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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 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.

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# 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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# CHAPTER 1

## REPEATING CHILDREN AT PRE-SCHOOL: THE STUDY

### 1.1 Introduction and Concerns of the Study

Imagine going to your physician with an illness. The doctor says, “There’s an old treatment for your condition. At best, it helps only one in 10 who get it, but no one can predict which one. That one person will experience a little bit of relief for a short period of time,” the doctor continues, “but then the problem will return. Everyone will have negative side effects, some of which can be severe, some lifelong.” This illness is underachievement. The treatment – if educators practice full disclosure – is grade retention (Bowser, 1998, p. 2).

Grade retention<sup>1</sup> has been an accepted remedy for an educational condition known as underachievement and is a condition that is becoming prevalent at all levels of schooling worldwide (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2005). Though a common antidote for children’s underachievement at, or unreadiness for, school, it has been questioned by some researchers in Australia (Kenny, 1991; McGrath, 2006) and the United States (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Saturday, 2000; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Jimerson, 2001a, 2001b, 2004; Shepard, 2004; Shepard & Smith, 1990; Xia & Glennie, 2005). Despite the concerns held by a growing body of researchers in the United States regarding its effectiveness (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Saturday, 2000; Jimerson, 2001a) and possible harm to children at all levels of schooling (Alexander, Entwisle, Dauber & Kabbani, 2004; Anderson, Whipple & Jimerson, 2002; Jimerson, 2004), school and Pre-school retention appears to be increasing

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<sup>1</sup> Retention is used in a positive way in Australia to describe the practice of keeping children at school until Year 12. In the United States, retention or grade retention refers to the practice of repeating a year level at school. From here on, the terms ‘retention’, ‘repetition’ and ‘repeating a year level’ at school will be used interchangeably and will refer to the practice of spending a second year in the same year level.

(Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003; McGill-Franzen & Allington, 2006; McGrath, 2006; Partners in Research Forum (PRF), 2003).

This chapter introduces the present study of Pre-school retention practices which include repeating children at Pre-school and the related practices of returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 and delaying children's entry to school. The rationale behind such practices is that teachers or parents believe that some children are 'unready' to commence formal schooling. As a growing body of research, drawn mainly from the United States (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Shepard, 2004), generally condemns such practices, concerns are raised in this study regarding the possible existence and extent of Pre-school retention practices in Queensland schools. Since there was no readily available data on Pre-school retention, it was unknown at the outset of the study what practices might be employed and what trends might be present in some Queensland schools.

The chapter explains the significance of the study in Section 1.2, given the general dearth of literature and accessible data on school and Pre-school retention practices in Australia. Section 1.3 raises further concerns of the study, that is, the discrepancy between research and practice. In Section 1.4, my reasons for commencing the study are outlined along with my position in the research endeavour. Sections 1.5 and 1.6 consider Pre-school retention practices as they relate to Queensland schools where the study was conducted. The research questions are outlined in Section 1.10 and the way the study was constructed is detailed in Section 1.11. The chapter concludes in Section 1.12 with an overview of the chapter outlines.

## **1.2 Significance of the Study**

A search of the more prominent data collection sites on Australian schooling, such as Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) confirmed a general absence of data on grade retention. The ABS site revealed that while all kinds of data were available on 'Human Capital Indicators', there was no data available at this site on repeating children at any level of schooling. Where data on school retention rates do exist, such data refers to a practice whereby children remain at school as opposed to their leaving school. A search of the MCEETYA site revealed similar results, that is, while a considerable amount of data is gathered on schooling in Australia, including apparent retention rates for children in Years 7 to 12, there is no national systematic data collected on grade retention rates for any level of schooling. In a few isolated cases, however, some data has been collected on grade

retention in Australian schools (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003; Kenny, 1985b) which suggests that the practice of grade retention may currently exist in Australian schools.

A search of the literature revealed that grade retention has drawn little attention in Australia. Although McGrath (2006) raised concerns over the use of grade retention as an educational practice in Australian schools, few studies, apart from Kenny's study in 1989 and Trovalusci's in 1996, have been conducted on grade retention in Australia. At the Pre-school level, I was unable to locate any Australian studies on Pre-school retention. The only research on Pre-school retention that I could locate in Australia was a study by Routley and de Lemos who referred to the related Pre-school retention practice, delayed school entry, in their research fifteen years ago (1993).

Initially, I assumed that there may be several reasons for the general silence in the literature and lack of available data on school and Pre-school retention practices in Australia, as opposed to the prevalence of retention literature in the United States. The absence of grade retention in Australian schools may be one reason for its general silence. Not all countries in the world use grade retention as an educational practice (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 1998). Another reason may be that while grade retention might exist in some Australian schools, its practice may be less frequently questioned by Australian educators and researchers. The findings of the study will reveal however, there may be further reasons which I had not considered at the outset of the study which might account for the general dearth of literature on Pre-school retention in Australia.

The study is therefore significant in that it will add to the general knowledge of grade retention in Australia and, more significantly, will fill the knowledge gaps on Pre-school retention practices in some Australian schools. From a general review of the available literature, there appears to be no known research on Pre-school retention in Australia and no known research on the practice of returning children to Pre-school from Year 1. The only research undertaken in Australia that discussed the related practice of delaying children's entry into formal schooling was undertaken more than a decade ago (Routley & de Lemos, 1993). Furthermore, there appears to be very little accessible data on Pre-school retention.

The aim of the study, then, was to understand what Pre-school retention practices might occur in some Queensland Pre-schools and why they might be employed when empirical research warns

against them (Jimerson, 2001b; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). Because the general absence of research in Australia on Pre-school retention makes this study significant, it creates some drawbacks in that there has been very little Australian research on which to frame the study. To overcome this drawback, the literature from the United States was drawn on to a large extent. In instances where data was available from Australian sources, it will be highlighted and, where possible throughout the study, a comparison will be made between Australia and the United States. While there is a general delineation throughout the study between literature from the United States and Australia, in some cases the discussion incorporates both countries.

### **1.3 The Discrepancy between Research and Practice**

A further concern of the study relates to the discrepancy between research and practice. As I continued to search the literature, I noticed a considerable discrepancy between what the research argued as good practice and what appeared to be practised in schools in the locality where I taught. From my observations, children were repeated at Pre-school because teachers believed that if children's achievements at Pre-school were lower on average than other children's achievements, then they might have difficulty coping with work in Year 1. By giving children a second year of Pre-school, teachers generally believed that children would be better prepared for Year 1 the following year. The widely held belief among teachers that school and Pre-school retention are beneficial educational practices has been noted by some researchers in the United States (Fager & Richen, 1999; Shepard & Smith, 1990; Tanner & Galis, 1997; Tomchin & Impara, 1992; Xia & Glennie, 2005).

Teachers have often based such beliefs on the short-term evidence following the child's repeated year. When a child's achievements during their second year at Pre-school are compared to their achievements during their first year of Pre-school, the repeated child has often made progress (Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber, 2003; Mantzicopoulos, 1997). Pre-school retention may thus appear to be an effective educational practice to address low levels of readiness for school (Xia & Glennie, 2005). However, research has also shown that if children progress to the next year level of schooling, they are likely to make similar or even more progress than if they were repeated (Fager & Richen, 1999; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Shepard & Smith, 1990; Tanner & Galis, 1997).

Thus when teachers are only aware of the short term effects of repeating children, they may reach "false conclusions" regarding the benefits of repeating children at Pre-school or any other year level of schooling (Xia & Glennie, 2005, p. 2). Although some research (Alexander et al., 2003;

Mantzicopoulos, 1997) has shown that children can make gains during their repeated year, other research has shown that such gains are likely to diminish several years after the children have been repeated (Dawson, 1998; Jimerson, Rottert, Carlson, Egeland & Sroufe, 1997; Shepard & Smith, 1990; Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). Teachers may also believe that repeating children and confining them to a year level which better suits their ‘ability levels’ reduces the stress and frustration of the next year level expectations.

Although teachers may believe they are employing the best practices to ensure children are ready for school, a growing body of research argues that Pre-school retention is problematic (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Shepard & Smith, 1989). Xia and Glennie argue that teachers “are often unaware of the findings of retention literature” which shows there are few benefits to repeating children at any level of schooling and the practice may have potentially harmful long-term effects (2005, p. 2). Xia and Glennie argue “the majority of published studies and decades of research indicate that there is usually little to be gained, and much harm that may be done through retaining students in grade” (2005, p. 1). From her studies in the area of grade retention in the United States, Dawson argues that “no researcher has found long-term, substantial benefits to the practice of grade retention” (1998, p. 29).

Following his meta-analyses of 83 studies, which included Pre-school retention, Jimerson (2004, p. 72) raised the question of whether or not retention at any year level should be considered “educational malpractice”. He argues, “the concept of educational malpractice emphasizes the responsibility of educational professionals to provide intervention strategies that are either promising or proven (based on empirical evidence) to be effective in facilitating students’ academic success” (Jimerson, 2004, p. 72). Jimerson concluded that “the confluence of results from educational research warrant serious consideration” of retention practices (2004, p. 72). The literature that supports similar claims and concerns regarding Pre-school retention practices will be further elaborated in Chapter 2.

