

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

Defining Kindergarten Readiness

A Study to Compare & Contrast the Different Definitions of Kindergarten Readiness

In Somerset County, New Jersey

Ana Victoria Cortijo

Colorado State University

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

Defining Kindergarten Readiness

Throughout the years in the United States, various actions have been employed to insure the success of children in school. Local, state and federal representatives on educational issues have all agreed that a child's success in kindergarten is heavily dependent upon being "ready" to start school (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005). In the last two decades, postponing entrance to kindergarten has become a common process to insure readiness, and or additional time for emotional and social growth – a process otherwise known as red-shirting. Red-shirting is practiced in many schools throughout the country, not only as a form of policy, but also as a parental choice. Lubotsky (2008) found that in October 1980, 9.8 percent of five-year-olds were not yet enrolled in kindergarten; by October 2002, that figure had risen to 20.8 percent. The majority of the increase is due to state-mandated cut-off dates requiring children to be five-years-old before a specific day to be eligible to start kindergarten.

Proponents of red-shirting base their practice on studies showing that older students tend to achieve higher reading and math scores in kindergarten and through the end of 1st grade (Datar 2003, as cited in Ackerman & Barnett 2005). There is also the assumption that red-shirting increases the child's confidence in social interactions and popularity among classmates, making the overall process of adapting to school rigors easier.

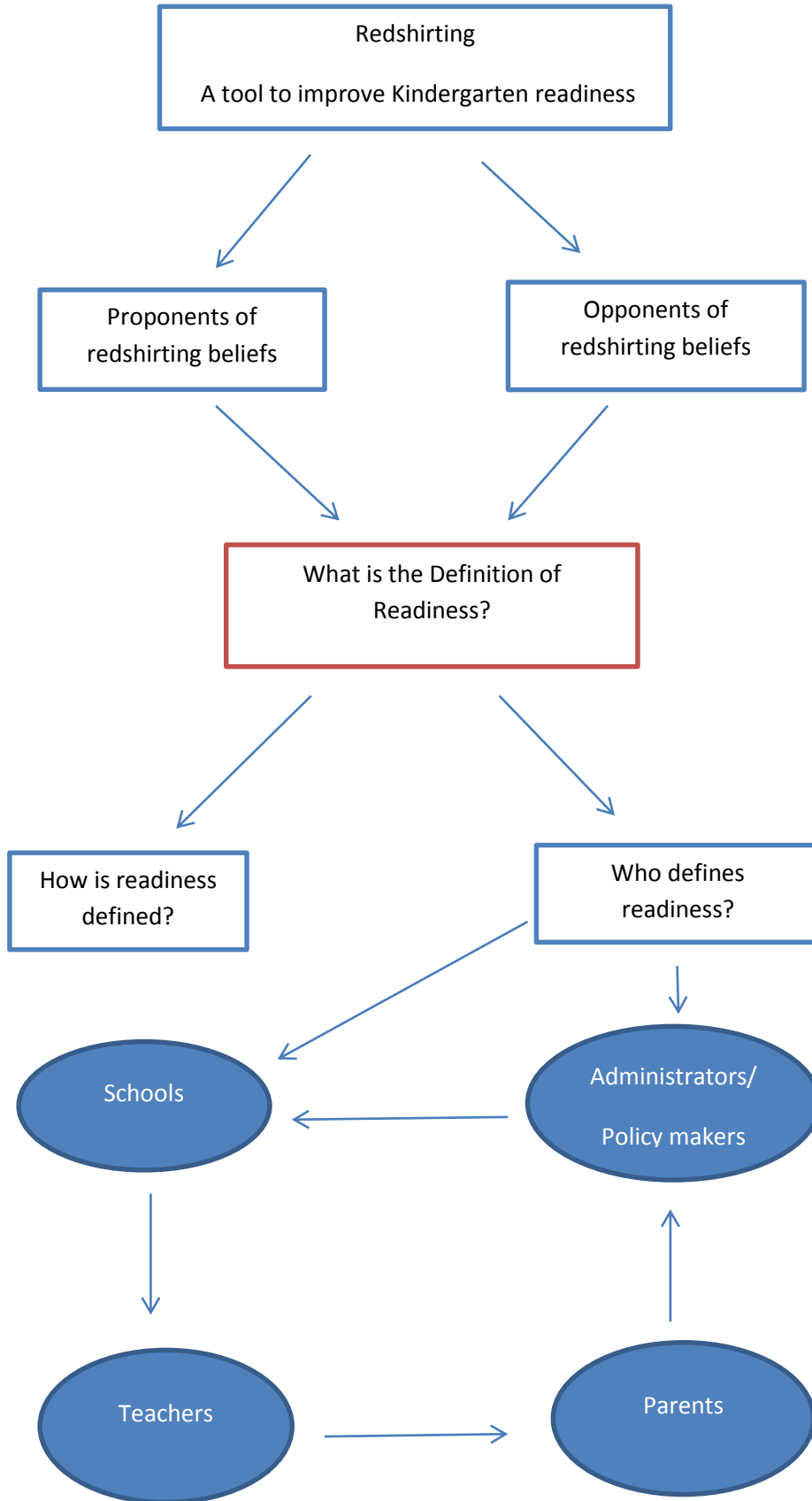
Likewise, opponents of redshirting argue that "Parents who hold their child out of school, or states that adjust their entrance requirements to raise the average entrance age, will raise achievements in early grades, with little or no long-term benefits to compensate for the high cost paid in terms of lost future working years, additional childcare costs, and potentially reduced educational attainment" (Lubotsky, 2008, p.4). In addition, Crone & Whitehurst (1999) found that younger kindergartners make about the same progress in math and reading skills as older children, and that although some kindergartners may have lower abilities at the start of kindergarten, they "catch up" quickly in academics and social abilities, and any advantage fades before the end of elementary school.

