 2) language development, 3) approaches to learning, 4) cognition and general knowledge, and 5) social-emotional competence. One particular "component" that has received much attention over the past several years is social-emotional competence (e.g., Huffman, Mehlinger, & Kerivan, 2000; Raver & Zigler, 1997; Raver, 2003). Social-emotional readiness skills include and are not limited to, being able to communicate desires and feelings, turn-taking and impulse control (Saarni, 1999). These skills have been identified by teachers as necessary readiness skills for kindergarten age children (Lewit & Baker, 1995). Early childhood programs and curricula which support early literacy skills as well as social-emotional skill development address the developmental needs of the child, as well as the classroom and school setting. By contrast, programs which primarily focus on cognitive skill development are unlikely to prepare young children for the increasing social and emotional demands of schooling, such as the capacity to sustain attention, the ability to get along with others and manage peer conflict.

One prong of school readiness research focuses on identifying particular risk and protective factors which influence readiness outcomes. A review of this literature presents a challenging state of affairs for schools serving low-income, minority students. For example, data indicate that variables such as poverty (Stipek & Ryan, 1997), maternal education status (Chandler et al., 1999), being a

member of a racial/ethnic minority (Swick, Brown, & Boutte, 1994), and aspects of the home environment (Linver, Brooks-Gunn, & Kohen, 2002)—among other things--all affect "school readiness" when defined as a set of skills, attributes or characteristics within a child. The effect of these factors appears to be additive: among 3- to 5-year-old children with 2 or more risk factors (e.g., low maternal education, mothers' language not being English, familial poverty, single parent home), only 26% exhibited 3 out of 4 of the readiness skills outlined by Chandler et al. above. For children with one risk factor, the percentage was 40%, and for children with no risk factors, the percentage was 47% (Chandler et al., 1999). According to this analysis, the outlook for "at-risk" populations, typically defined as being from a minority and/or immigrant group, living in poverty and raised in uneducated families is at best, grim.

Teacher and Parental Beliefs

Documenting parental and teacher beliefs about readiness for young children has provided important insight into how we think about children's first schooling experiences. These data fill in the space between what we know about readiness as a child-characteristic and how those who interact with children weigh these skills as a critical component in adapting and learning during early educational experiences.

Researchers have systematically surveyed parents and teachers (typically from pre-kindergarten and kindergarten contexts), identifying similarities and

differences among visions of school readiness (Piotrkowski, Botsko & Matthews, 2000). Inconsistencies among parents and teachers beliefs about school readiness are reported. For example, parents emphasize academic skills more than kindergarten teachers (e.g., Galper, Wigfield, & Seefeldt, 1997; Knudsen-Lindauer & Harris, 1989; West, Hausken & Collins, 1993) and behavioral expectations are differentiated between groups (Foulks & Morrow, 1989). Ratings of particular skills influence early childhood curricula, professional development and school readiness assessment for young children.

Research with teachers and parents in "high-need" communities has garnered less attention. Few studies have examined variation on parental views from differentiated ethnic/cultural groups (Farver, Kim & Lee, 1995; Heaviside & Farris, 1993). Studies have aggregated data across socioeconomically diverse communities, resulting in little knowledge regarding the beliefs of teachers and parents within low-income communities (Holloway, Rambaud, Fuller, & Eggers-Pierola, 1995). Furthermore, highly representative participants in high-need communities have been excluded from participation samples. For example, in a study on parental and teacher beliefs in a high-need community, only Latino parents who were able to read English were retained in the final sample (Piotrkowski et al., 2000). Those who were poorer, less educated, less likely to be employed and more likely to speak Spanish at home were excluded, even though they represented a large proportion of the community under analysis. Overall our

understanding about readiness for young children in urban settings is limited.

This is made particularly apparent by the work of Graue (1993) and Smith and Shepard (1988) who demonstrated that readiness meanings have a particular local flavor which shapes how the early childhood experience for young children emerges. Specifically, Graue (1993) found that day to day decisions about how to prepare children for school emerge from the local level and that variability among these decisions was related to institutionalized practices and expectations of readiness for children in distinct contexts. Thus, conceptions of readiness are in part, locally constituted.

The development of meanings and beliefs of readiness represent only one factor in a complicated system-level operation concerned with educating young children. Beliefs of readiness and success for young children are not static concepts (Meisels, 1998). Rather, the rhetoric of readiness and success for young children is revealed in localized educational reform, influenced by and influencing accountability and assessment practices. For educators, researchers and policy makers to fully address the complex and diverse needs of American schools, they must explore how local reform contexts inform, produce and relate to the rhetoric and practices of getting children ready for school.

RETHINKING READINESS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CURRENT EDUCATION REFORM

Despite efforts to increase awareness of child development from a holistic,

multi-dimensional view, current education reform—as exemplified by the No Child Left Behind law-has created a challenging climate for this to successfully occur (Kohn, 2004). In the school year 2004-05, approximately 13% of all Title 1[1] schools were identified for improvement under NCLB for failing to meet adequate yearly progress[2] (AYP) goals in increasing test scores and meeting other benchmarks. Urban schools are reportedly marked for improvement at disproportionately higher rates than suburban or rural schools. For example, urban districts have 27% of the Title 1 schools nationally, but 42% of the Title 1 schools identified for improvement. By contrast, suburban schools have 41% of the Title

---

[1] Schools where at least 40 percent of the children in the school attendance area are from low-income families or at least 40 percent of the student enrollment is from low-income families are eligible to receive federal Title I funds. The proportion of low-income families is most frequently measured by the percent of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch. Title I funds are to be used for programs designed to improve the academic achievement of children from low-income homes. Over half of all public schools receive funding under Title I. No Child Left Behind requires all districts and schools receiving Title I funds to meet state "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) goals for their total student populations and for specified demographic subgroups. If a school receiving federal Title I funding fails to meet the AYP target for two consecutive years or more, the school is designated in need of improvement and faces consequences, including public school choice for students in the school, supplemental services (including tutoring) for students, certain corrective actions and school restructuring [Definition retrieved from http://www.greatschools.net/] .

[2] NCLB requires states to measure "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) for school districts and schools receiving Title I funds with the goal of all students reaching the proficient level on reading/language arts and mathematics tests by the 2013-14 school year. States must define minimum levels of improvement as measured by standardized tests chosen by the state. AYP targets must be set for overall achievement and for subgroups of students, including major ethnic/racial groups, economically disadvantaged students, limited English proficient (LEP) students and students with disabilities.

If a school fails to meet AYP for two consecutive years, the school is deemed in need of improvement -- Year 1 and must offer public school choice. If a school fails to meet AYP for three consecutive years, the school is labeled in need of improvement -- Year 2 and must offer public school choice and supplemental services, including tutoring. If a school fails to meet AYP for four consecutive years, the school is labeled in need of improvement -- Year 3 and must take corrective action. If a school fails to meet AYP for five consecutive years, the school is labeled in need of improvement -- Year 4 and must plan its restructuring. If a school fails to meet AYP for six consecutive years, the school is labeled in need of improvement -- Year 5 and must implement a restructuring plan. A school exits Program Improvement when it meets AYP for two out of three years [Definition retrieved from http://www.greatschools.net/].

1 schools nationally and 40% of the identified schools (Center on Education Policy, 2005). Thus, urban school districts experience a unique pressure to meet the goals of the federal law, forcing districts and schools to develop strategies which narrow educational goals (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005).

Touted as a federal priority, the notion of being "ready to learn" by age 4 has implicitly demanded a conceptualization of readiness as a quality that can be identified and measured within the child. Metaphorically, a child comes to the door of an early childhood classroom with their "luggage" filled with skills such as recognizing all letters, counting to 20 or higher, writing one's name, and reading or pretending to read. To date, despite efforts to support conceptual and practical definitional modifications (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995), readiness as a child- characteristic has dominated the field's conceptualization. Furthermore, schools are being relegated to develop accountability and assessment protocols for younger grades (e.g., kindergarten) in preparation for high-stakes testing which will take place years later. These conditions shape the way children's readiness and success are identified, assessed and encouraged—yet exactly how is not sufficiently understood.

Maintaining an essentializing view of readiness as a child-characteristic has encouraged the overall academic orientation of kindergarten, the exclusive focus on specific social-emotional or cognitive skills, as well as a disregard for situated, locally anchored experiences (e.g., Fagan & Fantuzzo, 1999; Graue, 1993; May & Kundert, 1992; Meisels, 1992). Focusing on readiness of the child assumes that

the system is apt and the child is either ready or not. This approach can occlude vision of the properties of the system as being adapted to the child. For example, accountability, assessment and funding trends create the context in which readiness is understood within the early childhood education, thus shaping what we know to be "readiness" for young children in a specific context.

The call for a "readiness" perspective in early childhood begs the question, "Ready for what?" which was first addressed by Graue in the early 90's. Emerging data suggests that what we expect children to be capable of during early childhood is no longer driven primarily by developmental and educational theories of learning (Rothman, 2005). Rather, practices of readiness—or schooling preparation-- conceal a much more complicated reality. The local experiences of urban schools, such as the day to day activities of educating young children and providing professional support to teachers, are shaped by federal legislation. This well intentioned legislation results in perverse consequences, such as the demoralization of teachers, the undermining of developmental practice and the indirect tracking of children based on limited and narrow assessment practices (e.g., Graue, Kroeger & Brown, 2003; NAECS, 2001). Although the call for "readiness" skills in early childhood was initiated before the current federal education legislation, the "readiness" expectations of schools, teachers, and children are currently being transformed by the current law with tremendous consequence. The refocusing of early childhood practices within the context of later academic demands and accountability pressures is one serious example.

Developmental expectations for children as well as professional expectations for teachers are emerging within a context of "fear", resulting in a variety of system level responses, with unforeseen implications for schools, communities, teachers and children. Beliefs and practices related to what makes a child "ready" for school are no longer simply about differentiated child-oriented developmental perspectives; one as patterned and intermittent (Katz, 1997) and the other understood as a social-cultural driven process (Guiterrez & Rogoff, 2003). Rather, more distal factors such as system resources and federal law shape early childhood expectations and practices. This study examined the issue of readiness looking at the concept of readiness as a system property rather than as an individual quality. By shifting analysis to the system, rather than the individual unit of the child, it was possible to examine how "readiness" was inextricably linked to multiple layers of factors such as school resources and performance expectations (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). These issues are further addressed in chapter four.

Studies of meaning construction for readiness have influenced the development of this dissertation (Graue, 1993; Smith & Shepard, 1988). Particularly, Graue's work in four school districts which examined how readiness meanings were locally constructed and connected to the requirements of a particular context. This dissertation expands on Graue's (1993) contributions in several different ways. Graue's (1993) use of a social constructivist framework provides a robust theoretical heuristic for exploring the forces that result in

differentiated profiles of readiness (Meisels, 1998). However, it does not permit an analysis of the interaction between "cultures" of readiness (e.g., teacher vs. district) or the production of activities that result from these beliefs. Therefore, the adoption of readiness as a relational, interactional construct was employed in the current study. "Readiness" is then a product of a set of educational decisions that are differentially shaped by the experiences, learning opportunities, and skills that the child and family have and the perspectives and goals of the community classroom and teacher (Meisels, 1998). Particularly, the relationship between how readiness was produced and operated in a system defined by specific early educational reform goals was examined.

This study makes several unique contributions to the literature on school readiness. It is one of the few studies to focus on the experiences of stakeholders in three interconnected contexts (pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and 1st grade). In addition, no work on readiness or early school success has conceptualized global school staff, such as the school principal or literacy coach, as significant players in the development of readiness meanings and related practices for early childhood. As multiple and divergent meanings within the system of schooling co-exist, practices and policies which relate to readiness and success for children and families follow. In part, the focus of this dissertation served to document the practices and activities of how (and why) an early childhood setting prepared children for learning and teachers for educating within the context of federal education reform.

This work explored "readiness" and "success" in cultural and social terms where meaning emerges from and produces experiences and interactions of a specific community of participants within a particular historical and political context (Vygotsky, 1978; Engetrom, Miettinen, & Punamaki, 1999). Teachers and schools synergistically interacted to co-create meanings of readiness which then guided early childhood practices. These beliefs are a result of culturally situated expectations and values about education for young children—expectations and values in part emerging from a robust educational reform movement in our country. Pathways of learning, then, are best understood in the context of a school's meaning and practices of readiness or success.

Production of the Readiness (Reform) Culture

"Culture" has been defined as interconnected systems of meanings, values, expectations and practices which continuously shape one's view and experience in the world. These systems—or ways of knowing and understanding one's experiences- continuously interact with our surroundings to modify, recreate and re-establish the rules and goals that function as behavior and choices (Vygotsky, 1978). How one views readiness and success for young children is filtered, transformed and shaped according to one's "culture" or systems of meanings. These meanings, in part, are derived from lived experiences. Thus, each participant in this study brought with them a system of meanings—a set of lived experiences that structured the (re)production of readiness and success practices. The phrase "(re) production" is employed to indicate the historical as well as the

current. That is, participants may have created meaning about success and readiness in the past and currently "reproduced" these meanings in the context of their current situation shaped by political and social forces.

Teachers

The growing impacts of NCLB assessment routines which begin in third grade are influencing the practices of teachers in early childhood. Specifically, the relation between early and later grades is becoming increasingly more salient because of the anticipated tests results that will drive the school's funding, reputation and future viability of teachers and children.

For this reason, teachers from three interconnected contexts were asked to participate in the study—pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and 1st grade. Teacher's experiences and goals influence how they make sense of readiness and success for young children. For example, studies report that teacher expectations about young children's readiness are influenced by the sex and race of the child, with lower expectations reported for poor, minority students (Good & Nichols, 2001; Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996). Contextual variables such as system-level accountability practices may also influence teacher practices and beliefs about readiness. Descriptions of teacher behavior and practice and how it relates to localized reform will inform our perspective of school reform in early childhood settings.

School & District Level

More often than ever, it is the "school" which is defined as failing or succeeding in terms of young children's success (Goodman, Shannon, Goodman,

& Rapoport, 2004). The school's "approach to learning" or lack of capacity and high standards are the first speculations pursued when children are or not performing at or above national norms on standardized tests. Schools become invested in a "right" approach to early education, and thus teachers, parents and other staff are expected to embrace these notions with little or not appeal. Consequently, on-going monitoring and evaluation of classroom practices become instituted as a means to assess accountability and benchmark performance.

Broader educational community beliefs also shape the readiness experiences and opportunities for young children and families. For example, district-wide messages about readiness and accountability concerns permeate throughout school culture. Principals who manage identified "at-risk" schools, such as the one recruited for this study, have enormous pressure to meet standards and "be ready" for unannounced, spontaneous district evaluation practices (personal communication with principal, 2004). Restructured polices and budgetary constraints exacerbate the tensions across districts and within schools (Scott, 2004), unequivocally playing a significant role in how the school produces a culture of readiness and success for young children and families.

Understanding what makes a child "ready" and or "successful" is a product of interactions among the players in the system, namely, teachers and broader school and district staff (e.g., principal, literacy coach). Notions and beliefs about readiness and success are the beginning production sources for practices and activities that are continuously transformed as individuals interact within and

across the system of practices-- a system that is operating in the context of unparallel educational policy. It is this unique nature of readiness, success and reform that has not been systematically explored.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS

This study was informed by a socio-cultural perspective on development which conceives of conceptualization and practice as inherently social, cultural and as adapted to circumstance. Rather than aiming to identify the objective reality of a particular phenomenon, this perspective considers the human-ness of experience; the way practice, activity and meaning emerge from social experiences among individuals (Vygotsky, 1978). The development and shaping of categories and relationships which are historically bound to particular groups of people is key to this understanding. Thus, individuals who interact in a common social and political context will co-construct meanings and engage in practices which reflect the social requirements of that context. The type and form of social activity, as well as the resources that are available for individuals in a particular setting will serve to support the meaning-making process, as well as the continuously evolving practices they engage in.

School readiness meanings were created and shaped by those who experienced the process of 'getting ready for school'. That is, early childhood teachers, and school staff constructed culturally-situated meanings of readiness for

the children they serve. Knowledge about what makes a child ready for school, as well as what makes a teacher ready to teach them, were generated through social practices unique to the participants in the urban context. Knowledge conceptualized as a verb, as something groups of people do together, rather than a "thing" ruminating in our mind or thoughts to give to someone is core to the understanding of socially anchored thought (Geertz, 1973). This knowledge or experience bound a community of teachers and school staff in a process of negotiation and interaction, specifically within the boundaries of assessment, accountability and funding processes. As meanings of readiness emerged from these processes, values, expectations and practices that supported and reflected these meanings followed. It is through these social interactions, meanings and practices of readiness can be examined from a contextually relevant perspective.

The aim of the current work was to explore complex relations among meaning, activity and practice in a particular setting. The unit of analysis was the social context, or in other words a "system of interactions" among different players (e.g., teachers, administrative staff) with varying goals (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004). For these reasons, the development of beliefs and practices of those in the system (e.g., teachers, broader school staff) were explored as a collective cultural process occurring in the socio-political timeframe of No Child Left Behind.

Cultural frameworks (e.g., Cole, 1996; Goldberger & Veroff, 1995; Shweder, 1995) allow us to examine the compositionality of the phenomena in

question. In this way, one is able to move beyond linear or bi-directional analyses which do not allow for the identification of a parallel process model of development. For educational policy in particular, identifying how various push and pull factors influence a system's functioning is critical. Rather than focusing on the influence of one variable or another, the conceptual goal of this work was to identify the structural configuration of the various factors impacting how the system adapted to readiness and reform goals. How meanings of readiness relate to practices in the classroom and/or district level expectations of young children, for example, is a different question than how they are different or similar. How practices and beliefs are organized by power, politics, and other social forces is another critical element in understanding the social-structural features of individual behaviors. A cultural- analytical approach led to a dynamic, embedded understanding of social practices regarding how the system managed current early educational reform expectations for everyone involved (e.g., teachers, students), which is pragmatically and conceptually important for an informed perspective of education policy.