#### **1.4 Genesis of the Study**

There were several reasons why I commenced the study and located it at the Pre-school level. Although I had taught in a range of year levels in Queensland schools for almost thirty years, I had rarely taught the early years of schooling and more specifically, Pre-school. After I commenced teaching Pre-school, I noticed some striking differences between early childhood practices and those of upper primary school where I had mostly taught. One of the most striking differences was

the frequency with which children appeared to be repeated at Pre-school. At several government schools in one North Queensland town where I had worked as a Pre-school teacher, repeating children at Pre-school was regularly practised. This anecdotal evidence was confirmed by a brief review of the literature which revealed that both in Australia (Education Queensland, 2003) and overseas (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1994) there was a stronger tendency for children to be repeated in the early years, rather than the later years, of schooling. Some research from the United States has shown that teachers of early childhood classes (K-3) are more likely to repeat children than teachers of classes 4 to 7 (Tomchin & Impara, 1992).

A further observation I made was that particular groups of children appeared to be more often repeated at Pre-school. The groups of children included those from low-income families, Indigenous families, and boys. Although the study revealed that children from other social groups were given two years of Pre-school as well, I was not aware, at the beginning of the study, of the extent to which particular social groups more often employed specific Pre-school retention practices. Thus my interest in the study of Pre-school retention commenced through my experience in, and observation of, retention practices that appeared to be more characteristic of early childhood education compared to other sectors of schooling. Such observations raised several questions for me as to why children appeared to be more often repeated at Pre-school than at other year levels of schooling and why particular groups of children appeared to be more often repeated at Pre-school. Before I commenced the study, I searched the literature so that I might better understand the issues relevant to the developing research questions.

### **1.5 Pre-school Retention in Queensland**

Until 2007 in Queensland where the study was undertaken, government-run, Pre-school programs, known as 'Preschool', were offered cost-free to all children the year before they commenced formal schooling. Such programs were non-compulsory and available on a sessional basis, either five half-days a week or five full days per fortnight (The State of Queensland, Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2002a). Pre-school programs were also offered at some non-government crèche and Kindergartens and day-care centres. Children were required to turn five during the year they commenced Pre-school. While Queensland<sup>2</sup> was the only state in Australia that did not offer a full-

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<sup>2</sup> The state education department in Queensland was known until 1996-1997 as the Department of Education. From 1996-1997 to 2004 and during the data collection stage of the thesis, it was known as Education Queensland. From 2004 until 2006-2007, it was known as the Department of Education and the Arts, Queensland and since 2006-2007 it has been known as the Department of Education, Training and the Arts, of which Education Queensland is a sub-section. Unless

time pre-Year 1 program when this study commenced, it has since offered a non-compulsory full-time pre-Year 1 program known as ‘Prep’ which commenced in 2007. In other states and territories of Australia, Pre-school programs are variously known as Kindergarten, Preparatory, Reception or Transition (The State of Queensland, Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2002a). In the United States, where a considerable body of research has been undertaken on Pre-school retention, the Queensland equivalent of Preschool is known as Kindergarten<sup>3</sup>. Unless referring to specific Pre-schools in specific locations, the study will from here on in use the generic term, ‘Pre-school’, to describe all programs offered the year before children commence formal schooling.

The practice of ‘repeating children’ at school or Pre-school generally describes the practice in some Australian schools whereby children remain in the same year level for a second year (Kenny, 1991; McGrath, 2006). In the United States, the practice of repeating children at school and Pre-school has been described as “grade retention” (Alexander et al., 2004, p. 6), “retention” (Shepard, 2004, p. 183), “holding students back to repeat a grade” (Jimerson, 2004, p. 71), “age-grade retardation” (Hauser, Pager & Simmons, 2004, p. 97), “flunking” (Jimerson, 2001a, p. 47) and “non-promotion” (Jimerson, 2001a, p. 47). As the name ‘repeating’ suggests, children are required to remain in the same year level or ‘repeat’, until they can demonstrate the required level of competency to cope successfully with the following year level.

In the region where I worked and conducted the study, Education Queensland provided guidelines such as ‘Repeating preschool: Guidelines for schools’ (Department of Education, Northern Region, 1994). The guidelines stated that Pre-school retention decisions rested primarily “with the school (personnel) in collaboration with parents and relevant support personnel” (Department of Education, Northern Region, 1994, p. 2). Although Education Queensland endorsed Pre-school retention, cautionary measures were offered to guard against its possible misuse. While the option for children to repeat Pre-school was available, it was emphasized that repeating Pre-school was “at additional cost to the Department” and therefore “must be justifiable on educational grounds” (Department of Education, Northern Region, 1994, p. 4). The educational grounds emphasised that unless a child’s social skills were likely to impede the child’s success at school the child should otherwise proceed to Year 1:

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publication details cite otherwise, the generic name, Education Queensland, will be used in the study to refer to the state education department in Queensland.

<sup>3</sup> Unless specifically referred to as Kindergarten in citations from the literature, all pre-year 1 programs in the study will be referred to as Pre-school.

The criterion to be employed is that of whether or not the extended service is the best way of ensuring that the child acquires the social skills essential for success in Year 1 [...] (and) is not to be seen as a freely available option (Department of Education, Northern Region, 1994, p. 2).

Because the decision to repeat children at Pre-school was school-based, the Pre-school teacher's advice was generally sought and held considerable weight in the decision-making process. Although the decision to repeat children at Pre-school was more often initiated by the class teacher, the final decision was "at the discretion of the parents" (Department of Education, Northern Region, 1994, p. 2).

Pre-school retention in this study refers to the specific practice of remaining at Pre-school for a second year. However, the study also incorporated the related practice of returning children to Pre-school from Year 1. The generic term 'Pre-school retention' will also refer to this and other related practices that became apparent as the data collection commenced.

### **1.6 Returning Children to Pre-school from Year 1**

Along with repeating children at Pre-school and delaying children's entry into schooling, I noted a further practice, related to repeating, that concerned a group of children who, at the beginning of the year commenced Year 1, but who, for various reasons and at various stages throughout the year, were returned from Year 1 to repeat Pre-school. Although the children who were returned to Pre-school from Year 1 effectively repeated Pre-school, this phenomenon became a separate focus for attention in the study so that possible differences between the repeated and returned children might be highlighted. To distinguish between children who were simply repeated at Pre-school and those who repeated Pre-school after they were returned from Year 1, I called these children 'returned'. Although returning to Pre-school from Year 1 did not appear to be an uncommon practice in the region where I taught, I was unable to locate much information on this practice in the literature, even in the United States. Apart from a brief reference to this practice by several researchers in the United States who have researched on the area of Pre-school retention (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1995; Smith & Shepherd, 1987), there appears to be no studies undertaken on this practice.

## **1.7 The Returned Children: A Knowledge Gap**

Although I had often observed the practice of returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 in a number of locations where I worked as a Pre-school teacher, the extent of this practice and whether it might be viable enough for inclusion in the study became an issue. Consequently, I conducted a survey prior to the study which revealed that although repeating was more often practised; returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 was not an uncommon practice in the locality where the study was to be conducted. The inclusion of returned children in the study would add to knowledge in the area of Pre-school retention.

## **1.8 Alternatives to Pre-school Retention**

The study further considered what alternatives to repeating Pre-school might be employed and what these alternatives might look like. As schools in Queensland were allowed some flexibility in programming, it seemed likely that some schools and Pre-schools might offer different alternatives to repeating Pre-school. Although alternatives to repeating children at Pre-school were initially difficult to locate, three schools that employed alternatives to Pre-school retention were eventually found for inclusion in the study. These alternatives will be revealed in Chapter 6.

## **1.9 The Research Questions**

To understand why Pre-school retention and alternatives to Pre-school retention practices were employed by parents and teachers in the region where I worked, I constructed two sets of research questions based on my understanding of Pre-school retention literature. Although the study sought to understand what type of Pre-school retention practices and alternatives were employed and if they were employed for particular groups of children, the study was also concerned with the question of why these practices were provided when much research condemns their use (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Jimerson, 2001a; Shepard & Smith, 1989).

The first research questions related to Pre-school retention practices asked:

- *What practices are associated with repeating children at Pre-school?*
- *Are particular groups of children more likely to be repeated at Pre-school than others?*
- *Why are children repeated at Pre-school?*

At the outset of the study, I was aware of the related practice of returning children to Pre-school to repeat after they had commenced Year 1. As the case studies progressed, I became aware of two further practices that appeared to be related to Pre-school retention. They included Transition

programs that often accompanied Pre-school retention and the practice of delaying children's entry into school. A flexible methodology allowed for the incorporation of these practices into the study.

The literature indicated that not all education systems, schools or teachers practise retention (OECD, 1998). I therefore decided to include some schools in the study which offered alternatives to Pre-school retention practices if such schools were found. Similar to the questions relating to Pre-school retention practices, the questions for alternatives to Pre-school retention sought to understand what type of alternatives were employed, if the practices targeted particular groups of children, and why these practices were employed or what beliefs guided these practices.

Thus, the second set of research questions related to possible alternatives to Pre-school retention asked:

- *Are there alternatives to repeating children at Pre-school?*
- *If there are alternatives, what practices are associated with the alternatives?*
- *If there are alternatives, are particular groups of children more likely to be provided with these alternatives?*
- *Why are these children more likely to be provided with these alternatives?*

Because the study was framed on understandings drawn from the United States' literature due to the general absence of Pre-school retention literature in Australia, the study required a flexible approach to answer these research questions. It was possible that teachers and parents in Australia had different understandings of Pre-school retention practices to teachers and parents in the United States.

### **1.10 Constructing the Study**

I sought a research approach that was flexible enough to allow for new understandings about Pre-school retention to emerge. As the study progressed, it became apparent that the findings did not fit neatly into the traditional categories offered through the United States' literature. A case study method allowed for the study to be conducted in its natural context, that is, within schools. As the aim of the study was to understand why teachers and parents employed various Pre-school retention practices when research warns against them (Shepard, 1989, 2004), it was important to foreground their views as much as possible. Unstructured interviews enabled teachers and parents to discuss issues that were important to them and which led them to employing these practices.