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

Whether a proponent or an opponent of red-shirting, one element of law remains true: The Educate America Act signed in 2000 states that, “All children in America will start school “ready” to learn” (PL 103-227). Readiness has often been defined as a child’s skills, behaviors, or attributes in relation to the expectations of individual classrooms or schools. (Carlton & Winsler,1999, p.225). Schools, classrooms, and teachers within the same district may have different definitions of readiness, meaning that a child who is considered “ready” in one setting may also be considered “not ready” in another within the same school district (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005, p.9).

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative research aims to describe how different schools in Somerset County, NJ define “readiness.” This research aims to compare and contrast how they determine school readiness and establish their policies. The participants in this study will be school administrators and kindergarten teachers of both public and private schools, and the research will be conducted in each individual school site.

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS



DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

Methods

The purpose of this study, “Defining Kindergarten Readiness,” is to explore the different ways in which a number of purposefully chosen schools in the Somerset County, New Jersey area define readiness for Kindergarten entry, how they set their policies, and how their policies and definition of readiness differ from each other within the same county. This study used participants in the private and public sectors.

Participants

The participants were purposefully chosen using a maximal variation sampling strategy (Creswell, 2008). I chose five schools within the Somerset County district. The names of the schools are not shared to protect the schools anonymity. The chosen schools share one characteristic, and that is that they all serve children entering Kindergarten for the first time. However, in order to develop many perspectives I also chose these schools because of how they serve their Kindergarten students with respect to teaching practices and techniques, and the rigors of their respective Kindergarten programs. Some, of the schools are public institutions governed directly by the State of New Jersey. Others are private institutions with specific teaching patterns that begin in Kindergarten, and even others are private institutions which have created specific pilot programs in their schools to serve children at the kindergarten level.

I called the schools at 10:00 am, because children’ drop off time is over, and all of the children are already in their respective classrooms. I spoke to the gatekeeper so she would direct me to the appropriate office so I could introduce myself, explain my study, and request permission to study the school, as well as participation in the study (Appendix A).

