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Ready, Set, Don't go: Pre-school retention  
practices that restrict children's access to  
school

Thesis submitted by  
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in July 2008

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the School of Indigenous Australian  
Studies and the School of Education  
James Cook University

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# STATEMENT OF SOURCES

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# STATEMENT ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF OTHERS

A fee waiver for the PhD was offered by James Cook University. Funding for editing the thesis was provided through the Minimum Resources Policy offered by the School of Indigenous Australian Studies and the School of Education. Further funding for a conference was provided by the Graduate Research Scheme.

A professional administration service, Al Rinn Admin Specialists, was engaged to prepare the thesis for submission. Al Rinn's brief was to format and proof-read the document.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the guidance provided by my supervisors, Associate Professor Sue McGinty and Professor Nola Alloway. I am very appreciative of the dedication and tireless contributions that both supervisors have made to this research project.

Colleagues who participated in the research endeavour I also need to thank. In all, thirty-nine teachers in the region where the study was conducted consented to be interviewed or completed survey questionnaires. I acknowledge the support of various independent schools and Pre-schools, Catholic Education and Education Queensland. In particular, I am appreciative of the support from Townsville Regional Office. Parents of children in the study also gave much of their time to be interviewed. I am also grateful to Dr Michael Dalseno for his assistance in editing the thesis.

I would like to acknowledge Professor Jeannie Herbert who encouraged me to undertake this research, Professor Bronwyn Davies who inspired me to continue studying and (the late) Professor Pam Gilbert who provided me with the direction for the thesis.

I am very appreciative of the support of my children, Carla, Kirsty and Andrew and particularly of my husband Dale, who has provided me with ongoing encouragement and support. Finally, I thank God who brought all this together to make this thesis possible.

# ABSTRACT

Repeating the Pre-school year has become common practice in Queensland schools. Other increasingly used practices with similar intent and outcomes include returning children to Pre-school from Year 1, Transition programs and delayed school entry. Although Pre-school retention has been a long accepted remedy for children's underachievement and low levels of readiness for school, research from the United States warns that such practices offer few benefits for children (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Hong & Yu, 2006; Jimerson, 2001a, 2001b) and may be harmful (Jimerson, 2001a; Shepard & Smith, 1989; Walberg et al., 2004). In addition, data collected from Queensland in Australia and North Carolina in the United States revealed a substantial increase in Pre-school retention rates over the last decade.

In the light of such concerns, case studies employing a constructivist approach were conducted at nine Queensland schools to examine these practices. Unstructured interviews were conducted with fifty-one teachers and parents to examine their explanations for the continued employment of Pre-school retention and other related practices. The study found that although multiple discourses were available, teachers drew on a dominant way of assessing children's readiness for school. Children needed to be 'school-ready', that is, they were required to have particular skills and behaviours or cultural resources to successfully participate in schooling. Children who did not have the cultural resources valued at school were positioned 'unready' for school, discouraged from commencing school and were repeated at Pre-school, returned to Preschool from Year 1, placed in Transition classes or their entry to school was delayed.

Boys and younger children were more often repeated at Pre-school, returned to Preschool from Year 1 or had delayed school entry. Mobile children and children with little or no pre-school experience were targeted for Transition classes. Among children targeted for Transition classes were Indigenous children and children from schools whose catchment areas were marked by families of low socio-economic status. Such groups of children have already encountered challenges in education and are among groups of children identified in social justice policies (Department of Education, Queensland, 1994; Department of Education and the Arts, Queensland, 2005a). The study found that practices underpinned by school-ready discourse contradicted social justice policies (Department of Education, Queensland, 1994; Department of Education and the Arts, Queensland, 2005a).

Teachers from two of the nine schools in the study employed practices which valued all children's cultural resources with which they commenced school, positioned all children in a positive way and as competent and 'ready' learners. These practices, which were underpinned by the more recent constructivist/interactionist understandings of school readiness, incorporated a shared responsibility of families, schools and communities to prepare children for school (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 2007). They are further supported by current research (ARACY, 2007; Pianta & Cox, 1999), early childhood education departments (NAEYC, 1997) and curriculum bodies (QSA, 2007). In conclusion, the study recommends that teachers' efforts to prepare children for school be supported with continued professional development incorporating more recent conceptualisations of school readiness.



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