Different schools were selected to provide a range of Pre-school retention practices for the case study. Government and non-government schools and schools whose catchment areas drew upon families of varying socio-economic status (SES) were included where possible. In this way, a range of Pre-school retention practices and alternatives, involving different school types and with different social groups could be incorporated. To include each of these variables in the case studies, I used a pilot study and a survey to select school sites. I selected three different schools for each of the three practices I believed, at the beginning of the study, reflected Pre-school retention practices and possible alternatives. They included:

- three schools that repeated children at Pre-school
- three schools that returned children to Pre-school from Year 1
- three schools that provided alternatives to Pre-school retention practices.

As the findings will reveal, the practices were different to what I had assumed at the beginning of the study. The flexibility of the study, however, accommodated the new understandings of repeating children at Pre-school as they emerged from the stories of the participants. The participants' explanations for each of the practices became the basis for constructing a story of repeating children at Pre-school. The stories of the participants, which included parents and some grandparents, school administrators, guidance officers and Teachers-aides as well as teachers, were used to understand which groups of children were positioned as 'unready' for school within the dominant 'school-ready' discourse and why they were given a second year of Pre-school. School-ready discourse which dominates education systems both in Queensland (The State of Queensland, Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2002a) and the United States (NAECSSDE, 2000) emphasises the need for children to be 'ready for school'. Teachers' and parents' stories were analysed in the light of current understandings of school readiness and using the concept of discourse (Butler, 1997; Kress, 1985; Weedon, 1997). The concept of discourse which defines boundaries of possible truths (Butler, 1997) will be explained more fully in Chapter 5.

The construction of the study will be further outlined in Chapter 4 and will include a detailed description of how the study was set up, the research process, the research methods, the case study sites and the way in which the data was analysed. The research paradigm and my position as researcher within the study will be discussed along with my assumptions and the situated perspectives that guided the research process.

## **1.11 Conclusion and Chapter Outlines**

In Chapter 1, the concerns of the study and the purpose of the research endeavour were introduced. The primary concern of the study focused on the use of Pre-school retention practices in Queensland schools and why parents and teachers might employ these practices when some research warns of their ineffectiveness (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Hong & Yu, 2006) and possible harm to children (Jimerson, 2001a, 2001b; Shepard, 1989, 2004). Further, it appeared that particular groups of children were more often the target of these practices. Thus, the first research question related to Pre-school retention practices while the second research question related to alternatives to Pre-school retention. Each group of research questions asked what the practices were, if they were provided for particular groups of children and why they were provided. As there appears to be very little research on Pre-school retention practices in Australia, the study will add significantly to knowledge in this area. Although much of the literature used to frame the study was drawn from the United States, a flexible research approach was employed to enable new understandings of Pre-school retention practices to emerge, particularly within one Australian context.

Chapter 2 considers the literature on Pre-school retention. Before considering the evidence of Pre-school retention, the chapter provides an overview of the context of schooling and society that may have contributed to an increase in school and Pre-school retention practices. Evidence of Pre-school retention in Queensland, Australia is presented and a range of Pre-school retention practices is reviewed. Groups of children who are more often the target of these practices are considered along with data from Education Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003) which provides some evidence that particular groups of children are more likely to be repeated at Pre-school. The chapter presents evidence from different studies, conducted mainly in the United States, which show that many Pre-school retention practices hold few benefits for children and may be harmful (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Jimerson, 2001a, 2001b, 2004).

Chapter 3 considers theories of school readiness that may underpin explanations offered particularly by teachers and parents for the continued practice of repeating children at Pre-school. The OECD (1998) equates school and Pre-school retention with school failure. As such, theories of school readiness and achievement have also been used to analyse teachers' and parents' explanations for the employment of Pre-school retention practices for particular groups of children. While such explanations may be underpinned by deficit beliefs about certain groups of children or their

backgrounds, alternative explanations are also offered which may account for variations in children's readiness for, and achievement at, school. These explanations will be used to analyse teachers' and parents' stories of children for whom Pre-school retention practices are more often employed.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodology and methods used to construct the study and to gather the data. My position as researcher is outlined, as well as the ethical stances and considerations of the data collection process. The data collection processes, the selection of the research sites and the participants or storytellers are described. The concept of discourse will be used to analyse teachers' and parents' talk and the explanations for the practices which were employed for particular groups of children.

Chapter 5 focuses on addressing the first research question which considers practices related to Pre-school retention. It presents the stories from teachers and parents about the ways in which they have attempted to prepare children for school. Their stories highlight the struggles with which teachers and parents are faced in catering for children's entry into formal schooling in an era of increasing accountability and a strong focus on school-readiness. The findings of the study reveal a far more complex picture of repeating children in Australia than in the United States. What I believed was happening in schools, and what was borne out in the literature drawn mainly from the United States, was different from what I anticipated at the beginning of the study. The categories to understand repeating children at Pre-school, offered through much of the available literature in the United States, neither provided as neat a fit with the practices, nor the beliefs underpinning the practices, in Australian schools. The study offers some insight into the unique ways in which teachers and parents in one Australian context understand, and are attempting to prepare children for formal schooling.

Chapter 6 answers the second research question relating to the possible alternatives to repeating children at Pre-school which three schools in the study employed. The stories, offered mainly by teachers and school personnel, highlight the ways in which some teachers have attempted to provide alternatives to repeating children at Pre-school. The chapter not only looks at alternative ways of preparing children for school but also looks at the groups of children for whom these alternatives were provided and why these alternatives were provided. Such practices not only highlight alternatives to Pre-school retention practices but they highlight approaches to preparing children that position particular groups of children in more positive ways.

Chapter 7 summarises the findings of the study and provides the conclusions to the study of Pre-school retention practices. While teachers in Queensland schools appear to be avoiding many of the negative aspects associated with repeating children at Pre-school by dealing with the issue of preparing children for school in a range of positive ways, findings suggest that some practices do exist that may not benefit children. Findings suggest that teachers in Queensland schools may need to be better supported so that their efforts to prepare children for school are maximised. The chapter concludes with a range of policy recommendations and implications for practice. Recommendations for further research conclude the chapter.

# CHAPTER 2

## PRE-SCHOOL RETENTION PRACTICES: THE LITERATURE

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter reviews some of the literature on Pre-school retention practices drawn from Australia and the United States. Due to the general dearth of Pre-school retention literature in Australia, data has been drawn predominantly from the United States in framing the study and the literature review. Where data has been made available in Australia, it will be highlighted. The literature review focuses on both Australia and the United States and the discussion will alternate between the two countries. This chapter is divided into three aspects of Pre-school retention: the context of Pre-school retention; practices associated with Pre-school retention; and, identifiable groups of children associated with Pre-school retention practices.

Section 2.1.1 looks at increases in accountability at all levels of schooling which may have led to a range of Pre-school retention practices. Sections 2.1.2 to 2.1.5 will discuss data gathered on Pre-school retention in the United States and in Australia. Section 2.1.6 considers the value of Pre-school retention practices, based largely on research drawn from the United States.

Section 2.2 of the chapter discusses practices associated with Pre-school retention. While these practices are offered in the United States, only practices associated with Pre-school retention in Australian Pre-schools will be discussed in this section. Section 2.2 of the chapter looks at two alternatives to repeating children at Pre-school, including delayed school entry in Section 2.2.1 and returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 in Section 2.2.2. The final section, Section 2.2.3, questions the necessity for grade retention as an educational practice to address low school achievement. School and Pre-school retention is not practised in countries where student achievement is among the highest in the world.

The final part of the chapter, Section 2.3 will consider groups of children more often repeated at Pre-school. Section 2.3.1 considers children relatively younger for their year level, Section 2.3.2 discusses boys, Section 2.3.3 looks at children from low income groups and Section 2.3.4 considers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

## **2.2 The Context of Pre-school Retention**

### ***2.2.1 Increases in accountability***

Following the concerns of industry and of the wider society over educational standards, a range of educational reforms was initiated by governments in Australia, particularly during the 1990s. The reforms, which were widely applied to the schooling sector including the Pre-school sector, focused on accountability linked to student outcomes. In Queensland, public reforms were initiated by Education Queensland, known in 1990 as the Department of Education. Education Queensland commenced a range of outcomes-oriented policies and strategies emphasising accountability, which included *Focus on schools: The future organisation of educational services for students* (Department of Education, Queensland, 1990); *The corporate plan 1994-1998* (Department of Education, Queensland, 1993) and *Report of the Review of the Queensland School Curriculum Shaping the future* (Wiltshire, McMeniman, & Tolhurst, 1994). Among the initiatives was the *Social Justice Strategy 1994 -1998* (Department of Education, Queensland, 1994a) which aimed at providing an equitable and high quality education for all school children in Queensland. At the turn of the century these policies were supplemented by further initiatives in Queensland schools, focusing on student outcomes at all levels of schooling, and included *2010 Queensland state education: The next decade: A discussion about the future of Queensland state school* (Education Queensland, 1999a); *Queensland State Education* (Education Queensland, 1999b); *Draft Strategy for Consultation: 2010 Queensland State Education* (Education Queensland, 2000); *Queensland the smart state: Education and training: Reforms for the future. A white paper* (The State of Queensland, Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2002b); and *Queensland the smart state: Education and training: Reforms for the future. A green paper* (The State of Queensland, Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2002a).