A school setting is a culturally and socially organized place, which is situated in a unique historical moment. The system is organized by belief systems, varying privileges and resources and social practices. Understanding the development of belief systems and social practices from a cultural psychology perspective assumed that the study of the behavior in question emerged from within the system (Johoda, 1995). This "emic-approach" directed the

methodological decisions of the current study, resulting in the employment of ethnographic and qualitative strategies, which are further discussed in chapter three.

Social practices were part and parcel of inquiry for this research. A cultural perspective of development provided the conceptual tools to organize, analyze and interpret the data. The next chapter outlines the methodological approach of the study.

Chapter Three

Methodological Approach

METHODS OF ANALYSIS

Data were collected using ethnographic and qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, observations and fieldnotes (a more detailed description of each data source is offered later in this chapter). Two forms of analyses were employed to organize, analyze and interpret the data in this study; grounded theory and content analysis. Both of these approaches provided heuristic tools necessary in the naturalistic inquiry paradigm. For example, grounded theory analysis allowed for codes to emerge directly from the data. This "emergent" theory was critical in developing codes and theory reflective of the study context (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Once a set of codes and categories were identified, content analysis was utilized to further organize, analyze and interpret data from various sources. Using multiple methods of analysis during different phases of a research project is a common practice in interpretive work (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

From the onset of the project, an informant who is a Kindergarten teacher participated in the analysis process. Her participation provided a level of coder-reliability during the formative stages of analysis. Rather than relying solely upon my interpretations of the data, this person provided constructive insight, as well as "verification" of the analyses. As coding schemas emerged, I would present these

ideas to the informant and we would discuss them further. When there was disagreement about a particular interpretation, it was discussed and when applicable, the emerging conceptual model was modified. This collaboration facilitated on-going data analysis during the entire project timeframe. For these reasons, the data presented are contextually grounded and connect meaningfully to the realities of the setting in which I worked.

Similar to the methods used by Harry et al. (2005), different phases of the project were characterized by different analyses strategies reflecting key concepts of grounded theory and content analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1995; Ryan & Bernard, 2000). During the initial phase of the project (months 1-5), data from different sources (e.g., informal interviews, observations) were systematically reviewed for common categories based on open coding of preliminary data. In order for a category to be identified, convergence among different sources of data was required (e.g., informally interview, classroom observation). When categories appeared different, theoretical memos were constructed and a larger, conceptual model was adapted to accommodate the difference. This process enabled me to situate various forms of data within a larger system of meanings, interactions and beliefs about readiness and/or early childhood reform. This model—or set of broad categories-- was presented to the field-informant for verification, critique and interpretation. These "models" were then utilized in the field as points of reference. I "tested" these models in the field which at times illuminated conflict and contradiction in the analyses—relations

which did not holding together as predicted. For example, kindergarten classroom observation data reflected a different story about the assessment of literacy skills, then informal interview data with the early literacy coach. A contradiction in data was always accommodated by refining the emerging theoretical model. These events further fueled my conceptualizations and refined the interpretation of the data. Texts were conceptualized as a "window into experience" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), which revealed stories less of readiness, and more about how the system adapts to accountability pressures in an urban setting.

A list of eight broad categories emerged from the data which included; teacher practices, parental involvement, classroom activities, school/district expectations, assessment, resources, and professional development. Categories were then narrowed to themes which re-occurred across multiple sources of data and included; reform policy, assessment of teacher, school and child; curriculum; expectations (at the child, teacher and school level); accountability, funding and resources. Again these themes were presented to the field-informant and continued to be tested across multiple sources data.

During the second phase of the project (months 6-9) content analysis was employed to further organize, refine, analyze and interpret the data, as well as develop a final conceptual model (Figure 1.) During this phase of analyses, themes which were developed in phase one were further refined to make them conceptually clearer and to see if and how they appeared throughout "new" data (data were collected throughout phase one and two). Through this process of

triangulation, comparing categories across multiple data sources, coherence criteria emerged. By testing one source of information against another, I ensured the "reliability" or "quality" of the data sources. This process also guided subsequent field-based activities.

Summary

Through an iterative process over the course of nine months various forms of data were analyzed. During the first several months of the project (e.g., phase one), fieldnotes were the primary sources of data, which included classroom observations, participation in sites of decision making (e.g., professional development workshops) and informal interviews. At later stages in the project (e.g., phase two), a survey was developed and administered to a sample of participants and formal interviews were conducted. During the formative analysis period, fractures were revealed across multiple data sources creating contradiction among the data. When there was a discrepancy in the data, it was accommodated into a working conceptual model (theoretical memos were constructed to reflect these decisions). During the summative point in the analysis a criteria of consistency across all levels of data further refined the development of a final theoretical model which appears in Figure 1. Overall, two pathways of analysis were explored given the nature of the data (see Figure 2.) resulting in a taxonomy of school readiness beliefs which was a categorization of specific readiness "skills" or "experiences" described by participants (see Figure 3) and a conceptual model of how a school system adapts to localized reform efforts (see Figure 1).

In chapter four, I describe how the conceptual model developed in these analyses was utilized to generate a theory of accountability in early childhood, as well as provide three representative illustrations in support of this theoretical claim.

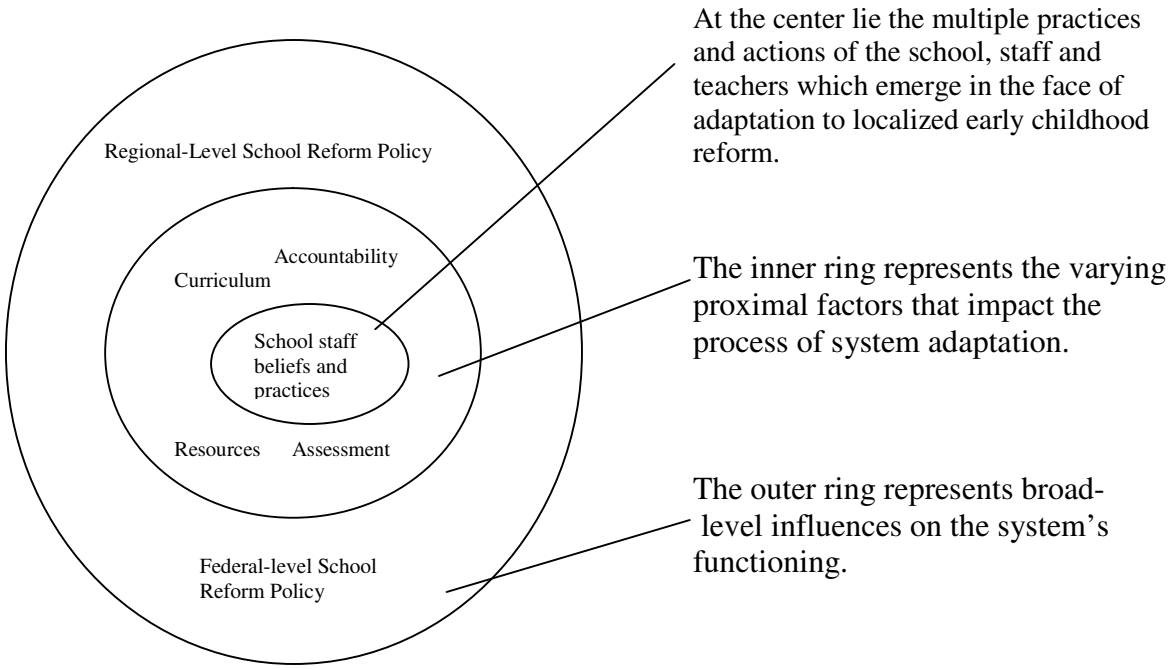

Figure 1. Conceptual Model Depicting Relations among Themes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998)

A codebook was developed (see Appendix A) in an effort to organize and reduce the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Throughout the project period I consulted additional literature on school readiness and early childhood reform. The initial conceptual framing of the project did not address issues of accountability, for example, a theme which emerged in the data. Thus, the practice of oscillating between data analysis and evaluating theory of early educational reform was vital to the current field-work.

Inter-coder reliability

Inter-coder reliability was assessed to verify that the categories developed during the formative stages of the analysis existed for others not intimately involved in the project. For training purposes, a subset of fieldnotes and interviews were presented to a Developmental Psychology doctoral student. Coding categories were outlined and the doctoral student practiced coding with these sample data. During the coding session, discrepancies between myself and the doctoral student were discussed. A random selection of fieldnotes and interviews were then selected and coded by myself and the doctoral student to assess the inter-coder reliability. Modifications to the codebook were made based on this process. Cohen's Kappa was used to calculate inter-coder reliability which is considered a conservative measure of reliability, statistically adjusting for agreement due to chance (Fleiss, 1981). Total agreement between coders yields a kappa =1.00. When there is disagreement a value of <1.00 is produced, with lower values indicating larger discrepancies. The Cohen's kappa was .74. Values greater than .65 are considered to be evidence an acceptable level of inter-coder accuracy when utilizing a conservative test such as Cohen's kappa[3].

[3] Landis and Koch's (1977) benchmarks for assessing the relative strength of agreement are the following: Poor (< 0), Slight (.0 - .20), Fair (.21-.40), Moderate (.41 - .60), Substantial (.61 - 80), and Almost Perfect (.81 - 1.0).

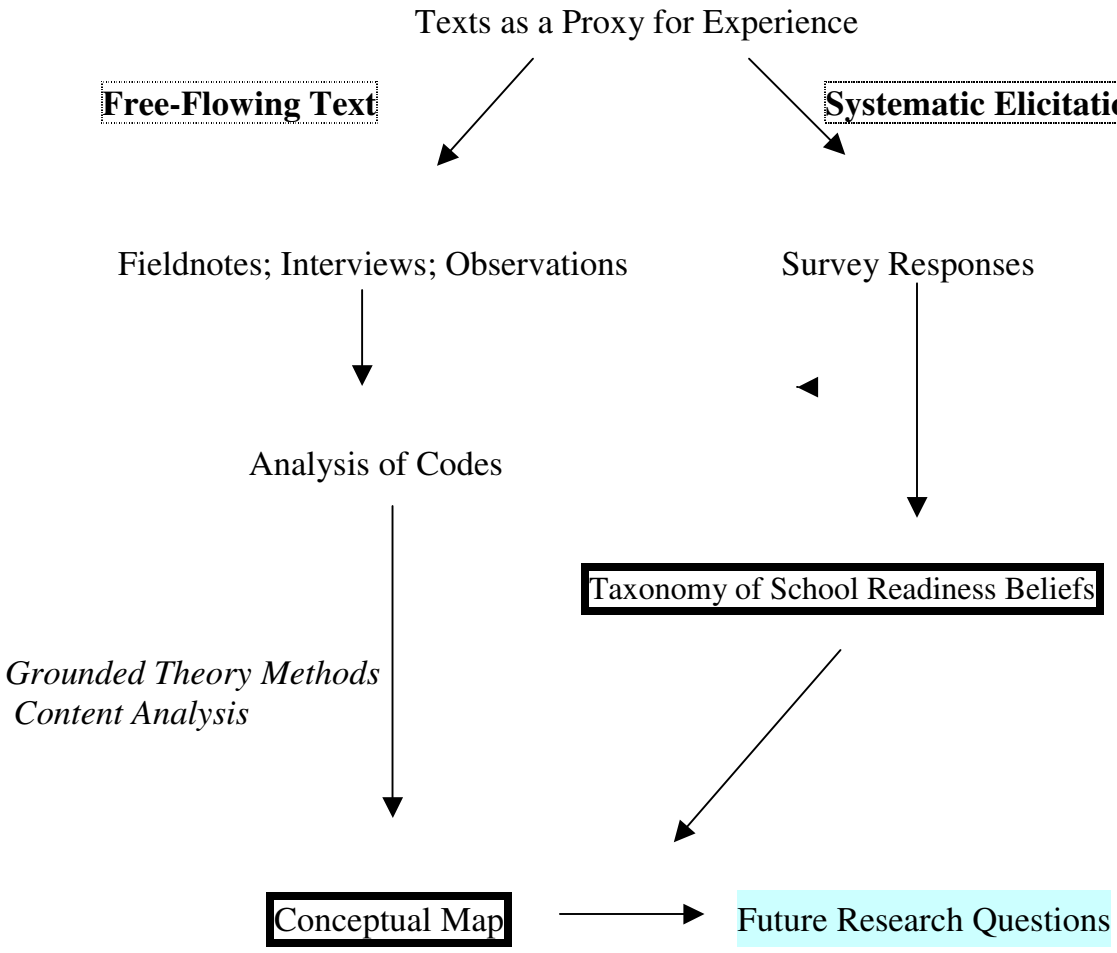

Figure 2. Depiction of data analysis process (adapted from Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

PARTICIPANTS

Over the course of the 2004-05 academic year, every teacher and paraprofessional in grades pre-kindergarten through first grade was invited to participate in the study (n=10). By the end of the study, eight early childhood teachers participated (two pre-kindergarten teachers; four kindergarten teachers and two first-grade teachers) in formal interviews. School staff such as the principal, assistant principal, literacy coach and early intervention professional

were asked to participate in formal interviews. Due to administrative changes, neither the principal nor the literacy coach was available to participate in a formal interview[4], although opportunities existed to document their practices and perspectives via participant observations and informal interviewing technique. Two school staff agreed to participate in formal interviews (the Early Intervention Specialist and the Assistant Principal). District level administrators, specifically the District and Regional Superintendents, were contacted four times utilizing different methods (e.g., email, voicemail and fax) and invited to participate in the study. At the end of the study neither district-level administrator responded to the requests.

As previously mentioned, a Kindergarten teacher served as a field informant over the course of the academic year. I spent most of my time documenting classroom activities in this teacher's classroom.

---

[4] Over the course of the academic year, the school experienced two significant losses in administrative capacity. The regional literacy coach (who was based at P.S. Gardenia for the past several years) passed away suddenly from illness related complications. Ms. Jane was the only site-based literacy staff who also maintained an open-door, walk in policy with her early childhood staff. Shortly after this loss, in late February the principal announced her "early retirement" that would take effect in March. This announcement occurred in the shadow of an alleged case of corporal punishment by a Kindergarten teacher. From my judgment, the principal provided a sense of strength and seriousness about schooling that was generally appreciated by everyone.

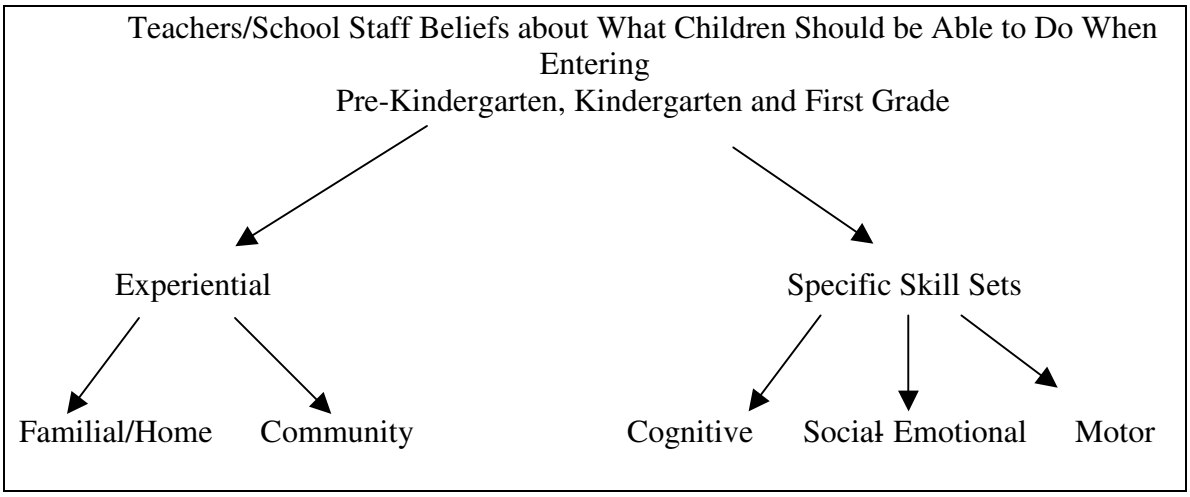

Figure 3. Taxonomy of Readiness Beliefs for Early Childhood Professionals

METHODS

Data were obtained from a variety of sources over the course of one academic year (2004-05). What follows is a description of each of these data sources.

Sources of Data

Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes were constructed during, and shortly after, every visit to the school documenting school-based observations and informal interviews with school staff. Participant observations occurred in different places at different times with the goal of capturing the everyday culture—or set of beliefs and practices—that relate to experiences of young children and those who educate them. The most frequented "site" I observed and participated in was the Kindergarten classroom of my field-informant. During these times, I would assist the teacher with daily activities and when possible engage in conversation with her

about many topics including the various practices we engaged in, school-day routines and professional development. During this time I was able to document how decisions for young children were made, revealing how "readiness" and "success" expectations structured the goals of the classroom. I observed and participated in various school-based assemblies which the pre-kindergarten, kindergarten or 1st grade classes were required to attend (e.g., career day; Kindergarten Stepping-Up Ceremony). Three sites where "decision making" about readiness practices and activities theoretically occurred were identified in the beginning of the project for participant observations; 1) professional development workshops for early childhood teachers (which included in-vitro classroom guided supervision); 2) common preparation periods for Kindergarten teachers and 3) parent-teacher conferences. Fieldnotes were also constructed to document my participation in these activities. Analytical memos were recorded in a fieldnote journal throughout the entire project period.

"Beliefs About Readiness" Survey Development

Approximately 6 months into the project, a survey, "Beliefs About School Readiness" was developed with the assistance of three Kindergarten teachers to assess the specific readiness beliefs of teachers in Pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten and First Grade classrooms (see Appendix B), as well as how those beliefs function. An adapted version was developed for use with other school staff such as the principal or literacy coach.