In two out of the five schools, the gatekeeper asked me to hold on the line, and soon after, transferred me to the Director of Admissions office. On both occasions, I was pleasantly surprised to hear the Directors voice in the other end of the line. At this point I introduced myself, my educational institution, college program, and the

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

purpose of my study. Then, I proceeded to ask if they would be willing to participate in a 45 minute survey by answering 8 questions. I told them that I could provide them with additional information before the interview, as well as the list of the questions. I explained that the study was for educational purposes only, and that it was strictly confidential. Both of the people I spoke with gave me afternoon appointments. One gave it to me for 3 days after the phone call, and the other, gave it to me for one week after the phone call. I thanked them for their help and graciousness, and that same afternoon, I dropped off in a sealed envelope an introduction letter (Appendix B) with a list of the questions (Appendix C)

Both of these interviews began between 1:00 – 1:15pm, and they were held at the schools in a small conference room. I began the interviews. I stuck to asking only the questions at hand, there were no interruptions. The participants answered all of my questions, and at the end of the interview, I thanked them for their help and reminded them that for their participation I would donate 2 hours of my time on behalf of any school activity that they would need. They thanked me and took my phone number.

With the other three schools, I was unable to make initial contact by phone. So, I visited them. In the first school, I spoke to a gatekeeper in the front office (Appendix A), she directed me to the Administrative office. Once there, I met with the assistant of the school Director, and waited for a little over 20- minutes before the school Director came and introduced herself and asked how she could help me. Again, I proceeded to introduced myself, my educational institution, college program, and the purpose of my study. Then, I proceeded to ask for her participation in the study at a convenient time for her. It was a good thing I went prepared, because she proceeded to say, “So, let’s do this!” “Now?” I asked. “Now or never” she responded, so I followed her to her office, and there, I began my questions. I am not sure if she really noticed that I was bit nervous. I was not expecting to conduct the survey that day. I was expecting an appointment at a later date, nevertheless, I did not want to miss the opportunity to collect the data, so I took a deep breath and once the interview began I felt fine.

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

During this interview there was a brief interruption by someone who needed something from the participant, but it was not a major interruption.

The fourth school on my list, I was not able to contact anyone by phone. So again, I visited the school and spoke to the gatekeeper (Appendix A). I was asked to leave any information I had, and so I left an introduction letter (Appendix B) and a list of questions (Appendix C). Two days later, I received a phone call inviting me to come in. The meeting was with the school Director. She requested the meeting to be during lunch time. Upon my arrival, she offered me coffee and bite to eat. She asked if it was okay to conduct the interview while having lunch. I answered that I was more than willing to wait for her to have lunch, and do the interview later, but she pressed to do it during lunch, and so it was. I began asking my questions. In the end, I thanked her for her time, and expressed my appreciation by again offering a donation of two hours for any activity of the school's choice.

Finally, the last person I interviewed was a recently retired school Administrator. This interview was conducted in the dining room of his home. Although the setting was a personal setting, I applied the same procedures with this interview as I did with all the other interviews. The only difference of this particular interview in comparison to the other four interviews was that I did not have to formally introduce myself. However, I followed the same procedures, as I did with all other interviews. I explained the purpose of the study, and provided the list of questions before hand.

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

Analysis

This is a qualitative study with a small group of participants. The data analysis involved the identification, examination and interpretation of patterns and themes of the data collected, and the findings are based on how the patterns and themes that were identified during the data collection helped to answer the original research question (Creswell, 2008).

The process of analysis for all the interviews were as follow: I recorded the date and time they began and ended. Immediately after every interview, I mentally processed the information I collected and I kept detailed notes of the important moments and information I was given during the interviews. After the second interview, I began to also cross reference all the data to begin discovery of commonalities between each interview. This was very helpful to also focus on separating the meaningful information that answered the original research question, versus information which, although informative, didn't. After collecting the data and having noted all the meaningful information, I chose to use the content analysis process by identifying similar words repeated in each of the interviews, identifying their patterns, and finally interpreting their meaning. Finally, the findings are presented in a narrative discussion format that raises further questions to be addressed.

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

Findings

Four out of five schools interviewed had an October 1st cut date as an age requirement for Kindergarten eligibility. One had an end of the year cut-date, meaning that they would accept any child turning five up until the last day of the year.