The reforms emphasised the measurement of student outcomes at all levels of schooling and, more particularly, the measurement of academic outcomes (Department of Education, Queensland, 1993; Department of Education and the Arts, Queensland, 2005b). Of concern to some researchers is the trend towards grade retention at all levels of schooling which have resulted from increases in

accountability via student outcomes. In noting similar trends in the United States, Jimerson claims, “[A]s ‘standards’ and ‘accountability’ have received increasing emphasis in education, current trends appear to be moving toward increased retention rates” (2004, p. 71). The association between increasing school accountability and increasing school and Pre-school rates has been noted by other researchers in the United States as well (North Carolina Education Research Council (NCERC), 1999; PRF, 2003; Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). Further, while the emphasis of school accountability is on student outcomes, the focus for concern is primarily on academic outcomes.

At both the national and state levels of education in Australia, increases in accountability have resulted in increases in the measurement of student outcomes at all levels of schooling including Pre-school. Whether increases in accountability through the measurement of student outcomes have also resulted in increases in Pre-school retention rates in Australia is unknown, due to the inaccessibility or lack of available data in Australia.

Benchmarking has been introduced at a national level for all Australian states. Through the National Literacy and Numeracy Plan, benchmarking<sup>4</sup> of literacy and numeracy has been in place since 1999 to “improve educational outcomes of all Australian children” (Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), 2005, p. 1). Currently in Australian schools, children in Years 3, 5 and 7 are tested in literacy and numeracy achievement to ensure they achieve the required benchmarks (DEST, 2005). Children are assessed in literacy and numeracy “as early as possible, to identify those students at risk of not making adequate progress towards the national numeracy and literacy goals” (DEST, 2005, p. 1). More recent recommendations from the national inquiry into the teaching of literacy suggest, however, that testing commence at school entry (DEST, 2005). It has been recommended that all children in Australia be tested (Department of Employment, Education & Training (DEET), 2005a). Assessment on entry to school has been incorporated into system-wide literacy and numeracy strategies (DEST, 2002). All Australian states require or recommend assessment at school entry (see Appendix A).

Since the 1990s, Queensland schools have seen increases in accountability through increasing assessment procedures (Department of Education, Queensland, 1993). Queensland has recently increased the range of assessment procedures that were already in place. In 2005, the *Queensland Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Framework* introduced “state-wide assessments in the

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<sup>4</sup> “Benchmarks are a set of indicators or descriptors which represent nationally agreed minimum acceptable standards for literacy and numeracy at a particular year level” (DEST, 2005, p. 1).

middle years” of schooling (Department of Education and the Arts, Queensland, 2005b, p. 1). As well as the national literacy and numeracy tests in Years 3, 5 and 7, children in Queensland schools will also be tested in essential learnings<sup>5</sup> in Years 4, 6 and 9 as well (see Appendix B). Reporting from essential learnings assessment in Years 4, 6 and 9 will commence in 2008 (Department of Education and the Arts, Queensland, 2005b). While assessment takes place within schools for each year level of schooling, there are few year levels where student outcomes will not be assessed at a state-wide or national level.

While at present there is no formal policy regarding assessment on entry to the Queensland Pre-school year, teachers are required to monitor children’s progress through the Early Learning and Development Framework and report to parents on the child’s progress at the end of the school year (QSA, 2007). While a range of assessment tools are recommended for assessing children at Pre-school, concerns have been raised for some time over the increasing use of diagnostic and assessment tools in Australian schools for screening children’s readiness for school (Woodrow, 1999).

In the United States, “the downward extension” of “accountability has seen [...] an increase in the use of Kindergarten and First Grade screening procedures. These procedures are designed to exclude children who are not yet ready for school” (Cosden, Zimmer, & Gutierrez, 1993, p. 2). Shepard argues that readiness tests are nothing more than “gatekeepers” used to deny ‘unready’ children’s entry to school (1997, p. 85). Shepard argues that readiness testing, used as a gatekeeping mechanism at the Pre-school level in the United States, is problematic for several reasons:

First it keeps low performing children out of school who most need the learning opportunities provided in school. In turn, removal of less ready children contributes to the escalation of curricular demands [...] Heightened attention to readiness concerns, in the media and in neighbourhood talk, also fuels the “redshirting”<sup>6</sup> trend whereby affluent parents whose children do well on readiness measures nonetheless hold their five year olds

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<sup>5</sup> The essential learnings are the “knowledge, skills and attributes” considered essential “to enjoy life and contribute to society” and are defined for each year level from P-10 (Department of Education and the Arts, 2005, p. 5).

<sup>6</sup> The belief that underpins the practice of redshirting is derived from American college sports where an athlete might voluntarily refrain from competition for a year until she/he is bigger and more mature, giving her/him a competitive advantage in that sport. The term ‘redshirt’ originated from the practice that required ‘redshirted’ players to wear a red jersey during practice with regular players. A similar concept applies to academic redshirting children’s entry to school; it is postponed for similar reasons (Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Katz, 2000).

out of Kindergarten for an extra year. Last but not least, readiness tests lack the technical rigor to make accurate predictions or placements (1997, p. 85).

The increasing use of assessment practices in Queensland schools in the last decade may indicate that school accountability may be increasing. While assessment practices may be valuable in ensuring the continued high standard of learning in Australian schools as evidenced by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) assessments (OECD, 2003, 2007), Pre-school teachers are advised to discern and make responsible use of assessment tools (Woodrow, 1999). In using assessment tools, Woodrow advises educators discern assessment processes by raising such questions as “[A]re comparisons made between children and their achievements fair?” “Do the assessment procedures rely on multiple sources of information about children?” and “Does the assessment process reflect individual, cultural and linguistic diversity?” (1999, p. 23).

While the QSA (1998, 2005, 2007) has continued to emphasise all areas of children’s development in children’s learning at school, the ‘new managerialism’ and accountability era of schooling has led to a predominant focus on academic outcomes at school, even in the Early Years (Years 1-3) of schooling (Dawkins, 2007; DEST, 2005). Although increasing a country’s educational standards through accountability may be beneficial, the means by which high educational standards are achieved has been increasingly questioned by researchers, particularly when it involves school and Pre-school retention (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Jimerson, 2004; McGrath, 2006; Shepard, 2004; Shepard & Smith, 1988).

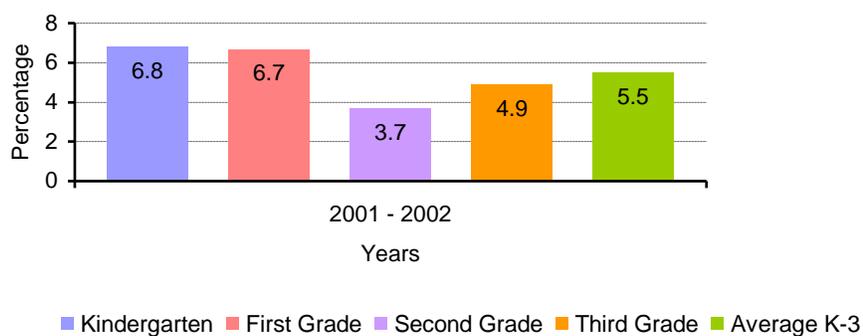
### ***2.2.2 Pre-school retention rates: The United States***

Data on Pre-school retention has not been readily available as it generally indicates ‘failure’ of the school, the teacher, the child or all of these (OCED, 1998). Although “no national data are available on retention” at any year level in the United States, McGill-Franzen and Allington suggest, “where data are available, it seems the rates of retention in-grade are increasing” (2006, p. 762). Most data available in the United States on grade repetition is based on estimates. It has been estimated that five to ten percent of all students are repeated at school and Pre-school in the United States annually, which “translates to over 2.4 million children every year that must complete an extra year of schooling” (Jimerson, 2004, p. 72). Similar estimates have been offered by Black who argues that “nearly 2.5 million students are retained” across all school levels each year in the United States (2004, p. 3). Estimates offered by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) suggest “as many as 15 percent of American students are held back each year, and 30 percent to 50 percent

of students are retained at least once before ninth grade” (2003, p. 1). Thompson and Cunningham similarly claim that while “[n]ationally, no statistics are kept on retention in the United States, reasonable estimates based on census data suggest that as many as one-third of all students have been retained at least once by the time they reach high school” (2000, p. 1).

PRF (2003) offers more accurate data collected in North Carolina from 117 districts and cities since 1991 on all children repeated in Kindergarten to Third Grade<sup>7</sup>. Broadening the insights on the practice of retention, PRF argues that the “retention rate for children in Kindergarten through to Third Grade (K-3) has more than doubled since 1992, from 2.7% in 1991–1992 to 5.5% in 2001–2002” (2003, p. 2). When considering Kindergarten alone, retention rates in 2001–2002 were even higher, averaging 6.8 percent for Kindergarten children in North Carolina. In some districts of North Carolina, retention rates for Kindergarten children were as high as 13.2 percent (PRF, 2003).

Figure 2.1 shows a summary of the data from PRF (2003), collected in North Carolina during 2001–2002 for children in Kindergarten to Third Grade (K-3). The data is presented in a graph for easy reference. Data shows that in Kindergarten, the retention rates were the highest for all early year levels (K-3) at 6.8 percent, just ahead of First Grade at 6.7 percent. Retention rates showed a decrease in second grade to 3.7 percent and increased again to 4.9 percent in Third Grade. Kindergarten and first grade appear to be the more common times to repeat children.



**Figure 2.1 Repeated Kindergarten to Third Grade Children, North Carolina, 2001 – 2002**

Data available in the United States indicates that retention rates have increased considerably at all levels of schooling including Pre-school. Although repeating children at school, and particularly at

<sup>7</sup> Grade levels in education systems other than Queensland equate to year levels.