The first part of the survey asks basic demographic information about the participant (i.e., age, highest level of education, years working in education). The second section consists of a series of open-ended questions about readiness beliefs in early childhood (i.e., "What skills should children have when entering pre-kindergarten?"). The final section consists of 14 items for which the participants rate how much they agree with statements about the origin of their beliefs on a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree (i.e., "My beliefs about what skills children should have in early childhood classes comes from the policies supported by the Department of Education; My beliefs and expectations for children in early childhood change from year to year).

The reason for creating this measure with the Kindergarten teachers was, in part a methodological intervention. One of the research aims of this project was to explore the *specific* beliefs about school readiness for young children in grades, Pre-K, K and 1st grade. As my role developed, both as an ethnographer and a much needed (and relied upon) support staff for my field informant, I realized that it would be beneficial to develop an efficient, self-administered questionnaire to capture beliefs about readiness from a larger sample. The importance of having the content and language of the survey reflect the sensibilities of readiness in this context was a priority. And so, the direction and feedback of Kindergarten teachers was sought after. During a common preparation period, I presented a draft of the survey to three Kindergarten teachers. With their assistance, items

were added, and others were modified. The finalized version of the measure was utilized in two ways. When feasible, formal interviews were conducted with teachers and or school staff utilizing the survey as an interview tool. For those teachers and or school staff who were unable to participate in a "formal interview" the survey was distributed and returned upon completion.

Formal Interviews

As previously mentioned, formal interviews were conducted with early childhood teachers and school staff (i.e., Assistant Principal) at the end of the project period. The "Beliefs About Readiness" survey was utilized as an interview tool. Additional interview questions which emerged from an iterative analysis process also guided the interviews. Interviews were conducted to gain greater understanding of the process of how readiness beliefs develop within the school system, as well as what those beliefs were. These data were utilized to deepen my understanding of the practices and activities of readiness/reform which were documented throughout the project period via fieldnotes, participant observations and informal interviews. Interviews ranged from 45 to 80 minutes. Interviews were conducted with a maximum of 2 participants per session. A total of six interviews were conducted over a one month time-span. All formal interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Archival Data

During the project period newspaper clippings, policy reports and other "mainstream" materials were collected. Specifically, Lexus Nexus searches were

conducted monthly to canvass a variety of sources for reports related to school readiness issues. These data will help to view the analysis in the context of hegemonic rhetoric of school readiness and reform policy for young children.

Chapter Four
Results

The rhetoric and subsequent focus on "school readiness" which is a direct by-product of the first National Educational Goal which states that "every child will enter school ready to learn" is re-established in the production of current early childhood school reform practice. Exactly what it takes to "be ready" to participate in the schooling process was revealed through an examination of teacher and classroom practices. These practices are shaped by the accountability stress of No Child Left Behind. Two conceptual streams—one reflecting "school readiness" for young children and the other reflecting accountability practice in urban contexts-- get mixed together with accountability eventually dominating and wiping out any real treatment of readiness for children based on developmental and educational knowledge. Thus, the main result of this study is how the relation between readiness and accountability practices emerge and how the system adapts to this dynamic and contradictory process. By understanding how the changing and divergent ideological meanings of readiness relate to practices and policies in early childhood, we gain an understanding of how a school system under tremendous socio-political pressure to "perform" can impact the development, learning and success of young, urban children in unexpected ways. In this chapter I will describe the setting where the study occurred and the educational-policy climate of this context at the time of the study. A discussion which illuminates the major findings of this work as reflective in three data rich accounts is offered.

During this chapter "raw" interview data derived from formal interview transcripts are presented in italics (when noted fieldnote "interview" data are also presented). Policy implications are discussed and direction for future research on school readiness and early childhood reform is presented in the final chapter.

School Context

The Gardenia School is one of seventy-seven elementary schools in the Floral Region of New York City. The school serves approximately 550 children in grades Pre-Kindergarten through 5th grade. The children who attend Gardenia come from strong cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Sixty-three percent of the children attending this school are Black and come from diverse ethnic backgrounds including, African American, Jamaican and West-Indian. Thirty-three percent are Latino, most of which are recent immigrants from Mexico, and others who are from Puerto-Rican or Dominican descent. Ninety percent of children are eligible for free-lunch as compared to seventy-three percent city-wide. Approximately ten- percent of the children are registered English Language Learners. The Gardenia School is situated within a mixed commercial-residential neighborhood, on a block with no thru traffic, making it seemingly isolated from the surrounding community. Within the school, there are 3 Pre-Kindergarten classes, 3 Kindergarten classes and 4 first-grade classes, serving approximately 185 of children.

District Context

District Star is one of four districts in Floral Region which served 13, 247 children and youth in 2004. Students who attend schools in this district are primarily Black (77.6%) or Hispanic (18%), with those numbers shifting year to year according to recent demographic trends (e.g., increases in Latino population). Eight-four percent of the enrollment is eligible for free lunch, as compared to 73% city-wide, indicating a community with unique economic and social needs. In 2004, 36.9% and 39.8% of students met the "standards" in all tested grades for the English Language Arts and Mathematics, respectively.

In 2003, District Star underwent a significant organizational change. What was formally known as the "Board of Education" is now referred to as, "The Department of Education" newly housed in a restored historical building adjacent to the Mayor's office in New York City. This major infrastructure shift was followed by a significant educational policy change for the City, including a strong commitment to meeting the goals of the No Child Left Behind Law (NCLB). Consequently, "Children First" was instituted, a comprehensive reform program which embodies the goals of NCLB and is implemented city-wide. According to the New York State Department of Education:

"Through its comprehensive reform program, Children First, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) is pursuing the spirit, as well as the letter, of No Child Left Behind. The reforms are reaching into all aspects of our school system to improve the quality of education at every one of the City's more than 1300 schools. Through changes in school curriculum, teacher and principal hiring

and training, streamlining of the bureaucracy, and increased outreach and support to parents, the NYCDOE is working to raise the achievement of all students."

The geographic area which was comprised of independent districts each having a "District Superintendent" who was responsible for every school in his/her district, was structurally re-configured. Under the new configuration, each district became part of a "Region". As a result, most of the District Superintendents offices were dismantled.

There are 10 Regions across the city. Each Region contains 2-4 Community School Districts. Now, every District is under the auspice of a "Local Instructional Superintendent (LISes)" who reports to their "Regional Superintendent". Each LIS has supervisory responsibility for a network of about 10 to 12 schools and principals. The LISes will provide schools in their networks with instructional leadership and will support principals and their teachers in implementing the new instructional approach and improving the quality of teaching and learning in their schools. Principals within each network will report directly to the Local Instructional Superintendent assigned to lead that network. Regional Superintendents function as the senior instructional management teach for the school system and report directly to the Deputy Chancellor for Teaching and Learning. In addition, 32 LISes are designated as Community School District Superintendents while continuing to serve as LISes. These 32 LISes each oversee a community school district office and fulfill the reorganization's commitment to

linking the new management structure with the Community School Boards and the parent-focused Community District Education Councils that are replacing them. This new organizational structure is aimed to provide each school with greater individualized support and supervision than the previous organizational system (Department of Education, 2005).

Entry into the Field

On September 7th 2004, I re-entered a familiar site with an unfamiliar goal. The Gardenia Public School was the site of previous evaluation work I conducted for the Policy Center I work at. I received many welcomes that morning, and one in particular which I eagerly followed through on. Ms. Douglas was a Pre-Kindergarten teacher when I was working at the school as an evaluator some two years prior. This particular year, she was teaching Kindergarten and as I vividly remembered her, she displayed warm and inviting affect when we spoke that morning. "You're here this year?" she said as she hugged me hello. I clarified my role (as I did many times with many others in the first few months of fieldwork) to Ms. Douglas and described the project I was hoping to pursue at the school. By the end of that day, Ms. Douglas and I discussed my potential role in her class as a participant observer during the upcoming year. I experienced her as welcoming, grateful and enthusiastic. Her one concern was related to a potential backlash from other Kindergarten teachers as noted in the fieldnotes:

"The others may feel envious or un-supported and may go to [the principal] with these issues".

I understood her concern and let her know that the principal was aware that I would be primarily observing (and helping out) in one classroom only—and she supported this design. Ms. Douglas was relieved to hear the arrangement was "approved" and let me know she would be looking forward to my return. As soon as I arrived on the subway platform bench, I indicated in my fieldnotes, *"I guess there must be issues around the lack of support in K classrooms?"*

Ms. Douglas served as an ethnographic informant for the current study. For this reason, a brief description of who she is is offered. Ms. Douglas is an African-American woman in her mid-thirties. She has been teaching for several years as a Kindergarten and Pre-Kindergarten teacher at P.S. Gardenia. This past year, she was selected to be the "Literacy Coordinator" which means that she is required to attend Regional professional development workshops and report back to the other Kindergarten teachers. Ms. Douglas appeared to be outgoing, enthusiastic and serious about her role as a Kindergarten teacher. I judged her to be a good collaborator with her early childhood colleagues. She generally appeared patient, respectful and nurturing with her young Kindergarten students. Ms. Douglas is a single mother, who lives in the community she works for. She is active in her church and talked warmly about her family who lives in the Southeast (of the United States). Her daughter attends Kindergarten in another school 15

minutes from P.S. Gardenia , in a middle-upper class neighborhood, which according to Ms. Douglas, is "better resourced" in terms of social capital and concrete resources. She explains during a formal interview:

"I send my daughter to Public School Daisy. It's a good school…the community is a well to do community. Parents are willing to just give to the school. If this was a different school, my daughter would be here, but they don't do a lot here. And it's more than just reading, reading, writing, reading, writing. I don't want to compare, but it's experience. She's getting some wonderful experiences over there that I can't even give here".

At the end of the study, as a matter of routine which developed throughout the project timeframe, I presented a final list of codes that emerged from analyses with interpretations for each category to Ms. Douglas. We discussed these categories thoroughly. I noted when she "verified" my interpretations and when she provided additional clarification or insight. This final session helped me to identify three synthesized thematic accounts which reflected the main result of the study, how accountability influences the system to respond in ways which demoralize teachers and disregard developmental learning theory.

Moving From Data to Theory: Using a Conceptual Model to Inform the Process

Resulting from grounded theory and content analyses methods, a conceptual model (Figure 1) was developed to visually represent the multiple layers of influence on the system (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). At the center of the model lie the beliefs and practices of teachers, school staff and administrators which emerged in the context of enormous pressure to meet

regulations proposed by NCLB. From the most distal layer, including district level and federal-level policies and expectations, forces impacted the daily lives of teachers, administration and young children. Moving closer to the "middle", school resources, assessment routines and curriculum foci equally contributed to context and how the system was able or not to adapt to demands of NCLB. Preparing young children for schooling, providing professional development to teachers and decisions where to allocate limited resources were driven by a 3rd grade assessment which in some cases, was four years away. Thus, local beliefs and practices were a result of the complex interaction of the layers in the system. Harry et al. (2005) similarly utilized a conceptual model to illustrate how the implementation of NCLB "interacts with local norms for children's achievement, which in turn, are affected by local practices…" (pg 12).

Based on this model, one can theorize the interrelating explanations of various system levels and conclude different "results", thus, generating a shift from codes to theory generation. For example, one result of this study is how the system learned to adapt to the demands of accountability pressures in behaviorally anchored ways. These practices included developing paper trails of "accountability-based" initiatives, as well as meeting specific quotas for serving "at-assessment" risk children with those who are not at risk. Another main result of this work which is reflected in system level beliefs and practices is that theories of readiness based on developmental and education learning models are being dismissed in the face of demanding accountability requirements. Thus, classroom

practices, curricula and assessment practices are primarily driven by a "do whatever it takes" approach to prepare classrooms, teachers and children for 3rd grade assessments in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and first grade. Within the context of these main findings, are nuances, findings which are as equally meaningful and must be addressed. One such finding is how a system of accountability based primarily on assessments scores demoralizes teachers by disempowering them in a context of fear and frustration. During this chapter, three related representations of these findings are presented.

Research Aims Reconsidered: School Readiness and No Child Left Behind Reform

School reform, particularly in early childhood, is not a fresh idea nationally or within the context of the Star District. Historically, presidents have proposed educational reform policies with evocative titles, such as "A Nation at Risk" or the "Education Accountability Act". Over a decade ago, President Bush and 50 state governors established 8 National Education Goals (National Education Goals Panel, 1990). The first goal stated that "by the year 2000 all children in America will start school ready to learn"—a cliché that would have an enormous impact on the way educators, researchers and policy makers conceptualize early education experiences. In 2002, "No Child Left Behind" education legislation was passed which provides schools a nationwide methodology and law to afford equal educational opportunity for every child in America. In order for states, such as New York, to receive NCLB funds, the State must meet very specific standards of

curriculum, instruction and professional development and provide school performance data in the context of assessment and accountability. Currently, New York State is compliant with the NCLB law and seeks to obtain these funds. This socio-political framework has shaped how educators, researchers and policy makers define "normative" benchmarks of school readiness and success for young children.

In the present study, "school readiness" was inextricably linked to local education reform for early childhood, such as the NCLB act. Beliefs about school readiness in part, produced the context of localized educational reform (and visa versa), therefore creating an interactive relationship among meaning, practice and policy. Three inter-related research aims guided the initial conceptualization of the study: A) To explore how meanings of school readiness or success are produced within the context of an urban school community for early-childhood educators and school/district staff; B) To examine the specific beliefs, notions and values of early childhood educators and school/district staff about what children should know and be able to do when entering pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and first-grade and C) To explore how local meanings of readiness and success relate to the practices and activities which involve young children's opportunities for learning and development. As the study evolved, it was clear that readiness beliefs and practices were driven by accountability demands, thus shifting the foci of the research to include a careful examination of how the climate of accountability influenced the overall system and how it related to early childhood.

The data presented in this study invites us to understand how divergent and convergent meanings, practices and policies in early childhood education are configured and operate in an urban setting, impacting the way teachers teach, children experience education and school's function. For these reasons, "school readiness" was operationalized as differentially defined and experienced, contingent upon the nature of the current accountability context.

Over the course of one year, I participated in numerous activities, and observed different practices which embodied a reality of "school readiness" within the context of early childhood reform. These practices were also reflected in the discourse of the teachers and administrators—which funneled into a system organized by "readiness", especially in the early grades. In many ways, the school was "adapting". Local pressure from the District and national attention about Annual Yearly Performance (AYP), as well as "being ready" for testing in 3rd grade resulted in a level of "system anxiety" which ultimately drove many of the decisions which impacted the schooling experiences of young children. Similar to how human beings manage stress, system-level anxiety can result in functional, effective coping strategies which benefit all of those involved. Likewise, it can force the system to engage in ways that are destructive and short-sighted, leading to unintended, negative outcomes. This major finding of adaptation to a NCLB accountability climate, appears throughout the following representations in countless ways. For example, in the section "Looking Good on Paper: Surviving

Reform", contradiction, conflict and hope emerge as motivators for changing practice and policy in early childhood to escape fiscal and political backlashes. In the section, "The Smart, Problem Child", an examination of the process of decision-making for two 5-year old African-American children, illustrates the constraints of a taxed system and how priorities emerge in the face of accountability and assessment. The current literature on "school readiness" lacks a theoretical space for educators, researchers and policy-makers from all political persuasions to engage in dialogue which accounts for well-intentioned educational policy, meaningful learning for children and the realities of everyday schooling in an urban setting. The aim of this ethnography is to provoke that conversation.

Looking Good on Paper: Surviving Reform

Twelve years is the amount of time states have to bring children (and schools) up to a prescribed academic proficiency—or they will lose their funding. Since the added emphasis on high stakes testing in the federal law (NCLB), we have witnessed an unprecedented documented national phenomenon--teachers are "cheating" (see Table 1; Full report is available at (http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsl/EPRU/documents/EPSL-0503-101-EPRU.pdf). In other words, falsifying data, teaching too closely- to- the- test and other practices have emerged in the face of pressures to achieve high scores (and maintain NCLB funds). In their 187-page policy report, Nichols and Berliner (2005) outline ten negative repercussions of the NCLB law that permeate every level of the public school system including, administrator and teacher cheating, misrepresentation of

dropouts, narrowing curricula and declining teacher morale. The first line of the report dictates Campbell's law: "The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor" (Campbell, 1975). One may expect that these consequences are relegated to systems of education for older children, those grades that are required to report their academic progress annually, including but not limited to test score results. The following discussion brings attention to practices that have emerged in an urban school setting unique to early childhood grades of pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and 1st grade. Five years before a child even takes a standardized exam, the system has identified ways to work around itself and present the best possible picture to the world outside at a price one can not yet predict. No longer are pre-kindergarten or kindergarten teachers exempt from "looking good".

Table 1. Instance and Allegations of Cheating by School Personnel (Nichols & Berliner, 2005)

Location of Story	Source	Headline	Story
1. New York	Daily News, Alison Gendar (November 13, 2002), p. 3.	State tests on hold till HS erases cheat label	A Boerum Hill alternative high school is barred from administering state tests until it proves its staff will not help students cheat. Helen Lehrer, the former principal at Pacific High School in Boerum Hill, was accused of erasing and changing as many as 119 answers on 14 Regents competency tests in global studies and U.S. history given last June.