Table 1 below lists nine requirements that I collected from all 5 interviews. School A, and School B are both private institutions, and they shared four requirements (age, physical size, fine motor skills, and language ability). However, School A also listed (the ability to interact with other children and adults, and maturity level) as additional requirement, while School B listed (being potty trained, feeling content in the school environment, and having gross motor skills) as their additional requirements. It is important to note that both Schools A and B have exactly the same academic program.

The public school had only one requirement, the student's age, which is strictly based on the October 1st cut date. During the interview the Public School did not list any additional requirements for Kindergarten eligibility, and stated that because they had a strict cut-date they were unable to deny Kindergarten eligibility for any child living with the school's zip code that met the October 1st deadline. The Public Administrator, who also represents the public school district, listed the child's size, motor skills, and language ability as a Kindergarten requirement.

However, according to policy even if an Administrator of the Public School District listed these 3 additional requirements, public schools are unable to deny eligibility to a child who meets the age requirement even if he or she lacks all the other requirements listed below.

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

Table 1

Entry Requirements Considered for Kindergarten Eligibility					
Entry Requirements	Private School A	Private School B	Private Center	Public School	Public Administration
Age	X	X	X	X	X
Interaction with other children	X				
Emotional maturity	X		X		
The child's physical size	X	X			X
Gross motor skills		X			X
Fine Motor Skills	X	X			
Potty Trained		X	X		
Language ability	X	X	X		X
Content and Comfortable in school Environment		X			

When asked if there were any exceptions for gifted children, all of the private schools stated that they did not have a program for gifted children, but School B explained that they had many exceptions for normal students who were near the cut-date, and whose parents needed to maintain the child moving forward at grade level. While school A also stated not having a program for gifted children and having exception for females but not for males. The private center had an end of the year cut-date so they had children as young as 4years and 9 months up to 6 years old in Kindergarten. The Public School and Public Administrator stated that their district currently did not have a gifted program for Kindergarten. Their gifted program begins for children starting 3rd grade. However, they did mention that public schools in New Jersey, by policy must make accommodations to evaluate gifted students. Testing and evaluations would take place to appropriately serve the needs and accommodate a gifted child within the public school system.

When asked about screening and assessments for children entering Kindergarten all of the schools agreed that they did not conduct screening or assessments of children for the purpose of Kindergarten eligibility. However, School A & School B, do require an interview with the child within the school setting to

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

make observations of the child prior to admission. These observations are used for the purpose of assessment only and not to make a decision of eligibility.

When asked how is readiness measured? All five schools stated (in different order) that readiness was the observation of the below measures listed on Table 2. School A and B were the only schools that stated that readiness was measured by carefully observing a child. School A, stated they had children reading at 1st grade level but not mature enough for Kindergarten, yet had many children who could not read or write who instead were ready. Furthermore, they singled out “maturity” to be the most important measure. While School B stated that many times age eligible children and even older children did not have the required measures nor had any social skills. They stated, “It is very delicate to define readiness. Its definition can sometimes be related to age, but many times it can be related to a child’s upbringing.”

The Private Center stated, “Readiness has different definitions for different people. In our experience, most students do not exhibit all the measures we would like to see, but we must work with them to help them develop emotionally, socially and academically.”

The Public School and Public Administrator agreed with the same measures, but stated that older age better ensured that the measures would be present at the time of Kindergarten eligibility.

Table 2

How is Readiness Measured					
Measures	Private School A	Private School B	Private Center	Public School	Public Administration
Following Directions	X	X	X	X	X
Good Social Skills	X	X	X	X	X
Ability to work in a group	X	X	X	X	X
Discipline (Good Behavior)	X	X	X	X	X
Overall Maturity	X	X	X	X	X

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

When asked about additional factors to consider when evaluating children for Kindergarten readiness Table 3 below, shows the factors that were mentioned on all five interviews and specifically shows what each school considered important. Note that these are only additional factors these schools may consider, but these do not represent measures used for Kindergarten eligibility. Parent involvement, sibling relationships, extracurricular activities, and attending pre-school were among the four additional factors on the list chosen by all five schools, considered important when evaluating Kindergarten readiness. All five participants interviewed agreed that pre-school was of utmost importance for children. Reasons stated included that preschool helps children cope with separation issues during the pre-school year, and helps children become emotionally prepared for Kindergarten. They also stated that preschool helps students develop independence, to learn skills to care for themselves, and to learn how to follow directions. Finally, they all agreed that preschool provides a setting for children to learn how to socialize, to be creative, and to begin understanding some academic concepts that are later a part of the Kindergarten curriculum.