Pre-school, was less common during most of the 1900s, increasing accountability has resulted in increasing retention rates in recent decades in the United States (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; PRF, 2003; Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). While estimates and available data may indicate that grade retention practices would appear to be high in the United States, further increases have been anticipated. Individual states (in the United States) have been “mandating retention for students who fail to reach the level of achievement as measured by a mandated assessment” (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 2006, p. 762). If grade retention does become mandatory for students failing to achieve the required test scores, further increases in grade retention rates are likely.

### ***2.2.3 Pre-school retention rates: Australia***

Similar to the United States, there has been no official national data kept on repeating children at any level of schooling in Australia. Unlike the United States, repeating children at any level of schooling has drawn little attention in Australia. As discussed in Chapter 1, while the ABS and the MCEETYA offer all kinds of ‘human capital indicators’ there has been no data available on school or Pre-school retention on a national level. As McGrath has noted, there are “very few statistics available” on the practice of repeating in Australian schools (2006, p. 1). Similarly in the literature, there has been very little discussion on repeating children at any level of schooling and very few estimates have been offered regarding its practice. Kenny concluded from her study on repeating children at schools in New South Wales in 1987 that “there was next to no research on the matter [...] in Australia” (1991, p. 1). While the lack of available statistics and discussion in the literature may lead one to conclude that the practice of repeating rarely exists in Australian schools, McGrath argues, however, that it has been “widely accepted in Australian schools” (2006, p. 39). Although no national statistics or estimates are currently available on the practice of repeating in Australian schools, pockets of data have been collected in various locations throughout Australia.

Kenny makes reference to a survey conducted by the New South Wales Department of Education on retention rates in New South Wales government primary schools in 1983 (Kenny, 1985a, 1985b, 1991). From the survey undertaken by the New South Wales Department of Education, as well as her own study on grade retention (1987), Kenny concluded that “an overall estimate of 14.5% – 17.48%” of Australian students may repeat a year level of schooling each year (1991, p. 1). While Kenny argues that this figure may represent “a continuing trend towards a decrease in repetition” rates in Australian schools, little data has been available in Australia since Kenny’s study in 1987 to ascertain what the current trend in Australian schools might be (1991, p. 1).

#### ***2.2.4 Data from Queensland***

Another location where data on school retention has been collected is Queensland, Australia. Since 1997, data on repeating children at school and Pre-school has been collected in Queensland state schools by Education Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003). Although this data has not been publicly available, it has been made available to Education Queensland teaching and administrative staff in schools. Thus, as a full-time teacher, I was able to access the data during the study. In my capacity as a researcher, however, I was also given approval to collect data within specified schools and other units within Education Queensland (see Appendix C). I was recently given approval within my capacity as a researcher to update the data before completing the study (see Appendix D).

During the data collection stage of my study, the administrative staff in the school where I worked as a full-time teacher made me aware of school and Pre-school retention data that was available from the Education Queensland data collection site (Education Queensland, 2003). I was able to download the data, collected by Education Queensland in Queensland state schools and Pre-schools from July 1997 to July 2002 during the months of February and July, collect data for the total numbers of each group and assemble them as percentages. The groups were All Indigenous children, Indigenous boys, Indigenous girls, All non-Indigenous children, Non-Indigenous boys, Non-Indigenous girls, All children, All boys and All girls who were 5 to 8 years of age (approximately Pre-school to Year 3). These categories can be seen in Appendix E. Before completion of the thesis, I collected data from July 2003 to February 2007. To retain some manageability of the data, the new data was drawn only from the July collection of each year from 2003 to 2006. After permission was given to me by Education Queensland to update the data before completion of the study, the most recent data, collected in August 2007 for February 2007, was added to the study. This data will be drawn on and used in Figures 2.2, 2.3, 2.7, 2.8, 2.9 and 2.10 of this chapter as a basis for the literature review.

#### ***2.2.5 Extracting the data***

Although the data is available to Education Queensland teaching and administrative staff within Education Queensland sites, for all intents and purposes, it is available in relatively inaccessible form. While the numbers of repeated children are available for each year level from Pre-school to Year 12 in several categories on a state-wide and district basis, it was difficult to make use of the numbers as they were simply presented as the number of children repeated, not as percentages. To make use of the data, I further accessed the total numbers of children for each category that would

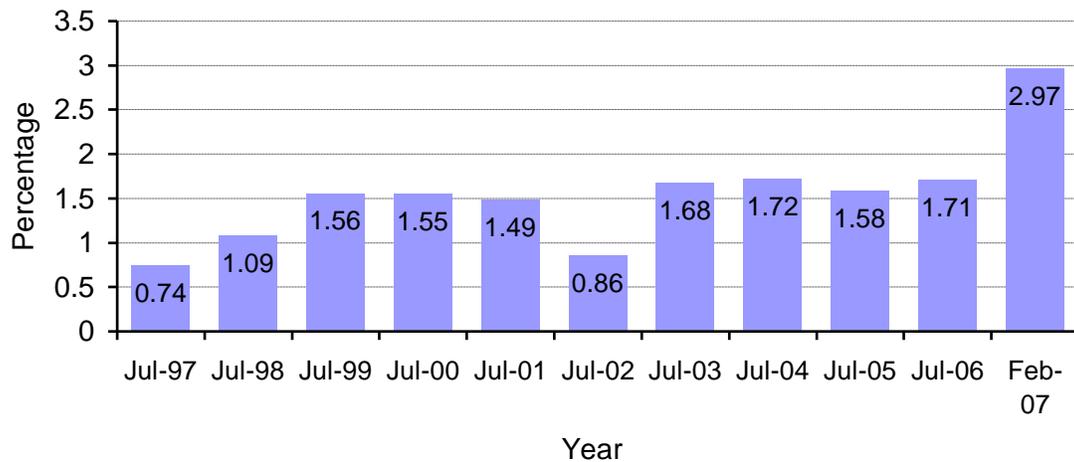
be relevant to the study and constructed a table to calculate the percentages for each of the categories. Tables, calculated from the data available at Education Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003) were drawn up for each year. From these tables, I was able to identify different trends of grade retention in the early years of schooling in Queensland state schools. The process employed in presenting the data from Education Queensland for years 1997-2007 can be seen in Appendix E.

Although the data from Education Queensland represents a significant finding in the study and thus may be considered more appropriate to be included in the findings chapters of the thesis, Chapters 5 and 6, my decision to present the data in the literature chapter was based on several reasons. The first reason was that I could find almost no research in Australia on Pre-school retention and, as such, the data from Education Queensland could be used as an empirical base on which to situate the study and to reveal a range of trends and evidence for the practice of Pre-school retention in Queensland state schools. Another reason is that, although the study sought to provide some evidence for the practice of Pre-school retention in Queensland state schools, it also sought to understand why such practices might exist when research warns of its possible harmful effects (Shepard, 2004; NAECCSDE, 2000). As the data from Education Queensland provides evidence for the practice of Pre-school retention in Queensland schools and reveals current trends, the findings from the case studies attempt to uncover the reasons such practices continue in schools.

Although Education Queensland has collected data since 1997 on repeating children at all levels of schooling, I limited the data collection to children aged 5 to 8 years, the officially recognised early childhood education years in Queensland schools (QSA, 2007). Although the study was concerned primarily with Pre-school retention, data was collected for all early childhood education year levels to reveal possible trends related to Pre-school retention. As will be revealed in Chapters 5 and 6, data collected from Education Queensland did trend towards offering a range of alternatives to repeating children at Pre-school.

A search of the literature revealed that Education Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003) was the only source of data accessible to me on repeating children at the Pre-school level in Australia, despite the fact that the early years of schooling appeared to be the most common time to repeat children at school (Education Queensland, 2003; Kenny, 1987, 1991). While the data was available to me in my serendipitous and privileged position as an employee of Education Queensland, it was not, however,

publicly available. Figure 2.2 shows the percentage of children repeated in Queensland state Pre-schools from July 1997 to February 2007.