2.Austin,Texas	San Antonio Express-News, Roddy Stinson (September 17, 1998), p. 3A	TAAS cheaters meet national standards	The Austin School District manipulated test results last spring to make it appear as if several schools performed better than they did, the Texas Education Agency says. "There must be 50 ways to cheat on TAAS tests, and administrators at several Austin schools employed one of the most clever chicaneries in manipulating history. Commissioner of Education Mike Moses explained the trickery in this August 14 letter to the school district: "...student identification number changes were submitted for students tested at (the schools), which resulted in the exclusion of those students from the accountability subset of TAAS results used to determine the 1998 accountability ratings." In plainer English, administrators gave students who performed poorly on the test ID numbers that did not agree with previous numbers, knowing that the incoonsistencies would cause the TEA to eliminate the students' scores from ratings calculations.
3. Potomac, Maryland	Associated Press & Local Wire (June 1, 2000) and Associated Press & Local Wire (June 6, 2000).	Principal resigns over allegations of cheating & Principal takes blame for cheating scandal on state test	First story about allegations that a principal of an elementary school ranked third in the state on the MSPAP helped students with the tests. Parents had complained that students received "inappropriate assistance intended to boost their scores" during spring, 2000 assessments. In a follow-up article, the principal took full responsibility for the allegations that led to an investigation and evidence that the principal coached students, gave them answers and extra time to complete the assessment.

4. Kentucky	The Herald-Leader, Linda B. Blackford and Lee Mueller (Staff writers) (March 22, 2004).	Former principal expected to be named county superintendent	In Bell County, the school board is expected to choose as its new superintendent a former high school principal whose certification was suspended due to allegations of cheating on a statewide assessment test. According to the story, the principal in 1993 won the Milken Family Foundation Award for improvements at Bell County High School. The national award is given every year to outstanding educators, along with a $25,000 check. However, three years later the high school statewide test scores spiked so sharply that local and state officials decided to investigate. "Investigators found that among some 80 violations, Thompson had encouraged inappropriate practices, such as teachers developing tip sheets, and students had been encouraged to seek help from teachers, according to investigation and court documents." As a result, the principal was stripped of all his teaching and administrative certificates for 18 months. Although he fought the charges all the way to the Kentucky Supreme Court, he inevitably dropped the case and accepted the penalty in 2002. He is not eligible to receive his certificates back until July 2004, however, he seems to be the front running candidate for the superintendent position in spite of the "bad rap." Interestingly, the principal, Thompson, has worked for a construction company since he lost his certification. While he fought the case, he was installed as testing director for Bell County.

5. Chicago, Illinois	Chicago Sun-Times, Rosalind Rossi (May 5, 1996), p. 13.	Grade school under investigation as teachers allege test cheating	One elementary school's principal and curriculum coordinator were accused of giving teachers copies of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and telling them to use it to help students prepare for the exam. Although the chief executive officer said he did not believe the alleged cheating was linked to stakes attached to that year's ITBS, the timing couldn't have been more coincidental as that year was the first year stakes were attached to the ITBS.
6. Maryland	Washington Post, B. Schulte (June 1, 2000).	School allegedly cheated on tests	Principal stepped down amidst charges she "was sitting in the classroom, going through test booklets and calling students up to change or elaborate on answers."
7. Wyoming	The Associated Press (July 15, 2000).	WyCAS tests lost from school at center of tampering scandal	In June of 2000, school officials said as many as 90 national TerraNova tests completed by first, second, and third graders had been tampered with, nullifying half the results. "Principal Jean Grose resigned in the wake of the finding, which resulted in scores for one class jumping from 42 percent to 87 percent over one year."
8. Georgia	The Atlanta Journal and Constitution, Michael Weiss (November 9, 1995).	Clayton school officials deny pressure to succeed	An investigation by the Professional Practices Commission, the state agency that polices teacher ethics, concluded that North Clayton Middle School Principal Gloria Duncan showed teachers advance copies of the state Curriculum-Based Assessment test and even drew up a list of vocabulary words from the exam.
9. Arizona	The Arizona Republic, Anne Ryman (October 8, 2003).	District audits schools after test deceit	The state's eighth-largest district is auditing all of its schools after officials alleged that a principal changed test scores so that her teachers could get incentive money.
10. Carthage, North Carolina	News and Observer, Associated Press (October 17, 2003)	Moore County SAT fund probed	Allegations that school administers were ordered by the superintendent to alter and destroy documents describing an SAT incentive program at North Moore High School. The documents showed that students who performed well were to be paid, but the money was improperly used to pay counselors.

11. Atlanta, Georgia	Associated Press (May 27, 2003).	School officials suspended after cheating allegations	Two Worth County school administrators were suspended without pay following allegations that they helped three students cheat on the high school graduation test. The students were not allowed to participate in the graduation ceremony.
12. Massachusetts	The Herald Tribune, Steve Leblanc (Associated Press writer)(April 9, 2004).	Worcester school principal resigns in wake of MCAS cheating probe.	A Worcester elementary school principal submitted her letter of resignation to the superintendent of schools a year after allegations that she helped students to cheat on the MCAS exam. The principal, Irene Adamaitis, was alleged to have distributed the test to teacher's days before they were administered to students. The dramatic improvement in MCAS scores at this school had prompted the investigation by the Worcester school system and the state's Department of Education. The allegations are still under investigation.
13. Boston, Massachusetts	Nation Post, Mary Vallis (staff)(June 24, 2004)	The "principal" told us to: Critics blame Boston cheating scandal on pressure to score high in standardized tests	Students told investigators that Antoinette Brady urged them to cheat on a high-stakes standardized test. They had written to their teacher alleging that the principal had encouraged them to change and add to their answers after the exam was officially over--the opposite of the instructions their teacher had given them. One student had written, "When we were done Ms. Brady told us to go back to Section 1 and 2. So everybody was told by the PRINCIBLE." "We did it. She look into everybodys eyes and said did you go back to the sections and check it over." One student reported that "Ms. Brady said that are school had low performance and we need it to be higher." These allegations emerged Friday, May 21 when one fourth-grade class wrote for the MCAS exam. The principal had asked the teacher to leave the room.

14. New York	The New York Times, Randal C. Archibold (December 8, 1999).	Teachers tell how cheating worked	Story on one of the biggest cheating scandals in New York City. A year after he arrived at Community Elementary School 90, Jon Nichols, a mathematics teacher, was approached by the principal, Richard Wallin, with what seemed at first an unusual pep talk. "1 was taken into the office at the beginning of the school year and told that the students were expected to do well— no matter what it takes," Nichols recalled Tuesday at the school in the Concourse section of the Bronx. "At the time, I didn't know what that meant exactly." He learned soon enough. It meant cheating, and Nichols and other teachers were provided with detailed instruction, down to palm sized crib notes to check against students' answer sheets as they took city and state examinations, according to accounts from Nichols, other teachers and Edward F. Stancik, the special investigator for New York City schools Stancik released a report Tuesday asserting widespread cheating on city and state exams over the last four years. The report identified 32 schools, but cited Community Elementary Schools 88 and 90 in District 9 in the Bronx and Public School 234 in District 12 in the Bronx as particularly egregious cases. The investigation began with Community School 90 after a teacher, Stacey Moskowitz, contacted Stancik's office and a television news reporter about the practices. Nichols and others then came forward. Nichols, 33, who investigators confirmed had participated in the case, described how an administrator approached him before city reading and math exams in April 1994. "Keep this handy, he said,

			and he gave me a piece of paper," Nichols recalled. "It was a 2-by 3 sheet with a list of numbers and letters on it. It was the answers to the test. Some of the numbers had asterisks next to them," Nichols continued- "These were the hard questions, and I was told not to help with those. The kids were expected to get them wrong."
15. Houston, Texas	Associated Press, Pauline Arrillaga, Associated Press Writer, (April 13, 1999).	Tampering allegations raise new questions about the role of TAAS	Story arguing that the pressures associated with testing are so great, it tempts teachers and administrators to do whatever it takes to look good. In the largest school district in Houston, administrators launched an investigation into the high number of erasures turning up on TAAS tests, with answers being changed from wrong to right. This probe (along with one in Austin) led the Texas Education Association to initiate its own investigation of the erasure problem—asking 11 of the state's 1,042 school districts to investigate 33 campuses that had above-average erasures in 1996-1998. Several Houston area districts found cheating or improper administration of TAAS at 11 campuses. "The infractions ranged from removing partially erased answers to using keys to 'systematically check' and change answers from wrong to right." One fifth-grade classroom had 185 erasures attributable to only 14 students, including 132 that were changed from wrong to right. A principal and a teacher in another district resigned, and Houston demanded the resignations of a principal and three teachers.

In the current study, pressure to perform and be in compliance with early childhood reform policy resulted in a range of system-wide practices and

activities. The principal, teachers, even the parents, found ways to "meet the standards" by engaging in practices which served to conceal, exaggerate or cloud the "reality" of early childhood learning. These practices appear to be part of a system-preservation process, which emerges from an enormous amount of local pressure, stress and system anxiety. The data brought to light in this study provides the much needed systematic documentation of practices and activities schools engage in to adapt within the current reform context. Practices and local policies that addressed the requirements of reform occurred at different levels in the system (e.g., classroom level) and in different forms (e.g., explicit, documented practices vs. unsolicited, unexplained decisions). Perhaps the best way to exemplify the system's adaptation is to present illustrations of this phenomena which occurred over the course of the project period.

One afternoon in mid-march Ms. Douglas and I were waiting in the lunchroom for the children to settle in before leaving. Over the course of the year, it appeared that the Kindergarten teachers used this brief period to check in with each other, as the children took their seats and the discipline torch was handed over to the lunch room monitors. On this particular day, the Assistant Principal (AP) who occasionally dropped by the lunchroom, was distributing a memo to all of the Kindergarten teachers. When she handed the memo to the teachers, she reminded them that all children who were not performing well on their assessments should be considered potential hold-overs. The formal memorandum was a written reminder requesting teachers to formally indicate which children are

at risk for being held back. The kindergarten teachers seemed to placate the AP with nods and smiles. As soon as she walked away, Ms. Douglas and her colleague looked at each other and rolled their eyes. I asked them about the memo, and a response emerged not regarding the expectation of retaining kindergarten children, but rather a comment about how this memorandum was part of a larger process of the "administration" protecting themselves, and that they don't take it seriously. This memo, according to three early childhood teachers (one whom I asked later on that day her opinion of the memo) was circulated to have formal documentation from the administrative level on file. This documentation was in part, a way to protect the administration from future accusations of not having "done their job" of identifying at-risk five-year olds primarily based on formal assessments of writing and reading. The disconnect among the administration and the majority of the kindergarten teachers was yet another example, based on this fieldwork, that there are some topics or educational decisions that are not up for discussion. To this end, the Kindergarten teachers appeared at some level okay with going along with this practice (accepting and acknowledging the seriousness of the AP in her presence, for example), with some awareness that this is necessary for the security of everyone involved in the schooling system.

With pressure to demonstrate academic proficiency, the system began to suffer from other harmful symptoms. Because the administration was rightly concerned with demonstrating good practice, for example, early childhood teachers were constantly reminded of the potential (unpredictable) "drop in" visits

from the District or Region office. Memo's circulated regarding these events, which made teacher's anxious and frustrated, unwilling and/or unable to creatively deviate from the prescribed curriculum—even when they felt it was not working. One Kindergarten teacher describes her feelings about this sense of defeat:

"If I wasn't forced to do it I wouldn't conform to this. The curriculum changes year to year—that's why the schools are failing. We have no room for our own creativity…we are like robots and its boring. We are bored and the kids are bored".

Similarly, Ms. Douglas noted, *"I am scared to have them do anything that isn't on the schedule. If someone walks in here I will be in trouble. It's not worth it." (note: fieldnote interview data).*

Other recent changes which may have resulted in more desirable outcomes were related to instructional and assessment practices. For example, Ms. Douglas recounts a speculation she shared with a pre-kindergarten teacher regarding the changes in the pre-kindergarten curriculum:

Ms. Douglas: ….It was difficult for me because the kids that I had this year when they came from Pre-K they were used to getting up whenever they wanted, going to whatever center they wanted, taking off shoes, asking if they could have a snack at 10:00 in the morning, and that was new to me because I did not do that in Pre-K. I didn't allow them to take off their shoes they could not eat at all times of the day because I am trying to get them ready for school….. The fact that a lot of them couldn't write their own name, I was shocked. Because at least in Pre-K that's the one thing you make sure they kind of master if nothing else.

Interviewer: Earlier in the year we were talking with Mrs. Oster about how the administration dumbed-down Pre-K…

Ms. Douglas: Last year..

Interviewer: Was this to make the scores look better in K??

Ms. Douglas: See that was a theory that we kind of talked about. Because if you dumb them down in Pre-K then it makes the program look good because, now I have to do the letter sounds, do this, do that, show them the reading skills. So now I have to do all of this work to show them that their curriculum is working.

Interviewer: So if they came in to Kindergarten and they knew too much the curriculum may not be seen as working?

Ms. Douglas: Or it is too easy……

The pre-kindergarten curriculum was changed for the 2003-04 school year and there was no indication that the curriculum would be modified for the upcoming academic year. The pre-k teachers are not permitted to teach letters or numbers. The focus is primarily on creating opportunities for social skills development. Kindergarten, however, according to some early childhood educators in this school, is the "new first grade" and the students are required to learn a variety of reading and writing skills historically reflected in a 1st grade curriculum—without opportunities for creative play or structured socialization. According to both Ms. Douglas and Ms. Oster, the transition is incredibly difficult for the children and they are not prepared for the academic-focused curriculum of Kindergarten. If the curriculum in pre-kindergarten is less rigorous or uni-dimensional for the sake of demonstrating curriculum efficacy in Kindergarten when children are formally assessed (at the school and district level only) one may speculate that getting ready for school is a process partly determined by external pressures to demonstrate the system's successful and effective adaptation to the mandated curriculum. In other words, this is the curriculum that the District supports and expects marked change from. One has to do whatever it takes to

exaggerate the effects of this theoretical "proven" model—if not what jeopardy would the school be in?

In the spring of 2003, Chancellor Joel I. Klein announced the New York City Department of Education's (DOE) decision to supplement the Month-by-Month Phonics Curriculum with the New York City Passport program, developed by Voyager Expanded Learning of Dallas. Detailed cost estimates for the program are not easily available although the Chancellor has said that the new reading and math curriculums would cost $50 million over two years. When this program was identified and supported by the DOE, much concern emerged primarily because the curriculum at the time of integration was only two years old and has not been independently evaluated (or published) to demonstrate the effects on individual child outcomes. Much of this outcry was led by NYC public advocate. Below is an excerpt of a letter she addressed to the Chancellor in May of 2003 highlighting the political tension which existed at the time (see Appendix C for entire letter):

"Voyager Uses Politics to Gain Contracts. Before being hired by Voyager, Senior Vice President Jim Nelson was a f Bush appointee who headed of the Texas Education Agency.[vii] Voyager President Randy Best worked with current Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld when the two were appointed board members of Westmark Systems, an Austin-based holding company specializing in acquiring military electronics companies.[viii] Voyager has been accused of using these political connections to gain lucrative contracts. For example, as Texas Governor, George W. Bush pushed a proposal giving $25 million in state money to after school programs that would aid Voyager, which had contributed more than $45,000 to Bush and over $20,000 to Bush's lieutenant governor running mate.[ix] Another example can be found in Georgia where the state Superintendent Linda Schrenko gave Richmond County a $1.1 million grant that was spent on Voyager. A month later, top executives from Voyager held a fundraiser in Texas for Schrenko after the grant went trough. At least 13

executives gave $56,000 to Schrenko's gubernatorial bid. Voyager President Randy Best has even said that politics was "a major part of the decision-making process."[x]

Schools Pressured to use Voyager. The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act specifically states that only curricula and teaching methods that are scientifically proven to work will be funded. Yet, despite criticism that the research used to justify Voyager's claims to success were unscientific and produced very little results, the U.S Education Department led applicants for federal reading funds to believe that approval of their application would be speeded up if they indicated a preference for particular commercial programs, including Voyager."

Beginning in 1st grade, children at risk for academic failure are identified to receive free services in the form of an after-school program with parental consent. Teachers are requested to provide lists of children who are eligible for the program based on in-class assessments. Ms. Douglas was asked to deliver the Voyager Program to the 1st graders. She shared with me the administration's desire to increase enrollment, even when students didn't require additional help. Teachers were reminded weekly about the program via memos and in one-on-one conversations with the Assistant Principal. In Ms. Douglas's opinion the drive to increase enrollment was a way to document the school's effort to "do their job" and serve the needs of the children—even though she thought the curriculum was not completely effective. The school was making sure to demonstrate they utilized all of the necessary means to ensure adequate yearly progress in a verifiable, concrete way. According to Ms. Douglas, the program was disconnected from the every day curriculum making it challenging for the 6 year olds to catch on. Programs that focus on individual remediation rather than coordinate with classroom curriculum are less effective (Wong, Sunderman &

Lee, 1997):

"We are not administering it the way that it should be. Although we have it as an after school program, some other schools actually have it as part of their curriculum. As part of their umm literacy program, I could see that. Because the whole class is learning these basic skills. Blending and umm comprehension, developing vocabulary and questioning. So the whole class is engaged in this and your doing it from September to June. So they'll be, and all of those things relate to whatever story you read and discuss."

The school had no choice but to utilize a program that was supported by the District. Children were being asked to go into the program to fill the seats. This primarily occurred because the parents who were targeted initially were not willing to send their child to an after-school program which was noted to be "inconvenient".

At the end of the school year I was waiting in the principal's office and noticed a large manila binder on one of the administrative desks. On the outside of this binder, in large, red ink were the words "PROMO IN DOUBT". "Promotion in doubt" is a strategy utilized by early educators to identify children who are at risk for failure (based on cognitive assessments), but are not being held-over. In pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children cannot be legally held-back, rather, the teacher must present a portfolio of the child's work to the parents and encourage them to make the decision. More recently, it has been noted that teacher's in the upper grades are putting pressure on the early grade teachers to hold their students over if they are not capable of doing the academic-work in first grade:

Ms. Venetia:…, this was back with {past principal}, and all the kindergarten teachers were sitting around a table and {principal} came, this was like the first week of school…And I was like (interviewee is speaking loudly), holy hell because I mean because she is so, I mean, I love {principal} dearly, she's very much missed, but, all of these 1st grade teachers were up in arms about various students who have been promoted from K and it was like they were screaming loud and clear—why are these kids in 1st grade they don't know anything? And {principal} just kinds of like dumped it on them, like why don't know their abc's why don't they know this….but it was it's also like you can't hold anybody over in k, you really can't…..