Table 3

Factors to Consider when Evaluating Kindergarten Readiness					
Measures	Private School A	Private School B	Private Center	Public School	Public Administration
Parent Involvement	X	X	X	X	X
Additional Care Givers		X			
Amount of Time Spent with Care Givers other than Parents		X			
Disciplinary Methods		X	X		
Sibling Relationships	X	X	X	X	X
Extracurricular Activities	X	X	X	X	X
Attending a Preschool Program	X	X	X	X	X

All of the participants stated that parents were encouraged to participate in the process of determining Kindergarten readiness for their child. Public School B and Private Center stated that they were open to

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

working with parents and children as long as children were thriving. All other participants welcomed parent's participation but stated that they will ultimately do what is best for the child.

Personal Reflections

When I began working on this study, my aim was to understand the different definitions of readiness in different schools within the Somerset County district. I believe that overall I met my objective. During my interviews, it was very clear to me that my participants all agreed that readiness meant for children to exhibit the measures of following directions, having social skills, having the ability to work in a group, being disciplined and exhibiting overall maturity. However, although they might have shared the same definition of readiness, their entry requirements varied, and in some cases the measures of readiness were not always present when considering a child for Kindergarten eligibility. Furthermore, based on my findings I felt that the issue of how the participants conducted the assessments of children for kindergarten readiness was rather vague. Most of them stated that screening or assessments for the purpose of Kindergarten eligibility was not conducted at all, while only two participants (both private schools) required an interview with the child to make observations prior to admission. However, these two participants stated that these observations were for the purpose of assessment only, and not to make a decision of eligibility. Therefore, although the definition of readiness may be clear, the way to assess readiness is not, and the policies to establish kindergarten eligibility vary depending on the school even within the same district.

As I continued my research on this topic, I came across a website called New Jersey Spotlight. On September 26, 2012, John Mooney, wrote, "As a part of Governor Christie administration's latest push for early literacy, the state is launching a pilot program for testing children as they enter Kindergarten. New Jersey has enlisted six school districts and a charter school to test the new Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA), which will measure children for basic academic and social development." Mooney continued by stating, "Nearly fifty

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

teachers and administrators in the district began training in August to learn to use a commercial assessment called Teaching Strategies GOLD. New Jersey joins Delaware, Colorado and Washington in using the new assessment tool, the company announced. State officials said they chose the Maryland-based company's program because it is easy to use and aligns with the National Common Core State Standards.”

The fact that a new pilot program has been implemented to provide schools and teachers with the necessary assessment training and evaluation tools recognizes the need for change and or improve the current form of assessment for Kindergarten readiness.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

One of the limitations of this study was time, and my ability to explore the views of prep schools, charter schools and expand the study to other areas within the state. Also, I believe that having more input from current administrative personnel of the public school system would have lent a broader insight from the public schools perspective. If I were to further this study in the future, or make a suggestion for future research, I would suggest exploring the different ways in which schools evaluate readiness instead of their definition of it. I would also suggest further studies in defining the impact of children attending a qualified preschool in preparation for Kindergarten readiness and eligibility versus the alternative of redshirting students for the same purpose.

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

References:

Ackerman, Debra J. & Barnett, Steven W. (2005) "Prepared for Kindergarten: What Does "Readiness" Mean?" *National Institute for Early Education Research*

Angrist, Joshua D. & Krueger, Alan B. (1992) "The Effects of Age at School Entry on Educational Attainment" *Journal of American Statistical Association*, 87, 328-336

Carlton, M.P., & Winsler, A. (1999) School Readiness: The Need for a Paradigm Shift. *School Psychology Review*, 28, 338-352

Creswell, John W. (2008) *Educational Research*, P. 254-258

Datar, Morrison, F.J, Griffith, E.M., & Alberts, D.M. (2003) Nature-Nurture in the Classroom: Entrance age, school readiness, and leaning in children. *Developmental Psychology*, 33, 254-262.