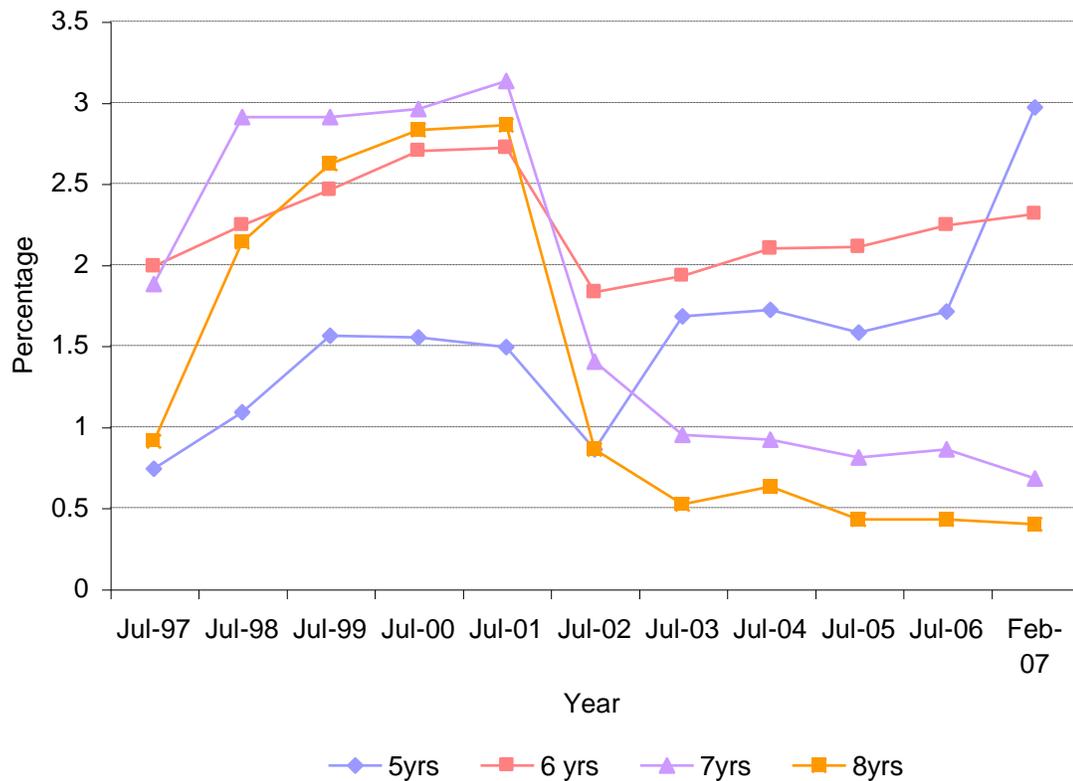


**Figure 2.2 Repeated Pre-school Children, Queensland State Schools, 1997 – 2007**

Figure 2.2 shows that the percentage of children repeated at Pre-school in Queensland state schools increased from 0.74% in July 1997 to 2.97% in February 2007. This increase represents an approximate four-fold increase in the number of children repeated in Queensland state Pre-schools over the last decade. While an increasing concern over children’s readiness for school may explain some increase in Pre-school retention since 1997, it may not fully explain why the number of children repeated at Pre-school nearly doubled from 1.71% in 2006 to 2.97% in 2007. One explanation may relate to Education Queensland’s introduction of a full-time Pre-schooling year in 2007, known as the Prep year. Included in the introduction of the new Prep year was a change in the Pre-school entry age; children were required to be six months older. Because such changes had raised concerns among some parents over their children’s readiness for school, Education Queensland gave any parent, wishing to repeat their child at preschool, the opportunity to repeat their children in the Prep year in 2007 if they so desired (Townsville North and West District Office, Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2006). The increase in the number of repeated children at Pre-school in 2007 may be an indication of the increasing number of parents concerned about their children’s readiness for school. It may also indicate that with the six-month increase in school entry age, some parents preferred their children to be more in line with the new entry age requirements. For whichever reason, when offered a ‘once

off' opportunity for their children to have a second year of Pre-school, many parents availed themselves of the opportunity to repeat their children at Pre-school to ensure they were 'school-ready'.

Figure 2.3 shows the percentage of children aged between 5 years<sup>8</sup> (Pre-school level<sup>9</sup>) and 8 years (approximately Year 3) who repeated a year level in Queensland state schools.



**Figure 2.3 Repeated Children Aged 5 to 8 years, Queensland State Schools, 1997 – 2007**

<sup>8</sup> The ages are an approximate equation with year levels. Children aged 5 years repeating a year level would almost certainly be in Pre-school as children could not enter Pre-school in Queensland until the year they turned 5 years of age when the study commenced. However, a 6 year old child repeating a year level may also be in Pre-school if the child had a birthday in the first part of the year. As younger children are more often repeated at pre-school (McGrath, 2006) as well as other year levels (Kenny, 1989), children aged 5 to 8 can roughly be equated with year levels pre-school to year 3.

<sup>9</sup> Preschool was the name of the Pre-schooling year offered in Queensland when the data was collected in 2003. Since 2007, the Pre-schooling year in Queensland is referred to as Prep.

Data from Figure 2.3 shows that, of all early year levels (Pre-school to Year 3), children were least likely to be repeated at Pre-school until 2003. By February, they were the most likely of all early year levels to be repeated. As mentioned previously, this may have been due to the introduction of the Prep year in 2007. Prior to 2007, the data from Education Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003) indicated that children were more frequently repeated in the early years of schooling (Pre-school to Year 3), particularly in Year 1. Although data drawn from Kenny's study of school retention in New South Wales government primary schools (1987) represented a considerable time gap, it also indicated that the most common time to repeat children was the early years of schooling (grades 1 and 2<sup>10</sup>). Data from Kenny's study (1987), which she combined with the New South Wales Department of Education survey of primary school retention rates in New South Wales during 1983, indicated that of all primary grades<sup>11</sup>, the highest retention rates were in Grade 1 at 6 percent. The data collected from Education Queensland since 1997 indicates that the highest retention rates were 3.37% for children aged 7 in July 2001 (who are more likely to be in Year 2), which represents just under half the highest rate (6 percent in grade 1) in Kenny's study (1987).

The relatively lower rate of school retention in Queensland schools seems difficult to account for, particular as there has been a considerable increase in accountability in Queensland education (Department of Education and the Arts, Queensland, 2005b) which is normally associated with increases in repeating children at school (Shepard, 2004). However, as mentioned previously and as will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, the findings of the study revealed that teachers in Queensland schools appear to be finding alternative ways in preparing children for school, which may account for the relatively low retention rates in Queensland schools and Pre-schools.

Figure 2.3 further indicates that until 2002, the most common time to repeat children in Queensland schools was when children were aged 7 years (approximately Year 2). One possible explanation may be connected with the rules associated with Reading Recovery, an early intervention literacy program that was offered in Queensland state schools to children experiencing literacy difficulties (Education Queensland, 1998). Although this program was available to children requiring literacy support, it was only offered to children who have completed one year of schooling and who were less than 7 years and 2 months of age (Education Queensland, 1998). If children were repeated

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<sup>10</sup> The term grade, used in NSW schools in 1987 denotes the year level of schooling and is used in the same way as year level has been used in Queensland schools from 1997 to 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Data was not available for the pre-school level.

before Year 2, they were unlikely to qualify for early literacy support should they require it, as they would be older than the required age limit. Thus, teachers in Queensland schools may have advanced children to Year 2 where they could be supported with Reading Recovery and/or repeated should they require either or both forms of early intervention. The phasing out of Reading Recovery which commenced in 2007 will conclude in 2008 (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2008). In 2008, all children in Year 2 regardless of age and except if they had repeated a year level, were eligible for Reading Recovery.

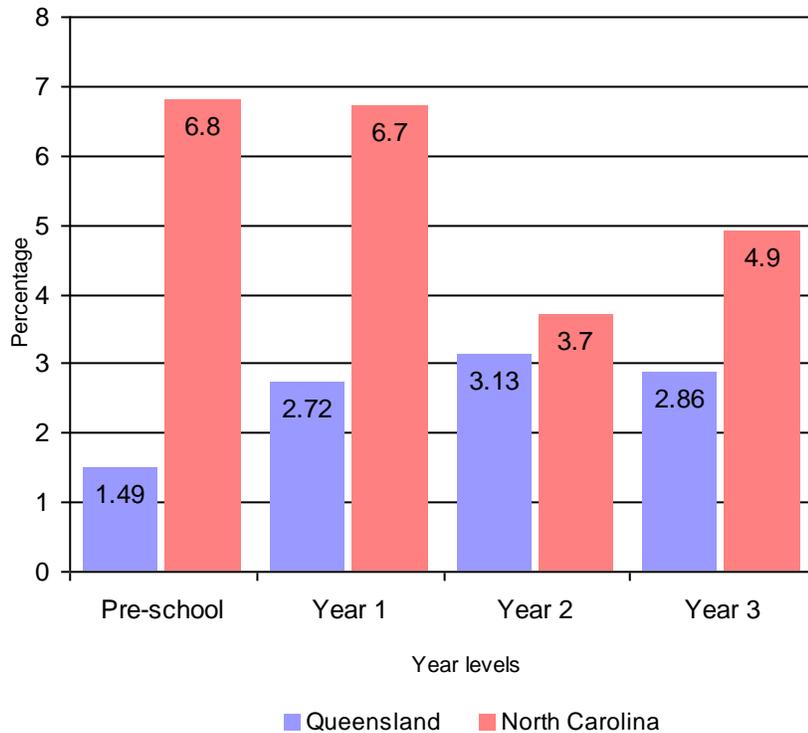
For the purposes of comparison, Figure 2.4 draws on data shown in Figures 2.1 and 2.3. Figure 2.4 clearly shows comparative patterns between Queensland schools and North Carolina schools. Figure 2.4 compares Kindergarten to Third Grade children, repeated during 2001–2002 in North Carolina with a similar group of children, Pre-school to Year 3 in Queensland<sup>12</sup> schools during July 2001. This period of time was chosen as it was during the time of the study's data collection stage. It also represented the most recent data and only available data that was systematically collected and not based on estimates as is most data from the United States.

In comparing the retention rates in Queensland schools with those of schools in North Carolina for children from Pre-school to Year 3, the overall retention rates in Queensland schools would appear to be much lower. In 2001, 1.49% of children in Queensland Pre-schools were repeated compared with 6.8% of children in North Carolina kindergartens during a similar period. This means that children in North Carolina were more than four times as likely to be repeated at the Pre-school level as children in Queensland. In Year 1, children were more than twice as likely to be repeated in North Carolina schools as they were in Queensland schools; 6.7% compared with 2.72% respectively.

Retention rates in the early years of schooling appear to be comparatively lower in Queensland state schools than they do in North Carolina schools. While data may indicate that lower numbers of children are being repeated in Queensland schools, data available from Education Queensland nevertheless indicates that the practice of school and Pre-school retention does exist as an educational practice in Queensland state schools. The next section of this chapter will detail the research, drawn from the United States, which warns against such practices.

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<sup>12</sup> Pre-school to year 3 (P-3) in Queensland schools in 2001 is equivalent to Kindergarten to Third Grade (K-3) in North Carolina schools.