When the parent's refuse to consent to hold-back their child or the promoting teacher does not agree with the assessment to have them repeat a grade, the student is flagged as a "promotion in doubt" case. Two first grade teachers discuss their process of holding back their students which is ultimately up to the Assistant Principal:

Interviewer: So how do you determine whether or not your children in your class are ready or not to be promoted? What goes into those decisions?

Ms. Venitia: Well it's like I have 8 kids who are on my hold-over list.

Interviewer: Why?

Ms. Venetia: Because they just weren't on, they have to be on the TC (Bank Street) level of [5]H/I by June and their still in D/E in February, it's like I am extremely worried about them. And also if their writing doesn't reflect, hasn't show much growth, ummm if their math skills you know, if their, if…we get inundated with what the goals should be for math and some kids still don't make them, but umm…I mean I got really..i got really busy once I saw that you know this is not happening that quickly for them so now I think I will probably have 3 hold overs, but that's .most if it. I don't even know if we are going to be picking who gets hold over…that's within the AP.

[5] The Bank Street curriculum delineates target reading materials for each grade level that must be achieved throughout the school year.

Ms. Teresa: I..I we don't even know the standard yet,, it seems very fuzzy, every year I've been teaching…Ii mean I know where the children should be, but, and they tell us what level basket they should be reading on, but it kind of changes every year depending on how much money opens up for summer school because I don't know if they hold that many children over, truly most of the time what is is they send the kids to summer school and they pass them along. Now who's in summer school? All of the behavior problems, people who did not want to sit down and learn. .

Ms. Venetia: There isn't even any summer school now for young, for k, 1 and 2. The only people who get summer school that, well that was last year, is third grade 4th grade and 4th grade, because those are all the big test years so if you don't pass one of those tests, you are an automatic hold-over, you have to go to summer school, and then you got to be re-tested in august to see if you'll be promoted or not. I mean…it's all unfortunate…it's all a numbers game, this is my first experience with it, but for me, I mean I was at a meeting at TC and another teacher said I can only have 2 hold overs..it's not based on the kids sitting in your room, it's like I can only have, they told me I can only have two hold overs. So, it puts teachers in such a strange position because they are going to fighting for kids to be held over which you think you would be in the reverse position, like even though this kid is not performing so and so, he's progressed this far, I think he could really excel, you know, they'll give him a big push over the summer, he's a great kid, he shows evidence of a lot of understanding and comprehension of stories, his writing is really great, I'm not sure why his reading is sluggish but let's give him, let's slate him for intervention, but, I think he should go to second grade. We are going to be doing the reverse of that, which is like fighting for kids to be held over because we don't see them as being able to proceed to the next level..

The Kindergarten teachers were unsure about the criteria to hold-over students. For example, I participated in a meeting in which all of the Kindergarten teachers were deciding where to recommend placement for each of their students. Conflicting views about the guidelines for this procedure erupted into a debate between three Kindergarten teachers who did not "believe in" holding back young students and one who did. Ms. Douglas suggested the criteria for placing students in the class were 1) to identify a teacher with a personality that will match their

student and 2) to consider the learning environment. When I asked what this meant, they discussed an implicit "tracking" system in which "promotion in doubt" children will be placed in one classroom, typically a self-contained class where the guarantee of a second professional in the room is mandatory (as of 2004 paraprofessionals were not placed in classrooms due to funding re-distribution efforts). One teacher argued that the most important factor to consider when suggesting placement for students is to separate children who have a history of misbehaving. At the end of the meeting all of the teachers felt dissatisfied and questioned the process. According to their view, last year their recommendations were not considered and the Assistant Principal made all final decisions about placement without consulting the Kindergarten teachers. Unfortunately, it was too late in the year to discuss this process directly with the Assistant Principal.

Reinforcing retention quotas and relying on the number of available summer school "seats" to indicate who should be promoted seem like precarious strategies for education systems. Surviving reform in this urban context has forced administrators and teachers to engage in practices that may not always account for the diversity of learning challenges in a school system-or for teacher morale.

The Smart, Problem Child

In recent years, federal programs and policies designed to support the development the "readiness skills" of young children have strongly materialized. Social-emotional development, one element of the National Education Goals Panel

[NEGP] school readiness definition, has received unique attention in this effort (see Cavanaugh, Lippitt & Moyo (2000) for a review of federal policies and programs affecting children's social-emotional development and readiness for school). Research exploring the main effects or correlates of social-emotional competence and other developmental outcomes is well established (e.g., Huffman, Mehlinger, & Kerivan, 2000; Raver & Zigler, 1997; Raver, 2003). When teachers are asked to define what skills are important for young children to have to be ready to learn, following directives, expressing one's needs, and getting along with others are indicated as critical readiness skills (Lewit & Baker, 1995). Ironically, even with strong empirical support which demonstrates the positive relationship between cognitive readiness skills and social-emotional skills (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), this component of "readiness" was, at best, superficially addressed in the early childhood classrooms in this urban school. The early childhood curriculum in Kindergarten (both in structure and content), as well as assessment requirements, focused primarily on early cognitive skills broadly defined as reading and writing. In this urban setting, the pressure was strong to demonstrate readiness in an essentializing, over simplified way—a set of cognitive, pre-literacy skills embodied in the child. A consequence of this culture of readiness manifests itself in the way children with demanding social-emotional needs were managed. There was little time and capacity for teachers to work through the demands of a non-compliant, behaviorally challenging five year old. Teachers were required to follow a very specific curriculum on a pre-determined calendar. As an early

childhood teacher, at any moment someone from the District can enter your classroom unannounced and "check up" on you, confirming you are or are not on-target with the "Flow of the Day". Below is a comment by the Principal during an early fall professional development workshop regarding surprise District visits which illuminates the tension around such practices for everyone involved:

"Are you ready for the District or the Region representatives to come visit? From my observations maybe 1, maybe 2 of you are ready. But, not the rest. ***I*** *(emphasized) don't want to be embarrassed and if it happened today, I'd be embarrassed".*

This dynamic occurs in the context of a system which directs most of its funds to curriculum and assessment, consequently decreasing vital intervention services and programs for young children with other developmental needs (For example the bilingual program was dismantled due to funding re-distributions). Learning experiences in this urban setting are shaped by the cognitive-based curriculum and assessment schedule. Social-emotional development, physical development, and creative and artistic learning, for example, are not areas receiving much curriculum, assessment or fiscal attention.

"The curriculum this year is horrible" (fieldnote data). This the first thing Ms. Douglas said to me after we finished the first Math lesson of the year. By 10am that day, I noticed at least 4 children yawning, rubbing their eyes and becoming easily distracted. Others were asking for snack or were thirsty. Ms. Douglas also noticed this behavior, and wondered if the children were too tired

and too young for structured, "math" lessons.

Shortly after the first weeks of school were over, I began to witness the challenges Ms. Douglas faced, and other early childhood teachers talked about, when implementing an academic-focused curriculum with five-year old children. When I spoke with teachers, they did not immediately connect the pressures they were experiencing to implement a required academic curriculum (in the context of a financially taxed system) with the behavioral difficulties some children were exhibiting. Rather, children who were not able to comply with what one teacher labeled as "ludicrous" practices, were identified as "problems"—children who disrupt the "Flow of the Day" and must be removed from their classroom (or isolated within) so others can keep moving along and instructional benchmarks can be met.

Three months into the school year I walked into Ms. Douglas's classroom a bit later than usual to find all of the Kindergarten classroom teachers in a circle at the rug, listening to Ms. Douglas demonstrate a "mini-lesson". When I walked into the class, I noted the level of seriousness in Ms. Douglas's tone fading out her usual enthusiastic, playful self. Below is an excerpt of a fieldnote entry recorded that morning:

"I walked in around 9am and there were 6 adults in the classroom. The Assistant Principal, Cindy (Ms. Douglas*), a Bank Street*[6] *person, and others (I need to get names).....*

[6] Bank Street College was contracted by the New York City Department of Education to provide a comprehensive reform model geared to improving teaching and learning at NYC public schools deemed to be in need of re-structuring.

Cindy seems nervous. She is more serious and less animated than usual with the children.

I just realized that the rest of the adults are the K teachers. How perfect! They are sitting around observing Cindy do an interactive lesson. They all have straight, serious faces on—as if it is painful to be here. A man just walked in, I have never seen him before. Cindy's affect isn't the same. Her enthusiasm and playfulness are not so obvious.

The Bank Street person called everyone over to tell us what's next. She looked at me, Ms. Douglas said "this is Jennifer" I immediately put my hand out to shake her hand and said my name. I was then quickly directed to make more sheets for the students to work with. My feeling was that if I was a new teacher, this person's attempt to greet and include me felt a bit hostile. This would be very strange if I were a teacher. I wonder if she felt I was "late" and so she was irritated? Even so she made me feel like a child. I wonder if that is how the teachers feel when interacting with her?"

Right now, I am in a circle with all of the teachers and the bank street person. She is going through, very strategically, the morning lesson. She's talking about communication break-downs between groups. Some teachers are reluctantly taking notes. Ms. Niobe (Jamacian teacher) who is old-school seems very shut-down, arms are folded, eyes are rolling. Jane walked into the room with a student.

……Bank Street person was encouraging teachers to share their experiences, one of the teachers (long hair, maybe Latina?) was very quiet throughout this entire exchange. Almost passive aggressively quiet."

During this "interactive" teacher lesson, the children were also behaving differently than during a typical morning. Although they moved through their structured writing tasks, they were less talkative and less likely to challenge the rules of the setting, except for Jamal. Jamal was a bright, African-American child who was eager to learn. He also wanted to play, casually talk with his classmates and move around the classroom freely—opportunities not afforded in this Kindergarten setting. Jamal knew all of his letters, and most of his sounds when

he entered Kindergarten. His ability to manipulate information and converse was average for a five-year old child. Jamal was quick to engage himself physically with others and utilize overly assertive tactics to get his way resulting in social conflicts. From the beginning of the school year, Ms. Douglas knew Jamal was going to have a difficult time in Kindergarten. Not academically, but complying with the structure of the Kindergarten day she was required to construct.

"Certain problems you can put into the auditorium", the Assistant Principal says to Ms. Douglas, referring to Jamal when he disrupts others during his writing task. Ms. Douglas takes the time to speak with Jamal privately (with six other adults in the room this appeared easier for her to do than a typical day), and he continues to comply with the morning lesson in an acceptable fashion. Later that afternoon I asked Ms. Douglas if the school provided interventions for children like Jamal and William (another African American child who was reading at the first grade level when he entered Kindergarten) who were bright and able to keep up academically but were having other developmental "difficulties". With a sarcastic tone Ms. Douglas replied, "*When kids are throwing chairs across the room is when they are pulled out" (fieldnote data).* I asked her why there was a focus on intervention rather than prevention and she responded, *"Money, money, money"*.

Throughout the year, I documented how decisions were made for children like Jamal and William—the smart, "problem" children. Are these children more

likely to be identified as problems because they are functioning in a system beset by anxiety about performance and accountability? Does their problem behavior emerge (or is exacerbated) as a result of developmentally inappropriate expectations for Kindergarten children? Are these children being left behind or relegated to a pathway of school failure because the system is not able to prioritize their needs in the face of early childhood reform which focuses on cognitive skills? Under what conditions do school systems function and adequately adapt to serve the differentiated needs of children? Perhaps these are the vital questions to explore in early childhood reform contexts given the current indicators of system-level anxiety and helplessness briefly noted below.

On April 26, 2005 a five-year old African American female was arrested at school after throwing a tantrum which started when the child refused to take part in a math lesson. At first the school staff called the child's mother who stated she was unable to retrieve her daughter from the school for one hour. It was at this point the school decided to call the police to assist in managing the child's behavior. The handcuffed five-year old remained in the back of a police car until her mother arrived at the school (Child Development Research, 2005). Recently, a report issued by the Yale Child Study Center, indicates that African-Americans attending state-funded pre-kindergarten were about twice as likely to be expelled as Latino or Caucasian children and that boys were 4.5 times more likely to be expelled than girls for "bad behavior". In New York State, more than 600 preschoolers are expelled annually having the 12th highest expulsion rate in the

country (Gilliam, 2005).

The current goal of education reform is to provide equal educational opportunity for all children in our country despite the enormous variability in background and life experience. What then can we learn from children like Jamal or William or the 5-year olds that are being arrested? To answer these questions we can turn to a local examination of how priorities for early childhood experiences emerge within a fiscally constrained setting designed to push the developmental envelope of age-appropriate practices with an eye towards meeting performance standards and getting children "ready" for school.

A System of Academics and Less of Everything Else

As the year progressed, it became clear that providing early childhood classes with access to free-play and/or physical development opportunities was a challenge. For example, by design, the curriculum selected and mandated by District Star did not balance play-oriented choice time with academics, particularly in Kindergarten. A disconnect between what the administrators called "developmental appropriate practice" and what was being instituted as practice existed. During a professional development workshop entitled, "Using Standards to Drive Curriculum" the literacy coach reminded teachers of a current pedagogical debate;

"There is a great debate between whether or not to do phonics, letters, etcetera etcetera, or focused play", Principal interrupts, *"The best strategy is a combination of the two" (fieldnote data).*

Although subtle messages were expressed in this way to include focused play into the early childhood day, teachers did not have the time or did not feel comfortable taking the risk to do this. On different occasions, Ms. Douglas reminded me of her anxiety of keeping on-task and following the "Flow of the Day" chart in case someone would enter her classroom unannounced. What does this mean for a young child? During an interview, Ms. Venetia, a first grade teacher discusses her discontent with the curriculum for children who may be labeled as "problem children":

"Even though they have the supposedly new curriculum, this curriculum is tailored to individual students, that you can assess the growth, that is not that they are all doing basal readers at the same time, but there is differentiation, authentic learning experiences blabideee blah blah……. in reality if you look at this model and compare it to progressive schools, very progressive schools in the incredibly…you know…some that are in the public system, like the Earth School or Central Park East….they have a curriculum that is 45 minutes of instruction and then the rest of the day the kids are exploring what their diverse interests are and they are creating projects and their creating their own learning in the classroom in a way that is completely foreign to this kind of public school setting.

….. And there is evidence to suggest that even kids who aren't compliant that come from disadvantaged backgrounds that if those children are in progressive schools, that its not that they're being forced to do reading for 45 minutes, they're being forced to do writing for 45 minutes, they're being forced to do math now for 45 minutes, blah blah blah, or whatever it its….if you have a classroom that has lots of choice, lots of self-directed learning, right, that those kids will do very well in these settings. We are trying to jam these square pegs into round holes (punches her hands for emphasis)*……for those kids who create chaos for the rest of the classroom, it becomes its very difficult to get through the day…but, I just feel like I am constantly failing these children because they are in the absolutely wrong setting. The are in the completely wrong setting".*

Outside of the academic-focused classroom, one would expect to find opportunities for young children to engage in open-play and physical activities—

to release the built up energy from sitting at their desks most of the day; to have a chance to engage socially and develop relations with other classmates in a casual setting. This was not the case at the Gardenia School. After lunch, Kindergarten children were relegated to sit quietly on the floor for twenty-five minutes, until it was time to return to their classroom. At times, they were escorted to the auditorium to watch a DVD, usually a popular young-audience movie (e.g., Honey, I Shrunk the Kids; The Little Mermaid). I asked Ms. Douglas why the children did not go outside and play, especially when the weather permitted. It was an issue of capacity. There was not enough staff (or volunteer parents) to monitor the classes on the concrete yard, and so, they were required to stay in the building for recess every afternoon—no matter if the sun was shining outside. When asked about the school's desire to provide social-emotional opportunities as well as cognitive, Ms. Douglas reported:

> "*They talk a good game. But for someone like William, for example, he is not going to be seen as needy, even though he is already identified as a difficult child.*"

When special events were planned for the early grades, children were generally taken to the auditorium to sit in theater-type seating and listen to a presenter, who at times did not employ strategies to engage the young audience (e.g., talking for periods of 25 minutes with a monotone voice). It was not uncommon for Kindergarteners to go to an assembly for 30 minutes with the expectation they would sit quietly and listen (e.g., Career Day). When children

would begin to stir in their seats or talk among each other their teacher or one of the assembly monitors would reprimand them. Young children who were identified as "disruptive", like William and Jamal, were immediately upon entrance to the auditorium seated separately from their classmates (although in sight of their teacher) with the aim of preventing their "bad behavior" from occurring.

Three times a week the Kindergarten children went to "gym" for 40 minutes. During this time they had opportunities to engage in structured physical activities. I never observed a gym class for more than 10 minutes, however, when the children re-entered the classroom, it was not uncommon to see their faces flushed and perspired. Based on this observation, one can assume there was some level of intense activity happening.

Toward the end of the school year, the gym teacher refused to teach gym in any grade. According to Ms. Douglas, he was "fed up with how the children were acting" they were according to her account of his complaints, "uncontrollable". Although his frustration was directed primarily at the 1st grade classes, *"all the children are suffering",* according to Ms. Douglas. As a result, the gym teacher offered to go to each classroom and teach a "health class". I decided to participate in one of these classes within the Kindergarten class I have been actively observing all year. During this particular observation, the children were expected to sit in their seats for forty-minutes and listen to their gym teacher discuss the important elements of a healthy meal. This discussion certainly had merit in and

of itself, but at what expense? During the “health lesson” Ms. Douglas left the classroom where she normally would stay when the children were at gym and prepare her lessons. The children were not engaged, and were easily distracted by off-topic peer-conversations. The gym teacher reprimanded the children to sit in their seats and listen many times.