Lubotsky, Darren H. (2008) Kindergarten Entrance Age and Children's Achievement: Impacts of State Policies, Family Background, and Peers

H.R. 1804 Goals 2000: Educate America Act, PL 103-227

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

Appendix A

Script for initial phone contact

“Good morning! My name is Ana Victoria Cortijo, and I am calling because I am graduate student at Colorado State University, and I’m currently taking a research class and conducting a study to compare and contrast the Definitions of Kindergarten Readiness. I would appreciate If you could direct me to someone in the admissions office, or administrative office or an actual Kindergarten teacher, who I may be able to give additional information about my study, and request their participation by answering some survey questions.”

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

Appendix B

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Ana Victoria Cortijo. I am a graduate student at Colorado State University, pursuing a Masters of Education Degree. I am currently enrolled in an Educational Research class, under the direction of Dr. Karen Kaminski, Professor of Adult Education & Training at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado.

As part of the requirements of the class, I am required to conduct a qualitative research study. My study will compare and contrast how different schools, both public and private, define “Kindergarten Readiness” and how they establish their policies for Kindergarten students within the district of Somerset County, New Jersey.

In an effort to assess multiple perspectives, your school was chosen for this study not only because it serves Kindergarten students entering school for the first time, but it was purposefully chosen because of one or more of the following reasons:

- The rigors of your specific kindergarten program
- Specific characteristics of the delivery of the program to the students
- Pilot Kindergarten programs offered at your location

The Educate America Act signed in 2000, states, “All children in America will start school “ready” to learn.” However, the definition of readiness has been often debated, by school administrators, teachers, and parents. Furthermore, in a study conducted by Elizabeth M. Graue in 1993, she found that schools, classrooms, and teachers within the same district may have different definitions of readiness, meaning that a child who is considered “ready” in one setting may also be considered “not ready” in another within the same school district.

This study will help participating schools share their views on Kindergarten readiness, and help parents and other interested parties understand how and why policies are implemented, and how and why these may differ from one school to another within our district. For this reason, I am respectfully requesting the participation of your school in this confidential educational study. I am also offering a donation of two hours of volunteer work for your institution at any event of your choice, in an effort to reciprocate your participation in this study.

The study will be a one-to-one interview with a school representative of your choice. I respectfully request for the person chosen to have at least 7 years of experience in the field, and who embodies the norms

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

and culture of the school. As the researcher of the study, I am available to conduct the study in your respective school location with no potential of disruptiveness to the normal activities of the school. I will be available to conduct the study during March 17th, 2013 through March 24th, 2013 at a time most convenient for you. Participants should allow 30 minutes to respond to several open-ended questions in one single visit. I have attached a copy of the questions that will be asked. All information provided during this study will be used for educational purposes only, and will remain confidential. The results of the study will be shared upon request with the participants by omitting the names of the participating school, as well as the names of the interviewees.

If you wish to participate in this study, please contact me at your earliest convenience to set up an appointment. You may contact me at 908-210-xxxx.

Thank you in advance for your participation and collaboration in this educational study.

Best Regards,

Ana Victoria Cortijo

DEFINING KINDERGARTEN READINESS

Appendix C - Interview Questions

1. What is the current eligible age required to begin Kindergarten in your school?
2. What other additional entry requirements if any, does your school have or look for when considering a child for Kindergarten eligibility?
3. Are there any exceptions to the age requirement for gifted children?
4. Is your school required to conduct screening or assessments of children entering Kindergarten?
5. How is readiness measured?
6. What other factors are taken into consideration when evaluating children for Kindergarten readiness?
7. What role does preschool have as a determining factor for kindergarten readiness?
8. Are parents encouraged to participate in the process of determining kindergarten readiness in your school?