*Figure 2.4 Repeated Children Pre-School to Year 3, Queensland and North Carolina, 2001 – 2002*

### *2.2.6 The (in)effectiveness of repeating children at Pre-school*

#### **Preschool retention**

Smith and Shepard (1988) argue that those who repeat children at Pre-school generally believe that young children need more time to mature before progressing to the next year level. Children who are ‘immature’ are considered to be ‘at risk’ of school failure. As many children are retained at Pre-school for ‘maturity’ or behavioural reasons (Hong & Yu, 2006), it is believed that during their repeated year, children will reach a developmental stage ready to commence Year 1.

By contrast, more recent understandings of child development argue that a child’s environment also influences development and learning and some environments are more conducive to school learning than others (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Morrison, 2007). From this perspective, it is argued that repeating Pre-school may impede social and cognitive growth if children are placed in an environment that has less age-relevant social and learning activities. If promoted to the next year level, as findings from recent research suggests (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005), children are more likely to display increased cognitive outcomes than if they had remained at Pre-school. Further, the

social stigma believed to be attached to repeating Pre-school can negatively impact on a child's self esteem and attitude towards school (NAEYC, 1997; Shepard & Smith, 1988).

Research conducted on Kindergarten (Pre-school) retention in the United States from 1984–88 led Shepard to conclude:

1. Kindergarten retention does nothing to boost subsequent academic achievement
2. Regardless of what the extra year may be called, there is a social stigma for children who attend an extra year
3. Retention actually fosters inappropriate academic demands in first grade (1989, p. 64).

In a more recent study in the United States examining the impact of Kindergarten (Pre-school) retention on children's cognitive growth in reading and mathematics, Hong and Raudenbush found:

the empirical evidence from this study refutes the arguments that adopting a Kindergarten retention policy boosts achievement on average, that such a policy improves the learning of children who would in any case be promoted, or that grade retention helps children experiencing difficulty in Kindergarten (2005, p. 221).

A study of Pre-school retention by Hong and Yu led to similar conclusions about Pre-school retention particularly in relation to its benefits in later school achievement, “[W]e find no evidence that Kindergarten retention brings benefits to the retainees’ cognitive development during the elementary years” (2006, p. 1). Shepard similarly concluded two decades before that children who repeat at Kindergarten “are just as likely to end up at the bottom of their first or third grade class” as children who are not repeated (Shepard & Smith, 1989, p.75). One of the more prominent educational bodies in the United states, NAECSSDE argues that policies and practices that promote Pre-school retention assign “the burden of responsibility to the child, rather than the program”: they place “the child at risk of failure, apathy towards school and demoralization”; they fail “to contribute to quality early childhood education”; and they “label children as failures at the outset of their school experience” (2000, p. 3).

### **School retention**

Considerably more research has been conducted on grade retention at the school level than at the Pre-school level. Anderson et al. argue that research “fails to find significant differences between groups of students retained early (Kindergarten through 3rd Grade) or later (4th through 8th

Grades)” (2002, p. 2). Given this possibility and as research on school and Pre-school retention appears to show similar findings, both will be presented in this section. Further, many of the studies on grade retention such as Jimerson (2001a) include Pre-school.

To demonstrate “the efficacy of grade retention during the past century”, Jimerson drew on the findings from three meta-analyses (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001a) that provided outcomes of 83 published studies between 1925–1999 (2001b, p. 48). Jimerson’s meta-analyses (2001a) included children retained at the Pre-school level. Based on the concept of effect size, meta-analyses allow researchers to pool results from multiple studies and examine from a larger sample the effects of an intervention such as grade retention. The results provide a measurement between a comparison group and a retained group expressed in quantitative units. The combined results of the meta-analyses can be seen in Table 2.1 (Jimerson, 2001b, p. 49). Scores and symbols used in the following discussion have been highlighted for easy reference.

**Table 2.1 Mean Effect Sizes (ES) Summary Showing the (In)Efficacy of Grade Retention**

	Holmes & Matthews (1984)	Holmes (1989)	Jimerson (2001a)
Overall Effect Size	-.37[575]	-.15[861]	-.31[246]
<b>Academic Achievement</b>	<b>-.44[367]</b>	<b>-.19[536]</b>	<b>-.39[169]</b>
Language	-.40[85]	-.16[106]	-.36[11]
Reading	-.48[75]	-.08[144]	-.54[52]
Mathematics	-.33[77]	-.11[137]	-.49[48]
Total/Composites	na	na	-.20[13]
GPA	-.58[4]	-.58[4]	-.18[45]
<b>Socio-emotional Adjustment</b>	<b>-.27[142]</b>	<b>-.09[234]</b>	<b>-.22[77]</b>
Social	-.27[60]	-.09[101]	-.08[12]
Emotional	-.37[9]	-.03[33]	-.28[13]
Behavioural	-.31[13]	-.13[24]	-.11[30]
Self-concept	-.19[34]	-.13[45]	-.04[16]
Adjustment Composite	na <sup>13</sup>	na	-.15[4]
Attitude Toward School	-.16[26]	-.05[39]	na
Attendance	<b>-.12[6]<sup>14</sup></b>	<b>-.18<sup>15</sup>[7]</b>	-.65[2]

Results from Table 2.1 indicate that the retained groups in Holmes and Matthews’ (1984), Holmes’ (1989) and Jimerson’s (2001a) meta-analyses scored .44, .19 and .39 of a standard deviation<sup>16</sup> unit

<sup>13</sup> Na means the data was not available.

<sup>14</sup> The numbers in brackets [ ] indicate the number of effect sizes used to calculate the mean effect size.

<sup>15</sup> The negative numbers represent the mean effect size and shows that the results favour the match comparison group in relation to the retained group.

lower than the promoted comparison group for academic achievement respectively. In considering all areas of academic achievement (language, reading and mathematics), results of these meta-analyses “demonstrate consistent negative effects of grade retention on subsequent academic achievement” (Jimerson, 2001b, pp. 50-51). In considering all areas of socio-emotional adjustment (social, emotional, behavioural, attitude toward school and attendance), comparisons between retained and matched promoted students showed a negative effect. As can be seen from Table 2.1, overall, the retained students scored .27, .09 and .22 of a standard deviation unit lower in Holmes and Matthews’ (1984), Holmes’ (1989) and Jimerson’s (2001a) meta-analyses of socio-emotional adjustment respectively. While effect size varies in relation to the dimension, the valuing of effect for every dimension of efficacy related to retention of students was unquestionably negative. In reviewing the three meta-analyses that explored the effects of grade retention on primary school students, Jimerson thus concluded, “Analyses resulting in a negative effect size suggest that an intervention (retention in this case) had a negative or deleterious effect relative to the comparison groups of promoted students” (2001b, p. 49).

Jimerson further cited the conclusions reached from the three individual systematic reviews and meta-analyses of research examining the effects of grade retention:

Those who continue to retain pupils at grade level do so despite cumulative evidence showing that the potential for negative effects consistently outweighs positive outcomes (Holmes & Matthews, 1984 cited in Jimerson, 2001b p. 52).

Only when well-matched studies were examined, a greater negative effect was found for retention than in the research literature as a whole. In studies where retained children and promoted controls matched on IQ and prior achievement, repeating a grade had an average negative effect of -.30 standard deviations. The weight of empirical evidence argues against grade retention (Holmes, 1989 cited in Jimerson, 2001b p. 52).

Studies examining the efficacy of early grade retention on academic achievement and socio-emotional adjustment that have been published during the last decade report results that are consistent with the converging evidence and conclusions of research from earlier in

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<sup>16</sup> Standard deviation is a measurement of statistical dispersion or the variability of score distribution. It measures the amount of variation from the average score and can be expressed in positive or negative integers (Grimm, 1993).

the century that fail to demonstrate that grade retention provides greater benefits to students with academic or adjustment difficulties than does promotion to the next grade (Jimerson, 2001a p. 52).

McGrath has pointed out that much earlier research on repeating children at school generally highlighted positive gains for repeated children (2006). However, such research only considered gains children made during the year they were repeated, whereas more sophisticated studies of repeated children used a comparison group of non-repeated children (Jimerson, 2001a, 2001b; McGrath, 2006). Jimerson outlined further methodological concerns relating to studies where positive benefits of grade retention have been found (2001b). He argues “most studies analyze only academic achievement and rarely include socio-emotional outcomes; [...] few studies document remedial services during the repeated year”, and “few studies examine the long term outcomes associated with early grade retention” (Jimerson, 2001b, p. 50). When these methodological concerns are addressed, different outcomes of grade retention practices are shown. For instance, contemporary research uses a control group of non-repeated children to compare with repeated children of similar levels of achievement and social adjustment for periods of up to twenty years (McGrath, 2006).

Furthermore, McGrath argues that longitudinal studies (Jimerson 1999, 2001b) have thus shown that any gains made by children during the repeated year are “minimal and short lived” and by the middle years of schooling have diminished completely (2006, p. 40). Longitudinal studies have provided further information on repeated children. In a 21-year longitudinal study comparing low achieving promoted students with repeated students to age 20, Jimerson (1999) found that in comparison to the group of low achieving students who were promoted, repeated students “were less likely to receive a diploma by age 20, were less likely to be enrolled in a post secondary education program, received lower education/employment status ratings, were paid less per hour, and received poorer employment competence ratings at age 20” (2001b, p. 51).