During an interview Ms. Douglas shared her views about this situation:

“We [Ms. Douglas and other Kindergarten teachers] said for the following weeks we were going to take them to the park because this group doesn't get to play. There's a lot to be said for what's happening. School policy, teachers' rights, and how they all say "No child left behind." I just want to share this with you. We had a gym teacher here, he refuses to teach gym because some of the kids are too bad. So on certain days he just doesn't come to work. And it's accepted. And I'm sure there's letters in the file but he just comes to work. I don't get that…… And now he doesn't do gym at all, he comes to your class and does the health lesson?!?

…..What hurts me is how much this person doesn't realize how much the kids like him, maybe even love him, just because he's the gym teacher, and he shuns them. He pushes them away, and he doesn't know. Then you should not teach, not the early grades. Go to high school, go to junior high school. The little ones want to touch, they want to hug you. They want a hug, they want a pat on the back. Some kind of affection that might be the only thing they get. You know.

During the last weeks of school, Ms. Douglas heeded the suggestion of another kindergarten teacher and decided to utilize an assessment of site-word recognition to “see where the kids were” in preparation for first-grade class assignments. As expected Jamal and William performed well (see Tables 2 and 3). Their collective assessments over the past year indicate they are “ready” for first grade. I asked Ms. Douglas to reflect upon the futures these two students. In the system they have already been identified as “difficult” children. This means, most

of the early childhood staff knows that they will disrupt a class and require extra-attention, thus potentially hold-back the progress of other well-behaved children. Due to the pressure of keeping on target with curriculum requirements, and the lack of social-emotional focus in early childhood classrooms—children like Jamal and William will continue to be removed from their class (e.g., sent to the auditorium) or isolated in their classroom setting. In either case, their exposure to learning experiences will decrease and be configured with their behavior difficulties in mind. According to Ms. Douglas the pathways of students like William and Jamal will be determined, in part, by their first-grade teacher's capacity to manage behavior that is disruptive and/or not appropriate in a class setting. As the school system continues to function as part of the current reform model with a central focus on cognitive skills (and fiscal constraints), teachers and school staff alike will be forced to make decisions that do not benefit every child.

Table 2. Jamal's performance on a site word recognition assessment. Words that are underlined/bold were answered correctly.

100 words Kids Need to Read											
Book 1 (First Grade)											
a	black	day	five	go	**I**	mother	old	run	**ten**	want	**you**
am	**blue**	did	for	goes	**if**	**my**	**on**	**sat**	that	was	
an	**book**	**do**	four	**good**	**in**	new	**one**	saw	**the**	**we**	
and	boy	**don't**	friend	got	**is**	night	orange	**see**	they	went	
are	**by**	down	**from**	**green**	**it**	nine	out	seven	**this**	**were**	
as	came	eat	gave	had	**jump**	**no**	play	she	three	will	
at	**can**	eight	**get**	has	little	not	rain	sit	**to**	with	
ate	**car**	**fast**	**girl**	have	**look**	of	ran	**six**	**two**	**yellow**	
be	come	father	give	**he**	**me**	off	**red**	stop	up	**yes**	

Table 3. William's performance on a site word recognition assessment. Words that are underlined/bold were answered correctly.

100 words Kids Need to Read

Book 1 (First Grade)

a	**black**	**day**	**five**	**go**	**I**	**mother**	**old**	**run**	**ten**	**want**	**you**
am	**blue**	**did**	**for**	**goes**	**if**	**my**	**on**	**sat**	**that**	**was**	
an	**book**	**do**	**four**	**good**	**in**	**new**	**one**	**saw**	**the**	**we**	
and	**boy**	**don't**	**friend**	**got**	**is**	**night**	**orange**	**see**	**they**	went	
are	**by**	**down**	**from**	**green**	**it**	**nine**	**out**	**seven**	**this**	were	
as	**came**	**eat**	**gave**	**had**	**jump**	**no**	**play**	**she**	**three**	**will**	
at	**can**	**eight**	**get**	**has**	**little**	**not**	**rain**	**sit**	**to**	**with**	
ate	**car**	**fast**	**girl**	**have**	**look**	**of**	**ran**	**six**	**two**	**yellow**	
be	**come**	**father**	**give**	**he**	**me**	**off**	**red**	**stop**	**up**	**yes**	

Narrow definitions of school readiness which primarily focus on cognitive skills for young children have been nationally disputed (NAEYC, 2005). Over the past decade empirical research has demonstrated the necessity for us to consider all aspects of development, not one particular domain, if we are genuinely interested in educating and preparing children for the transition into the worlds of higher education, family and community. Why are we asking schools, such as the Gardenia Public School, to make choices and create learning environments based on narrow concepts of school readiness and success? School reform that is anchored in a system of cognitive assessment is creating a precarious situation for schools systems. In this urban school, resources are allocated primarily for instruction, curriculum and assessment leaving little support for enrichment

programs, and other vital early intervention services that address the needs of the whole child. Schools are relegated to prioritize their actions in light of reform based on a uni-dimensional perspective of development and learning, which unintentionally leave children like Jamal and William behind.

The Urban Triangle: Accountability, Assessment and Funding

As urban schools are targeted for improvement at disproportionately higher rates than suburban or rural schools under the No Child Left Behind Law (Center on Education Policy, 2005) one may speculate that these schools are correspondingly more likely to be at risk for and/or more anxious about losing their funds based on accountability measures. Although schools are finding ways to adapt to this system, these efforts reveal a set of contradictions which illuminate the relationships between accountability, assessment and funding. For example, many of the strategies and practices administrators engage in are focused on maintaining their funds although their motivations are very much driven by fear and anxiety about losing support. The accountability criteria imposed on the school by the district in an effort to comply with NCLB accountability benchmarks conflicts with the ways teachers were trained and professionally identify themselves as important, active agents in their setting. The assessment criteria for children are based on a very limited view of how young children optimally learn and develop. Given this, the school has developed a number of adaptive strategies which on one hand meet the NCLB criteria and on the other preserve their sense of what it takes to teach a child and make them "ready". They

fill in the gap between realities with fictional practices such as "dumbing" down pre-kindergarten curriculum, filling up seats with kids that don't belong in extra-intervention, demoralizing teachers by bringing in "experts" who know better and maintaining files to cover for later expected failure (e.g., promotion in doubt).

At the school level, certain standards must be met to be eligible for continuous funding—and so there is a system of accountability and assessment in place to facilitate the meeting of these standards. In practice, however, much of the responsibility of helping children become successful learners and adults become better teachers, is modularized and farmed out to people outside of the system such as Bank Street and Voyager. These educational supplemental services, are however, not rigorously evaluated based on the "scientific- based research" paradigm mentioned many times in the NCLB law. These lenient and ambiguous evaluation criteria lead to misconceptions about the effectiveness of programs particularly in educationally at-risk schools (Sunderman & Kim, 2004). The following excerpt from a joint-interview with the Early Intervention Specialist and Assistant Principal illustrates the complexity of this unique urban-school condition:

<u>Early Intervention person</u>: …….but she was also doing a reading program with low-level and there was another reading recovery teacher in addition to me so what we use to do was we use to identify the kids in the beginning of the year, talking 1st grade now, identify the kids in the beginning of the year, I would take so many the other reading recovery teacher would take some, and then the other project read teacher. The project read teacher would then umm, take small groups. So if we weren't covering them in reading recovery, she was covering them in the small groups. Then when January came we would share what we

learned about them and then we would clump them so, if they were still low performing in January we would keep them back to us in January as many as we can handle. But, she also did more than first grade, I think she did 1-3 rd grade, I think. But, it was very interesting because at some point they asked us to demonstrate the amount of growth over a period of time. I forget what the years were, but it was like a 5 year span, from the initiation of project read, the initiation of reading recovery and how the kids moved. During that time our kids went higher—as soon as our kids got higher and we made an improvement, they pulled project read from the building. They said, you don't need that anymore…because your kids are better now. (big laugh). But, the reality is when you have low-performing children they need constant support throughout all of their elementary school, at least through 3rd grade.

Interviewer: and now, that's really not happening?

Early Intervention person:: NO, so when you talk about NCLB umm, when that was signed we received information about the possibility of getting a grant. [the assistant principal] and I were both involved in the writing of that grant, okay. We were asked to identify the problems within the school, we were asked to tell about what kinds of things we needed to do to improve what was going on in the school, and so on and so forth. So we write this great grant. When we got it, we were suppose to get 600k over 2 years to implement what we have proposed in the grant, so in other words if they accepted our grant this is what we put down. In August of that year, [the principal] called me and said Tammy, we have to be in White Plains on Monday. And I said okay. She said we got the grant…..So we thought Great! Right? So, I interrupted my vacation and left my 2 kids with family members, and went to White Plains for 3 days. The first day, instead of giving just a few people the grant money, they decided that anyone who qualified based on the needs would get the grant, BUT, instead of getting what you applied for you really were going to get 133k each year for two years, so it was 266k verses 600k which was what we were initially suppose to get. And out of that 266k was to come my salary, you see, so you think of it in terms of 1 year, 133k dollars minus my salary which at the time the district was saying was 110k, which it is no where near, but they include that your benefits, pension, etc……so whatever way they got to that number, so you figure that out, which is how much left? Then they told us we had to use Voyager to implement the grant.

Interviewer: Who told you the……

Early Intervention person:… the state…we had no choice, in other words the professional development piece was decided upon by the state before we had any input. We did not put Voyager down, and it did not turn out necessarily to be a bad thing, but at that moment in time we did not have that in our proposal to use

that specific company. We had specific things that were on our agenda that we thought we needed to address that was thrown out the window.

Interviewer: And why do you think they selected Voyager?

Early Intervention person: I do not know the answer to that question. But, I was very angry. Because I felt that if people in the schools were asked to identify the needs and had the experience in the school that they weren't putting down just any old thing, and they knew where their weaknesses were and they knew how to address those weaknesses, why were those professionals given the opportunity to follow through? Okay so basically, 133k minus 110 we had to use Voyager, all teachers on grade 1,2,3 had to be participants in this and they had to do the on-line staff development with me and we had to pay Voyager $1,100 for each teacher we trained. So you think how much was left after that? So what money did we get for the school to implement anything other than to support Voyager…..not really very much.

Beginning in 2003 (the first year of NCLB funding for this school), all of the paraprofessionals were removed from the early childhood classes. Title 1funding was redistributed (primarily for teacher development and assessment) and teachers lost a vital classroom resource. For example, Ms. Douglas's kindergarten class contained 20 children. This teacher-student ratio is well beyond recommended standards for early childhood settings (NAEYC, 1991). In 2004, the bilingual program was extinguished, yet, the Spanish-speaking population in the school continued to increase. With these programmatic changes, also came new assessment standards and curricula for the early grades. Assessment schedules demanded the teacher's attention and time—something not easily afforded in a classroom without additional support. Ms. Douglas spoke about the relationship between assessments and resources often over the course of the year, as did other early childhood educators. The teachers reported feeling frustrated

about “not having enough time” and anxious about their student’s performance.

The following excerpt from an interview with Ms. Douglas reflects these tensions:

Interviewer: This is what I am hearing, you have to be so focused on putting this curriculum in the classroom and getting scores up, and doing these assessments, but you're not resourced to do all of it. I wasn't here all that much. How would you have finished all these assessments you had to do and were asked to do?

Ms. Douglas: That's a whole other chapter. Because how do you? What the new program is trying to do (Bank Street) their trying to show you how to teach the lessons and then based on what the child is doing, if they are doing this and then…

Interviewer: They are very individualized…

Ms.Douglas: Yeah, if they can do this then they are low level or if they are doing that then they are high level. You should be able to tell just by what you taught what they are capable of doing. And then that way you know how to keep pushing them forward.

Interviewer: But are you equipped to address the every issue….

Ms. Douglas: (Interrupts) NO not by myself no, no, no.

Interviewer: What's happening, what's happening then?

Ms. Douglas: To me what happens is, those kids who are showing progress you keep pushing them.

Interviewer: Okay

Ms. Douglas: Those kids who are struggling kind of keep struggling because, you don’t have time to re-teach. Even though they say umm, with those kids that are struggling regroup them back on the carpet while you have those that are able to function independently, have them do the work at their desk, you go over it with those kids on the carpet. That’s a hard practice for me.

Interviewer: Why?

Ms. Douglas: One, because even though the kids are supposed to be working independently by themselves because I think they can do it. They are not always doing it, they still need their supervision to redirect them, get focused and finished. They might start, but then they start talking, or you know they forgot what they are

going to do. They still need guidance as well, even if you know they can do this. They still need that - another adult to help them adjust as well. Until they are independent, and to me kindergarten kids are just not independent.

Interviewer: Do you think they should be?

Ms. Douglas: No….. I don't think that they should be.

Interviewer: But do you think the system thinks they should be?

Ms. Douglas : I think the system thinks that they should be….. Like they all say by this time they should be "this", ok but they're not, and do they fail because they are not? Do you understand what I am saying?

Interviewer: Yeah….

Ms. Douglas: And no I don't think so. Some kids don't get it until first grade.

Interviewer: Umm..hmm..

Ms. Douglas: You know. I don't understand how the system... I know with time comes change; however, I remember from my own experience, in kindergarten I played. Yes I read stories, yes I am sure we did math in a game kind of way but it was not a sit down learn how to add. I didn't do that until first maybe second grade. And I was able to understand it better as opposed to…. but ok come on (unclear). It's just enough. And it's a lot, it's a lot of pressure, it's just a lot of pressure. Because, if half of my class doesn't look good then I've failed as a teacher. Because you're telling me that this curriculum works, it's been working for years, it works, you know. So if it's work, but I don't have the majority of my kids doing this work then I feel like the failure. Someway I didn't teach it right, I did not spend enough time on it- something. There just a lot of pressure and yes it's all about looking good. So you have TC assessment, ECLS assessment, you have month by month assessment, you have everyday math assessment because this assessment is the District. The TC assessment is regional. So and yeah, when do you have time left? They did kindergarten…. they did all of early childhood a disservice when they took out the paras. You really hurt. You hurt the teacher and you hurt the kids tenfold. Because that para was there to work with either those kids that were high functioning or review with those who didn't get it the first time.

In 2005, the nation's schools received $9.8 billion less than the anticipated NCLB funding promised by Congress. It is estimated that in 2006, $12 billion less

will be provided to schools nationwide than what Congress authorized when the federal law was enacted (NAEYC, 2005). When federal funding does not adequately support the rules and regulations of the law, states are relegated to utilizing local funds, which leads to a fiscal and administrative hemorrhage in already under-resourced urban school systems. One pivotal legal movement calling attention to the shortfall of federal funds to implement the requirements of the NCLB law became evident when a diverse network of schools joined the National Education Association (NEA) and filed the first national lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Education on April 20, 2005. In August 2005, Connecticut was the first state to bring a suit against the federal government for not adequately funding the federal education law (Salzman, 2005). Can teachers be "accountable" when they are not sufficiently supported? Without the adequate capacity-building efforts can we expect schools to successfully reform or will we continue to endorse the failure of urban systems of education? One first grade teacher discussed how early childhood teacher choices are being influenced by the pressure to demonstrate accountability via their students work:

Ms. Ventia:…….it doesn't make sense to me that they are not learning their alphabet, in a very creative way in pre-k. Because it doesn't make sense, there just squished too much in k –it doesn't make any sense. But, I think the pressure on K teachers now is just enormous….what the expectations are. And because some kids can really succeed and do well, doesn't mean that all children should be doing that well at that age because its' setting the bar this high, and so then anyone who doesn't make it and I'm it's like……..I'm sorry you can go around the building and look at the work and you can see what kind of value is placed on the work by what's out there. Like because if I ….see you're making me say bad

things…but if I see work in the lower grades that every single word is spelled correctly, to me they are not doing them any favors…

Interviewer: You know that their writing is…..

Ms. Ventia: Well I don't know how the're doing it but I don't believe it. And what that kind of writing does it tell kids, you can only write what you can spell, so everything is "I went to the park" "My mom". You know it becomes very…..children aren't… if the goal is to have it look perfect and be spelled perfectly then we are in big trouble because we are making kids shut off themselves as individuals, shut off as a brave courageous writer that tries to stretch it out. I'm even hearing in the upper grades now, their saying, it drives me crazy to go around this building and see like, you know there are 20 kids in the class but they're only putting up 6 kids' works. So what does that mean about how we value those other 14 children in the room? We don't value their work? And I'm hearing upper grades now saying, unless it's perfect it's not going up—it's like we're back to that crap that we had 5 years ago when the district said that everything had to be spelled absolutely perfect??!! I mean it's insane, it's insane to me. But, that's how…(expresses frustration by banging on desk)…you know it's like the stakes have been raised, but teachers I don't think are very clear about what they've been raised to—it's not about spelling words perfectly it's about children having a place to express their ideas, their imagination, blah blah blah, and trying to support them, and you know there are all the skills underneath as you move along. But umm, I I'm lost…

This study began with the idea that "readiness" as defined by teachers and schools would be a key area of contest and a key issue driving school practices. As the research plan unfolded new topics, related to, but not the same as, readiness emerged. These emergent topics appeared to be at the center of the forces driving the school's practices. In a nutshell, the concept of readiness is nested within a conceptual complex focusing on children, teacher's beliefs and practices and district and regional beliefs and practices. Readiness, in that form, clearly continues to exist as a conceptual framework. However, new factors, related to federal legislation and its anticipated funding impact on schools has emerged as a

more central player in driving school practices. It appears that the administrative demands of complying with federal funding demands has become more important to school administrators (as a matter of survival) than ideas about development and/or the cultural relations of schools and communities. To some extent the concept of readiness has blended into the concept of "ready or not, here I come, and you'd better be accountable."

Chapter Five
Discussion

"School readiness" is a concept used by educators, researchers and policy makers to explain and address the educational needs of young children. Most recently, federal legislation has created a unique context for how "readiness" is defined and subsequently used to structure the educational pathways for young children, particularly in urban settings. Employing qualitative and ethnographic methodology, the current study aimed to document how beliefs about readiness for young children emerged and what those beliefs were. An equally important goal was to capture how beliefs structured the practices in early childhood. As the study evolved, it was evident that beliefs and practices of "readiness" were driven by the current federal legislation (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act). Expectations about readiness for four, five and six year olds primarily emerged based on a future assessment mandate in 3rd grade, not by developmental knowledge or their historical engagement in learning activities, for example. Readiness beliefs and practices were nested within a conceptual model impacted by factors such as assessment, accountability and school resources, as well as broad educational policy (see Figure 1). Overall, the system learned ways to adapt to pressures to demonstrate efficacy and accountability in an effort to maintain NCLB funds and avoid district-level penalization. Within the context of adaptation, expectations about young children's learning and teacher practice emerged and practices followed which were disjointed from developmental and educational theory of

learning. System anxiety led to "adaptive" responses of the system (e.g., "dumbing down" pre-k curriculum to make the K curriculum look good; indirect tracking of students).

As the study evolved, it was clear that readiness as a conceptual model addressing the developmental and educational needs of an early childhood context was no longer the driving force for early educational practices in this urban context. Rather, accountability theory based on assessment standards for teachers and young children was defining the experiences and practices of those who operated in the system. Measures of accountability and competency are reasonable requirements for educational systems, and indeed can be productive mechanisms for schools. However, as Linn (2000) suggests, "the unintended negative effects of the high-stakes accountability uses often outweigh the intended positive effects", must be considered given the results of the current study.

Clearly, a growing body of literature documenting the negative implications of the educational policy in our country, such as drop-out rates (e.g., Bracey, 2000) is emerging. Yet, most of these studies are documenting the practices and outcomes of older children and youth, not five and six year olds. The results of this study are emblematic of the unexpected impact elementary school assessments have on early childhood settings (e.g., pre-k, k and 1st grade). By working backward from third-grade expectations, kindergarten children are then seen as obstacles to test scores. "At-assessment risk" is a term I use to describe a system under pressure to meet the requirements of the current NCLB accountability

trends; a climate where five and six year olds are evaluated in the context of a test which is years ahead. As a result, limiting or replacing the necessary enriching opportunities for young children with academic, test-focused activities becomes a common practice. Quite literally, pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and first-grade schooling experiences are structured to meet the demand of mandated testing beginning in third-grade. Early childhood education becomes disjointed from developmental theory, which across most major paradigms, emphasized development and/or learning as a process which new ways of understanding and responding to the world emerge during sensitive periods based on contextual circumstances (e.g., Piaget, Vygotsky). An "assessment" risk context creates a different culture in the school and a different view of children.

Revealing the relationship which exists between the concept of school readiness and No Child Left Behind legislation is critical for the progress of equitable, developmentally-appropriate schooling opportunities. Despite national efforts to expand and contextualize how we think about "school readiness" for young children, the federal law, No Child Left Behind, has set the stage for schools to, without much latitude, embrace specific educational values and practices that are not reflective of the social-cultural, historical practices and development of children and schools in diverse settings. These demands re-create the deficit model of learning and development, perpetuating the certification of failure for educationally at risk schools, students of color and English language learners (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Rather than assume differentiated

developmental pathways for young children and assess learning needs based on contextual factors (e.g., system resources; prior experiences), the current culture of early childhood creates a structure of learning driven backward from a standardized test score in 3rd grade. In urban settings, which are most at risk for being identified as "needing improvement", this issue becomes compounded by class-driven factors. Urban school settings disproportionately serve more students who live beyond the poverty line. Children who are born in communities of poverty have less access to adequate health care, parks, or day-care; have limited in-home resources such as books and toys; and are more likely to live in over-crowded homes (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994); all circumstances which shape the way children experience the first schooling. These economic disparities structure the developmental opportunities differently than those who come from well-resourced communities. These differences, not deficits, are not appreciated, valued or considered within the context of reform based on accountability via standardized assessment. The underlying accountability theory driving NCLB which is based on a corporate model of "survival of the fittest", penalization, and fiscal manipulation, disengages from developmental theory leaving many children behind.

School systems, such as the one presented in this study, are adapting to the pressures of NCLB. This work presented here, exposes the practices of adaptation and who is most likely to become marginalized within this process. Academic leaking and pressure from the upper grades, daily assessments and the exclusion of

what is now being termed as “baby stuff” such as free play, music and nap time create a troubling context for early childhood settings. Most of the empirical and theoretical attention of NCLB effects has primarily focused on grades three through twelve. The research presented in this study makes a strong argument to shift our focus to how this law is changing the landscape of early childhood experiences in pre-kindergarten through 1st grade.

A social-cultural approach to development assumes individual development is only understood in social context and cannot be separated from it (Rogoff, et al., 1998). Based on this work, one can infer that children who are being educated in similar urban contexts are participating in activities of learning (or not) structured and reflective of the pressures, fiscal constraints and notions of what makes a young child ready for the “No Child Left Behind” school experience. Similarly, early childhood professionals experience being disenfranchised by a system that superficially asks for their assistance, while placing increased demands without building capacity or support. A system of accountability based primarily on assessments scores demoralizes teachers by disempowering them (e.g., pacing calendars, surveillance, and loss of creative freedom). The results of this study illuminate the ways in which the NCLB accountability context creates fear and anxiety among early childhood professionals.

Revisiting "Initial" Research Aims

The initial aims of the study can be revisited within the context of the current data. For example, the first aim of this study was to explore how beliefs about school readiness or success are produced within the context of an urban school community for early-childhood professionals. Beliefs about readiness emerged from a variety of different sources. Based on survey and interview data, teachers and school officials who participated in this study reported that their notions about what children should do when entering pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and 1st grade were influenced by their experiences with students in the school, their educational and professional experiences and professional development workshops led by the district. When asked if their beliefs about readiness and success for young children changed from year to year, teachers reported that their beliefs about readiness were sometimes challenged by the dominant approach to schooling as defined by the region, district or school administrators. Whether or not teachers agreed with the current thinking about curriculum or assessment (proxies for broad-level readiness values), they were required to participate in a one-size fits all approach to early childhood.

The second aim of this study was to examine the specific beliefs, notions and values of early childhood professionals about what children should know and be able to do when entering pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and first-grade. Data were generated from formal interviews which resulted in taxonomy of beliefs (see Figure 2) illustrating two distinct ways teachers and school officials reported what

makes a child "ready". Every participant discussed specific skills sets that children should have when entering pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and 1st grade. These skills were easily categorized as cognitive, social-emotional or motor skills and became more sophisticated as the grade level increased**.** Four out of eight participants also discussed the importance of children having certain "experiences" which made them "ready" for schooling at each grade, particularly Kindergarten. These experiences were categorized as "familial/home environment" which included exposure to books in the home and parental responsiveness or "communal" experiences such as visiting a local park or library.

The third aim of this study was to explore how local beliefs of readiness and success related to early childhood practices. Expectations of children's readiness and success (which is currently driven by accountability demands) shape how teacher's structure their classroom setting and daily instructional practices; and how and what children are expected to learn in specific grade-levels. Because children's learning success is largely connected to performance on standardized test scores years later, the majority of their early schooling experience is organized around preparation for testing—even in kindergarten. Whole-child development which emphasizes the benefits of comprehensive, diverse learning experience (e.g., inclusion of arts, music, play, socialization) is lost. The diverse needs of students (e.g., bilingual education, physical education) are not adequately addressed. Internal funds are shifted to programs and services identified by the state to support a rigorous assessment schedule and a structured reading and

writing- based curriculum with little support (and teacher buy-in) to build the necessary capacity to carry out such demands.

Limitations to the Present Study

One of the most significant limitation to the present study is the lack of representation of the district and parents. The inclusion of parents in the current study was not feasible given time constraints and limited logistical support. However, to capture how parental beliefs and practice relate to the culture of current learning in this system will provide a way to foster much needed community and school dialogue, as well as an analysis of the disparate cultures of readiness which exists among stakeholders of young children. Although several attempts were made to invite district and regional level individuals to participate, these attempts were unsuccessful. Throughout the study, participants referred to "the district". Not including the District's perspective of how decisions for young children were made is a conceptual disadvantage of the data presented.

Implications for Future Research

The research base in this particular area is limited and would benefit from further attention. Three areas of research are worthy of further investigation based on the results of the present study. First, the further development and refinement of the "Beliefs about Readiness Scale" would be a useful tool to assess teacher and school staff beliefs in early childhood. Using a measure such as this to assess beliefs prior to the implementation of a curriculum would provide points of entry for much needed dialogue among teachers, administrators and service providers.

Second, an effort to understand how parents and district-level staff develop beliefs about school readiness and related practices would shed further light on the current findings. Third, a multi-method study investigating longitudinal pathways of young children in urban reform contexts would help us understand the impact (both adaptive and maladaptive) on a variety of developmental outcomes. For example, what are the social life experiences of middle-school children who participated in an early childhood setting (pre-k through 1st grade) which lacked a focus of social-emotional development and fostered individualism and competition?

Implications for Educational Policy

A critical motivation for this work was to generate data that would serve as a springboard for educational policy dialogue. The results presented in this study point to the following policy implications:

1) Placeholders must be established to protect the nature of early childhood settings from engaging in practices driven by standardized achievement benchmarks in 3rd grade. "Development in context" models of learning must overshadow the demands of NCLB, providing a comprehensive, developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant learning experiences for children in urban settings.
2) Curriculum decision-making must include the participation of service providers. Without this type of dialogue, teachers are disenfranchised and

isolated in a system which is becoming more and more demanding. The use of teacher's and other staff's histories and knowledge of their communities to address the needs of the school and the children it serves is critical.

3) Adequate fiscal support is necessary for schools to perform the additional demands of NCLB. Without adequate support, whole-school functioning is compromised.

Conclusion

The intentions of No Child Left Behind legislation are commendable. All children in America should have an equal opportunity to engage in a comprehensive education system, equipped to address their most complex educational needs. However, the impact of such policies on the everyday lives (and futures) of young children is only beginning to be understood. Early childhood is a time where children become ready for many things in life. For this generation, it will be recognized as a period when political agendas, fear and reactionism structured their experiences unlike any time in history. Data from this study challenges the gatekeepers of education to face our nation's educational challenges in equitable and meaningful ways and really leave no one behind.

Appendix A

Codebook

Code	Code Mnemonic	Description (Inclusion criteria)	Real Text Example
School Readiness Beliefs	SCHREAD	Refers to notions, thoughts, and beliefs about what skills or experiences young children should have in the early grades.	"A high level of oral language development, I think that is the most significantly important thing that they should have coming in".
Accountability (Sub-codes include school-level; teacher-level; parent-level)	ACC	Refers to who is responsible for children's learning and how that responsibility functions in the school system.	"Whether they think kindergarten is important, coming to school and being on time is, and because there is no policy, there is no reprimand….and this has been from pre-k. And you send these letters home "You child has been late 35 days and it's only January", you know what I mean? What's the punishment? I mean, I feel bad punishing the kid. It's not his fault, he's not

			responsible for getting himself here, but what do you say to the parent?"
Curriculum/Instruction	CURIN	Refers to the current and historical practices of instruction/curriculum implementation in the early grades.	"In a conversation with Cindy she said that last year (2003) preschool was NOT permitted to work with words, letters, etc. She feels that this is why her class is "so different" than in previous years".
Teacher Agency	TA	Refers to teacher's involvement in decision-making and their freedom to be instructionally creative.	"I just feel like I am rolling with the punches here. Things change a lot and they expect a lot. The morale is down in this school…your room had to look a certain way, you had to hand things up a certain way. That's stressful, no creativity was allowed."
Assessment (Sub-codes include child; teacher; school)	ASSESS	Refers to how members of the school system are monitored for progress toward reform goals.	"[The principal] came into the classroom during the math lesson. She observed the class for less than ten minutes,

			seemed rushed and as if she was looking for something specific".
Resources (Sub-codes include community-level; school-level; external funding)	RES	Refers to fiscal, programmatic and social opportunities (or lack of) for learning/schooling.	"If you look at their background *(referring to 4 year olds)* they do not have books in their home, they do not have libraries, they do not have desks, and their routine is not going to the library once a week, maybe once a year".
School Reform (sub-codes include local and federal)	SRFORM	Refers to educational policy.	"The problem is they want us to provide intervention for 3rd, 4th and 5th grade, but we really need to do it for the pre-k, k and 1st grades".

Adaptation (Sub-codes include classroom/teacher; school-policy)	ADAPT	Refers to practices, actions and behaviors in the system, resulting from unrealistic expectations.	"I'm even hearing in the upper grades now, their saying, it drives me crazy to go around this building and see like, you know there are 20 kids in the class but there only putting up 6 kids works. So what is that mean about how do we value those other 14 children in the room? We don't value their work? And I'm hearing upper grades now saying, unless it's perfect it's not going up—it's like were back to that crap that we had 5 years ago when the district said that everything had to be spelled absolutely perfect?? I mean it's insane, it's inane to me.

Appendix B

"Beliefs About School Readiness" Survey

Part I: The interviewer reads the following questions and asks the participant to record their answers in a space provided.

1. What skills should children have when **ENTERING** pre-kindergarten?

2. What skills should children have when **LEAVING** pre-kindergarten?

3. What skills should children have when **ENTERING** kindergarten?

4. What skills should children have when **LEAVING** kindergarten?

5. What skills should children have when **ENTERING** first grade?

6. What skills should children have when **LEAVING** first grade?

Thinking about your responses above, please indicate if you agree or not with the following statements:

Part II: The interviewer asks the participant answer the following sections on a 5-point likert scale (1= strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=disagree, 5=strongly disagree).

A. My beliefs about what skills children should have in early childhood classes come from:

1) . My teaching experience

2) My education experience

(Survey Continued)

3) Attending professional development opportunities

4) Policies supported by the Department of Education

5) The ideology of the school I am working at

6) Television, newspapers, internet or other media

7) Professional Literature (e.g., journals)

8) My parenting experiences

9) The children in the community I work in

B. My beliefs and expectations for children in early childhood:

1) Change from year to year

2) Influence my instructional practices

3) related to how much homework is assigned

4) Help me make decisions about retention and/or promotion

5) relate to how and when I assess children's performance

Appendix C

Gotbaum Calls on Chancellor Klein to Justify Use of Untested Reading Curriculum

Following is a letter sent by Public Advocate Gotbaum on Tuesday May 6, 2003 to schools' Chancellor Joel Klein that questions the use of the Voyager reading curriculum proposed earlier last month.

Attached is a brief report prepared by the Public Advocate's Office that shows a lack of research and evaluation of the Voyager program. Additionally, the Public Advocate found that teachers who have used the program called it "boring," and said the program "limited creativity and lacked flexibility."

May 6, 2003

Chancellor Joel Klein
NYC Department of Education
52 Chambers Street
New York, NY 10007

Dear Chancellor Klein:

Your decision to supplement the Month-by Month Phonics Curriculum with the NYC Passport program, developed by Voyager Expanded Learning, raises many questions.

Research conducted by my office indicates that no outside examination of the Voyager curriculum has been published and none of the students using the curriculum have been independently tested to evaluate the programs success.

Introduced only two years ago, Voyager has already amassed much criticism. Fran Perkins, an adjunct professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, the first city in the country to use the reading program in 2001, called the program "the best example of the worst reading program for young children." Teachers that have used the Voyager curriculum have called it "boring".

Given the lack of Voyager's track record, I would like information on the following:

1. During your selection process, did you see research that indicated Voyager's success? If so, I would like to have a copy.

2. Did you consult any reading experts when choosing Voyager?

3. There are many successful reading programs across the country. Which programs did you evaluate and why did you select Voyager?

4. Why did you decided to implement Voyager city-wide instead of testing the program in a small number of schools?

The cost of implementing this program is an important factor to consider. The public has a right to know how funding will be used. Please provide me with a breakdown of cost associated with implementing the Voyager program.

I look forward to quick response.

Betsy Gotbaum
Public Advocate
NEW YORK CITY OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC ADVOCATE, BETSY GOTBAUM
INVESTIGATIVE REPORT, MAY 2003

Choice Under Pressure: New York City and the Voyager Expanded Learning Program

In April of 2003, Chancellor Joel I. Klein announced the New York City Department of Education's (DOE) decision to supplement the Month-by-Month Phonics Curriculum with the New York City Passport program, developed by Voyager Expanded Learning of Dallas. Although the department has yet to provide detailed cost estimates for the program, the Chancellor has said that the new reading and math curriculums would cost $50 million over two years.

New York City public school students attend overcrowded schools where less than 40 percent of the third to eighth graders meet city and state standards in English Language Arts. Since the DOE's choice for a reading curriculum will have a profound effect on these children and their ability to develop reading skills to succeed later in life, the Public Advocate's office believes that the Voyager program demands a close look.

FINDINGS

Voyager is an untested program still in its developing stages. The Voyager program is relatively new, with the first students taught by it anywhere now only in the second grade. When Florida began testing a Voyager literacy program in January of this year, it was hailed as a new and still developing program.[i]

Despite the fact that the program had never been tested in other districts, Birmingham, Alabama became the first city in the country to use Voyager's reading program in 2001. Critics of the program, like Fran Perkins, an adjunct professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, University of Alabama and Alabama State University found it to be "the best example of the worst reading programs for young children" and so narrowly focused that she declined Voyager's attempt to recruit her as literacy coordinator for the Birmingham school system.[ii] Perkins and Birmingham teachers point out that Voyager grades children too optimistically – children who understand almost nothing are considered "emerging" readers; and there is no classic literature component.[iii]

Refusing independent offers to evaluate its program has certainly not reduced criticism of the program. Voyager declined graduate professor of statistics at the University of Arkansas Carl Shaw's proposal to evaluate and conduct scientific research on whether its programs helped children succeed in school.

Voyager has produced little results. Research on Voyager programs is rare. When it is done at all, it is almost never conducted by evaluators with no connections to, or financial interest in, the company. The research and claims made by Voyager have been cited to be flimsy and unscientific by several university scholars who specialize in reading curriculum[iv].

One example of the Voyager program producing little results can be seen in Wake County, North Carolina. Their summer school program had been replaced by a program developed by Voyager in 2001. However, the new program had similar academic results to the program it had replaced. Only about one-quarter of the participants passed the retests and students who participated in the program did about the same on end-of-grade retests as similar students who did not join.[v]

Educators complain about Voyager's inflexibility. Most teachers who returned an Alabama Education Association survey said they disliked the program. Many of the teachers felt that their children were not doing any better than the regular program and thought it was a waste of money.[vi] The instituting of the Voyager program in Richmond County, Georgia was also met with criticism by educators who claim that the program limited creativity and lacked of flexibility.

Voyager Uses Politics to Gain Contracts. Before being hired by Voyager, Senior Vice President Jim Nelson was a f Bush appointee who headed of the Texas Education Agency.[vii] Voyager President Randy Best worked with current Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld when the two were appointed board members of Westmark Systems, an Austin-based holding company specializing in acquiring military electronics companies.[viii] Voyager has been accused of using these political connections to gain lucrative contracts. For example, as Texas Governor,

George W. Bush pushed a proposal giving $25 million in state money to after school programs that would aid Voyager, which had contributed more than $45,000 to Bush and over $20,000 to Bush's lieutenant governor running mate.[ix] Another example can be found in Georgia where the state Superintendent Linda Schrenko gave Richmond County a $1.1 million grant that was spent on Voyager. A month later, top executives from Voyager held a fundraiser in Texas for Schrenko after the grant went trough. At least 13 executives gave $56,000 to Schrenko's gubernatorial bid. Voyager President Randy Best has even said that politics was "a major part of the decision-making process."[x]

Schools Pressured to use Voyager. The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act specifically states that only curricula and teaching methods that are scientifically proven to work will be funded. Yet, despite criticism that the research used to justify Voyager's claims to success were unscientific and produced very little results, the U.S Education Department led applicants for federal reading funds to believe that approval of their application would be speeded up if they indicated a preference for particular commercial programs, including Voyager.

Furthermore, the New York State Department of Education was also said to be following the federal government's guidelines by mandating the use of a Voyager program. In July 2002, educators from schools across New York State gathered to discuss grant proposals for new professional development programs for teachers – to be funded with Reading First money. School officials were told that they had to use an online program being developed by a Texas-based company, Voyager Expanded Learning.

CONCLUSION

With the reading skills of New York City children and millions of dollars at stake, the decision to choose an untested program that has been called unproven and boring, by a company that has allegedly used its political connections and campaign contributions to gain contracts, needs to be revisited. Educational curriculum choices should be made on what works best for our children, not on what's best for the companies.

i Orange Sentinel, 1/15/03
ii Birmingham News, 2/24/02
iii Birmingham News, 2/24/02
ivBirmingham News, 3/25/01
v News and Observer, 2/19/03]
vi Associated Press, 5/25/02; Birmingham News, 3/20/02
vii Syracuse Post Standard, 2/29/02
vii Syracuse Post Standard, 2/29/02

ix Dallas Morning News, 9/8/98
x Chattanooga Times Free Press, 1/11/03; Atlanta Journal and Constitution, 10/21/02

Bibliography

Bracey, G. W. (2000). Bail me out: Handling difficult data and tough questions about public schools. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press

Bredekamp, S., & Shepard, L. (1989). How Best To Protect Children From Inappropriate School Expectations. *Young Children, 44,* 78-86.

Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (1998). The ecology of developmental process. In D. William, & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *The handbook of child psychology, Vol. 1: Theoretical models of human development* (5th ed., pp. 993-1029). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Brufee, K.A. (1986). Social construction, language, and the authority of knowledge: A bibliographical essay. *College English, 48,* 773-790.

Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning.* Cambridge, MA : Havard University Press.

Campbell, D. T. (1975). On the conflicts between biological and social evolution and between psychology and moral tradition. *American Psychologist, 30*, 1103-1126.

Cavanaugh, D. A., Lippitt, J., & Moyo, O. (2000). *Off to a good start: Research on the risk factors for early school problems and selected federal policies affecting children's social and emotional development and their readiness for school*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina: FPG Child Development Center.

Center on Education Policy. (2005). *Title I funds: Who's gaining and who's losing: school year 2005-06 update*. Retrieved December 2005, from http://www.ctredpol.org/nclb/

Chandler, K., Nord, C., Liu, B., & Lennon, J. (1999). Statistics in brief : Home literacy activities and signs of children's emerging literacy, 1993 and 1999. Retrieved March, 2000, from the National Center for Education Statistics web site: http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2000026

Child Development Research. (2005). Five year old handcuffed and arrested in Florida. Retrieved April 2005, from http://cdwire.net/cgi-bin/pub9990184912136.cgi

The Children of the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study Go To School; Executive Report. (1999). Retrieved March, 2004, from http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/CQO-es.pdf

Cole, M. (1997). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2004). Standards, accountability, and school reform. *Teachers College Record, 106,* 1047-1085.

Department of Education. (2005). Retrieved June 2005, from http://www.nycenet.edu/Administration/Organization+of+the+DOE/default.htm

Duncan, G. J., Brooks-Gunn, J., & Klebanov, P. K. (1994). Economic deprivation and early childhood development. *Child Development, 65*, 296-318.

Ellwein, M. C., Walsh, D. J., Eads, G. M., & Miller, A. (1991). Using readiness tests to route kindergarten students: The snarled intersection of psychometrics, policy, and practice. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 13,* 159-175.

Engetrom, Y., Miettinen, R., & Punamaki, R. L. (1999). *Perspectives on activity theory*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Entwisle, D. R., & Alexander, K. (1999). Early schooling and social stratification. In R. C. Pianta & M. J. Cox (Eds.), *The transition to kindergarten* (pp. 13-38). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Entwisle, D., & Alexander, K. (1993). Entry into school: the beginning of school transition and educational stratification in the United States. *Annual Review of Sociology, 19,* 401 – 423.

Epstein, A. S. (1993). *Training for quality: Improving early childhood programs through systematic in-service training*. Ypsilanti, MI: High Scope Press.

Fagan, J., & Fantuzzo, J. W. (1999). Multirater congruence on the social skills rating system: Mother, father, and teacher assessments of urban head start children's social competencies. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 14*, 229-242.

Farver, J. M., Kim, Y. K., & Lee, Y. (1995). Cultural differences in Korean- and Anglo-American preschoolers' social interaction and play behaviors. *Child Development, 66,* 1088-1099.

Fleiss, J. L. (1981). Balanced incomplete block designs for inter-rater reliability studies. *Applied Psychological Measurement, 5,* 105-112.

Foulks, B., & Morrow, R. D. (1989). Academic survival skills for the young child at risk for school failure. *Journal of Educational Research, 82,* 158-165.

Galper, A., Wigfield, A., & Seefeldt, C. (1997). Head Start parents' beliefs about their children's abilities, task values, and performances on different activities. *Child Development, 68*, 897-907.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures.* New York: Basic Books.

Gilliam, W. S. (2005). *Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems*. Report from Foundation for Child Development. Retrieved June 2005, from http://www.fcd-us.org/ourwork/f-publications.html

Glaser, Barney, & Strauss, Anselm L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine De Gruyter.

Goldberger, N. R. & Veroff, J. B. (Eds.). (1995). *The culture and psychology reader.* New York: New York University Press.

Good, T. L., & Nichols, S. L. (2001). Expectancy effects in the classroom: A special focus on improving the reading performance of minority students in first-grade classrooms. *Educational Psychologist, 36,* 113-126.

Goodman, K., Shannon, P., Goodman, Y., & Rapoport, R. (2004). *Saving our schools: The case for public education saying no to "No Child Left Behind"*. Berkeley, CA: RDR Books.

Graue, M. E. (1993). *Ready for what?: Constructing meanings of readiness for kindergarten.* New York: State University of New York Press.

Graue, E., Kroeger, J., & Brown, C. (2003). The gift of time: Enactments of developmental thought in early childhood practice. *Early Childhood Research and Practice, 5,* (1). Retrieved July 2005, from http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v5n1/graue.html

Gutierrez, K. D., & Rogoff, B. (2003). Cultural ways of learning: Individual traits or repertoires of practice. *Educational Researchers, 32*, 19-25.

Harry, B., Sturges, K. M., & Klingner, J. K. (2005). Mapping the process: An exemplar of process and challenge in grounded theory analysis. *Educational Researcher, 34*, 3-13.

Heaviside, S., & Farris, E. 1993. *Public school kindergarten teachers' views of children's readiness for school*. Retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics Web site: http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=93410

Holloway, S.D., Rambaud, M. F., Fuller, B., & Eggers-Pierola, C. (1995). What is "appropriate practice" at home and in child care? Low-income mothers' views on preparing their children for school. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 10*, 451-473

Howes, C. (2000). Social-emotional classroom climate in child care, child-teacher relationships and children's second grade peer relations. *Social Development, 9,* 191-204.

Howes, C., & Smith, E. W. (1995). Children and their child care teachers: Profiles of relationships. *Social Development, 4*, 44-61.

Huffman, L., Mehlinger, S., & Kerivan, A. (2000). *Research on the risk factors for early school problems and selected federal policies affecting children's social and emotional development and their readiness for school* Retrieved January 2004, from The Child and Mental Health Foundation and Agencies Network web site: http://nimh.nih.gov/childp/goodstart.cfm

Johoda, A. (1995). Quality of life: Hope for the future or an echo from the distant past? In I. Marková & R. M. Farr (Eds.), *Representations of health, illness and handicap* (pp. 205-224). Newark, NJ: Harwood Academic.

Jussim, L., Eccles, J., & Madon, S. (1996).Social perception, social stereotypes, and teacher expectations: Accuracy and the quest for the powerful self-fulfilling prophecy. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology: Vol. 28* (pp. 281-388). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Kamerman, S. B., & Kahn, A. J. (1995). *Starting Right*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Katz, Lilian G. (1997). *Child development knowledge and teachers of young children.* Champaign, IL: ERIC/EECE Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED407114)

Kinlaw, C. R., Kurtz-Costes, B., & Goldman-Fraser, J. (2001). Mothers' achievement beliefs and behaviors and their children's school readiness: A cultural comparison. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 22,* 493-506.

Korenman, S., Miller, J., & Sjaastad, J. (1995). Long-term poverty and child development in the United States: Results from the NLSY. *Children and Youth Services Review, 17,* 127-155.

Klebanov, P. K., Brooks-Gunn, J., McCarton, C. M., & McCormick, M.C. (1998). The contribution of neighborhood and family income upon developmental test scores over the first three years of life. *Child Development, 69,* 1420-1436.

Knudsen-Lindauer, L., & Harris, K. (1989). Priorities for kindergarten curricula: Views of parents and teachers. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 4,* 51-61.

Kohn, A. (2004). What does it mean to be well-educated?**:** And other essays on standards, grading, and other follies. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Lewit, Eugene M., & Baker, Linda S. (1995). School readiness. *Future of Children, 5*, 128-139.

Linn, R.L. (2000). Assessments and accountability. *Educational Researcher, 23*, 4-16.

Linver, M., Brooks-Gunn, J., & Kohen, D. (2002). Family processes as pathways from income to young children's development. *Developmental Psychology, 38,* 719-734.

May, D.C., & Kundert, D.K. (1992). Kindergarten screenings in New York State: Tests, purposes, and recommendations. *Psychology in the Schools, 29*, 35-41.

Meisels, S.J. (1992). Doing harm by doing good: Iatrogenic effects of early childhood enrollment and promotion policies. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly. Special Issue: Research on kindergarten, 7,* 155-174.

Meisels, S.J. (1998). *Assessing Readiness*. Report published by the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA).

Mendez, J. L., McDermott, P., & Fantuzzo, J. (2002). Identifying and promoting social competence with African American preschool children: Developmental and contextual considerations. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 22,* 493-506.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook.* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Mintrop, H., & Trujillo, T.M. (2005).Corrective action in low performing schools: Lessons for NCLB implementation from first-generation accountability systems. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 13*(48). Retrieved December 2005, from http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v13n48/

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1995). Retrieved April 2004, from www.naeyc.org/resources/position_statements/psredy98

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (2005). Federal budgets: Choices about out children's futures. *Young Children, 60*, 72.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (1991). *Accreditation Criteria and Procedures of the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs*. Washington, DC.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). *NAEYC Position Statement on School Readiness*. Retrieved March 2004 from http://www.naeyc.org/about/positions/PSREDY98.asp

National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE). (2001). Still unacceptable trends in kindergarten entry and placement. *Young Children, 56,* 59-62.

National Education Goals Panel. (1990). Retrieved March 2004, from www.negp.gov

National Education Goals Panel. (1995). Retrieved March 2004, from www.negp.gov

National Education Goals Panel. (1999). Retrieved April 2004, from www.negp.gov

National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network (ECCRN). (1999). Child outcomes when child care center classes meet recommended standards for quality. *American Journal of Public Health, 89*, 1072-1077.

Nichols, S., & Berliner, D.C. (2005). *The inevitable corruption of indicators and educators through high-stakes testing*. Retrieved August 2005, from http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsl/EPRU/documents/EPSL-0503-101-EPRU.pdf

Piotrkowski, S., Botsko, M., & Matthews, E. (2000). Parents' and teachers' beliefs about children's school readiness in a high-need community. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 15*, 537-558.

Raver, C., & Zigler, E. (1997). New perspectives on Head Start. Social competence: An untapped dimension in evaluating Head Start's success. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 12*, 363-385.

Raver, C.C. (2003). Emotions matter: Making the case for the role of young children's emotional development for early school readiness. *Social Policy Report, 17*, 3–8.

Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., & Pianta, R.C. (2000). An ecological perspective on the transition to kindergarten: A theoretical framework to guide empirical research. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 21,* 491-511.

Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., Pianta, R. C. & Cox, M. J. (2000). Teachers' judgments of problems in the transition to kindergarten. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 15,* 147-166.

Rogoff, B., & Damon, W. (Ed.). (1998). Cognition as a collaborative process. In W. Damon, D. Kuhn, & R. S. Siegler (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 2: Cognition, perception, and language* (5th ed., pp.679-744). NY: Wiley.

Rothman, R. (2005). Testing goes to pre-school. *Harvard Education Letter, 21*(2), 1-4.

Ryan, G., & Bernard, H. R. (2000). Data management and analysis methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.). *Handbook of Qualitative Research (*2nd ed., pp. 769-802). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Saarni, C. (1999). *The Guilford series on social and emotional development: The development of emotional competence.* New York: Guilford Press.

Salzman, Avi. A fight over ideas in education suit. (2005, August 28). *The New York Times,* Section 14CN, p 5.

Scott, C. (2004). Makeovers, facelifts, or reconstructive surgery: An early look at NCLB school restructuring in Michigan: Center on Education Policy Report, retrieved January 2005, by http://www.cepdc.org/fededprograms/Michigan_Nov2004.pdf.

Shweder, R. (1995). Cultural psychology: What Is It?. In N. R. Goldberger & J. B. Veroff (Eds.), *The culture and psychology reader*. New York: New York University Press.

Smith, M. L., & L. A. Shepard (1988). Kindergarten Readiness and Retention: A Qualitative Study of Teachers' Beliefs and Practices. *American Educational Research Journal, 25*, 307-33.

Shonkoff, J., & Phillips, D. A. (Eds.). (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods*. Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences.

Smith, M. L., & Shepard, L. A. (1988). Kindergarten readiness and retention: A qualitative study of teachers' beliefs and practices. *American Educational Research Journal, 25*, 307-333.

Spradley, J. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Stetsenko, A., & Arievitch, I. M. (2004). The self in cultural-historical activity theory: Reclaiming the unity of social and individual dimensions of human development. *Theory & Psychology, 14*, 475-503.

Stipek, D., & Ryan, R. (1997). Economically disadvantaged preschoolers: Ready to learn but further to go. *Developmental Psychology, 33,* 711-723.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Sunderman, G., & Kim, J. (2004). *Inspiring vision, disappointing results: Four studies on implementing the No Child Left Behind Act*. Retrieved June, 2004, from Harvard Civil Rights Project Web site: http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/esea/nclb.php

Swick, K., Brown, M., & Boutte, G. (1994). African American children and school readiness: An analysis of the issues. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 21,* 183-91.

Taylor, L., & Adelman, H. S. (2000). Connecting schools, families, and communities. *Professional School Counseling, 3*, 298-307.

Thompson, R. (2002). The roots of school readiness in social-emotional development. *The Kauffman Early Education Exchange, 1*, 8 – 29.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

West, J., Hausken, E.G., & Collins, M. (1993). Readiness for kindergarten: Parent and teacher beliefs. Retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics Website: http://nces.ed.gov/pubs93/web/93257.asp

Wertsch, J. (1985). *Vygotsky and the social formation of mind.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wertsch, J. V., & Toma, C. (1995). Discourse and learning in the classroom: A sociocultural approach. In L. P. Steffe & J. Gale (Eds.), *Constructivism in education* (pp. 159-174). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Wong, K. K., Sunderman, G. L., & Lee, J. (1997). Redesigning the federal compensatory education program: Lessons from the implementation of Title I school wide projects. In M. C. Wang & K. K. Wong (Eds.), *Implementing school reform: Practice and policy imperatives*. Philadelphia: Temple University Center for Research in Human Development and Education.

Zill, N. & West, J. (2001). Entering kindergarten: A portrait of American children when they begin school: Findings from the condition of education 2000. Retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics Web Site: http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001035.pdf