Additional studies have associated grade retention with not completing secondary school (Alexander et al., 2004; Hauser et al., 2004; Jimerson, 2001a, 2001b, 2004; Shepard, 2004; Temple, Reynolds, & Ou, 2004). Following “[a] systematic review of 17 studies examining dropping out of high school prior to graduation”, Jimerson concluded “grade retention is one of the most powerful predictors of dropout status” (2001b, p. 52) and may increase the risk of not completing secondary school by 20% to 50% (Jimerson, 1999). Alexander et al. found that repeating a grade “increases

dropout risk, and later the risk of non-completion, anywhere from three to eight fold, and this in a group already at high risk” (2004, p. 20). Jimerson argued that the combined negative effects of repeating a year level may eventually lead to a negative attitude towards school and “poorer educational and employment outcomes during late adolescence” (2001b, p. 51).

McGrath argues that “this overall deterioration” may be due to the fact that “repeating is a visible demonstration of ‘failure’” which may contribute to a negative view of the child’s abilities by the child and others (2006, p. 40). In summarising her research on repeating children at school,

McGrath outlined her conclusions:

- Repeating does not improve academic outcomes
- Repeating contributes to poor mental health outcomes
- Repeating leads to poor long term social outcomes
- Repeating contributes to a negative attitude to school and learning
- Repeating results in students dropping out of school
- Repeating decreases the likelihood that a student will participate in post secondary schooling
- Repeated students demonstrate higher rates of behavioural problems
- There is no advantage to students in delaying school entry for a year in order to increase ‘school readiness’
- There are huge costs associated with repeating a year of schooling
- Some students are more likely to be recommended to repeat than others (2006, pp. 39-40).

Strengthening children’s socio-emotional adjustment in readiness for school has been one of the more common reasons argued for repeating children at Pre-school and delaying their entry into formal schooling until they are ‘school-ready’ (Department of Education, Northern Region, 1994).

McGrath argued that the “social disruption” that results from repeating children at any year level may contribute to “poor long-term social adjustment” (2006, p. 40). Such disruption may be even greater for students returned to Pre-school after commencing Year 1. McGrath argued that repeated students may come to “associate school and learning with humiliation and threat” (2006, p. 41). For some children, repeating a year level may also exacerbate behavioural problems in some children (McGrath, 2006) particularly when such children have a prior history of physical aggression (Nagin, Pagani, Tremblay & Vitaro, 2003).

From an economic point of view, many researchers have argued that repeating is an expensive and ineffective response to low achievement (Bowser, 1998; McGrath, 2006, OECD, 1998). In the 1980s, France estimated that 30 percent of its budget was allocated to addressing “failure at school; mainly due to grade repeaters and dropouts” (Kovacs, 1998, p.1). Data from PRF (2003) revealed that the average total cost for each child repeated in the early years of schooling (K-3) in North Carolina was US\$7,616<sup>17</sup> during 2001–2002. The total average cost for the 22,343 children in K-3 who were repeated in North Carolina during 2001–2002 was US\$170,164,228. The OECD argue that grade retention at any level of schooling is a “heavy burden in terms of waste of resources in a context of restraint in government spending” (1998, p. 12).

Although considerable “empirical evidence argues against grade retention”, repeating children at school and Pre-school continues to be suggested as a remedy for low achievement (Pouliot, 1999, p. 3). Many researchers, both in Australia (Kenny, 1987; McGrath, 2006) and overseas (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Jimerson, 2001a; Shepard & Smith, 1989) argue that there is a huge discrepancy between what the research shows and what educators might believe is good practice.

### **2.3 Practices Associated with Pre-school Retention**

To ensure children are ready for school, several practices related to repeating Pre-school and unique to the Pre-school level have emerged in recent decades. Such practices include delaying children’s entry into formal schooling and returning children to repeat Pre-school after they have commenced Year 1. Although developmental Kindergarten<sup>18</sup> is another practice offered in the United States to address the perceived low levels of readiness in some children, it will not be discussed in this study as it is generally not practised in Queensland and, therefore, has less relevance to the study. Transition classes have been provided in some cases as another alternative to Pre-school retention.

Indicators suggest that while practices associated with repeating children at school, such as delaying children’s entry to school, are prevalent in the United States (Morrison, 2007), they have also been noted by some researchers in Australia (McGrath, 2006; Routley & de Lemos, 1993). Some critics consider delaying children’s entry to school to be similar to repeating children at Pre-school as both practices cater for children considered ‘not ready’ for school (NAECSSDE, 2000). Parents, usually

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<sup>17</sup> The total expenditure per child is the sum of local, state, federal and capital expenditure in each Local Education Agency (LEA). Capital expenditure is the LEA’s 5 year average and all values have been rounded to the nearest dollar.

<sup>18</sup> Developmental Kindergarten is offered to children in the United States who, after testing, are considered to have sufficient developmental delays to require two years of pre-schooling instead of the normal one year.

from middle to higher income backgrounds, more often delay their children's entry into formal schooling in the belief that their children might gain a competitive edge over their younger peers by being older. Similar to repeating children at Pre-school, much of the available research reveals that this may not be the case (McGrath, 2006).

### ***2.3.1 Delayed school entry***

In the United States, the practice of delayed school entry or voluntarily holding children out of school when they are age eligible has increased (Katz, 2000; Meisels, 1999). This may be due to an increasing emphasis, in the United States, on school readiness (Katz, 2000; Meisels, 1999). The United States National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) estimated from household surveys in 1993 and 1995 that 9 percent of all first and second graders had delayed entry into Kindergarten (2000). Morrison, in 2007, noted that the Department of Education (United States) estimated that "about 10% of entering Kindergarten children are redshirted - held out of school for a year" (2007, p. 334).

Studies in the United States have found that, while there is no difference between boys' and girls' readiness skills (Datar, 2003), boys are more likely to have delayed entry to school than girls (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Byrd, Weitzman & Auinger, 1997; Katz, 2000; Morrison, 2007; NECS, 2000). Some studies in the United States show that children who are relatively younger than their peers (Katz, 2000; Meisels, 1999; NCES, 2000) and from more affluent homes (Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Katz, 2000) are more likely to have delayed school entry.

While more attention has been given to delaying children's entry into schooling in the United States, it has drawn little attention in Australia. A study conducted by Routley and de Lemos (1993) revealed that there was an increase in school entry age in Victoria. Although the average school entry age had increased for both boys and girls, more boys entered school with a higher average age than girls. Routley and de Lemos' study found that there was a "significant difference between males and females in the mean (average) age of entry to school" (1993, p. 33). The study further revealed that there was "an increasing trend in Victoria for parents from middle-class backgrounds to delay their child's entry to school" particularly when the child was younger for her/his year level (1993, p. 30). As deferring school may mean additional Pre-schooling or day-care fees, parental income is likely to influence parents' decisions to delay their children's entry to school. Routley and de Lemos found there was "a clear trend for the increase in school entry age to be associated with socio-economic factors as indicated by income level" (1993, p. 36). As will be discussed further in

this section, there are concerns that children may not be advantaged by this practice. Since 1993, there has been no further research on delaying children's entry into schooling in Australia.

Studies have shown that delaying children's entry into formal schooling is more often based on the belief that younger children are less ready for school (Lewitt & Baker, 1995; McGrath, 2006; Routley & de Lemos, 1993). Parents who delay their children's entry into formal schooling for an extra year believe that this practice enables their children to become the oldest in their class and in this way gain "a competitive advantage in school" (Smith & Shepard, 1988, p. 5). Proponents of this view believe that they are giving children the 'gift of time'; they will have more time to mature and thus be more 'ready for school'.

The assumption that 'more time' will enable children to be 'more mature' and thus 'more ready' for school has been associated with a maturational view of school readiness and linked to the theories of Piaget. Piaget's theories and a maturational view of school readiness will be more fully reviewed in the next chapter. Current research contests practices based solely on this view of school readiness (Graue & DiPerna, 2000; NAECSSDE, 2000). NAECSSDE argues, "[B]elief in the pure maturational viewpoint underlies many [...] deleterious practices" of Pre-schooling, such as those associated with grade-retention and delayed school entry (2000, p. 12).

Evidence to support this practice is mixed. Some studies suggested that it raises children's pre-reading and pre-numeracy achievement (West, Denton & Germino-Hauskin, 2000) and may increase a child's confidence and social competence (Spitzer, Cupp & Parke, 1995). Other studies found that younger Pre-school children make similar progress in pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills as older children (Datar, 2003; Shepard & Smith, 1986). Further studies have shown that although younger children may have lower levels of cognitive and non-cognitive abilities when they commence Pre-school, they can catch up with their older counterparts by mid-schooling (Kurdek & Sinclair; 2001; March, 2005; Stipek & Byler, 2001; West, Meek & Hurst, 2000). In a study of 476 Kindergarten and First Grade children, youngness was not related to social competence (Spitzer et al., 1995). In a more recent Australian study, *Preparing for School: Report of the Queensland Preparing for School Trials 2003/4*, younger children outperformed their older peers in a range of assessment areas (Thorpe et al., 2004).

Katz noted that proponents of delayed school entry argue that there is no long-term evidence that the practice is harmful to children (2000). However, Graue and DiPerna argue that there is a higher

likelihood for “redshirts and retainees [...] to receive special education than their peers who enter and are promoted on time” (2000, p. 1). Byrd et al. further argue that a higher incidence of behavioural problems exists among children who have delayed school entry compared with those who do not have delayed school entry (1997). Drawing on a cross-sectional analysis of parental reports in a sample of 9079 children aged 7 to 17 years, Byrd et al. found that “16 percent of students with delayed Kindergarten entrance demonstrated extreme behaviour problems, compared to 7 percent of students who entered on time” (1997, p. 654).

Concerns over school readiness have led to an increase in delayed school entry (Routley & de Lemos, 1993). Much of the research from the United States argues that this practice may offer few benefits for children (Datar, 2003; Kurdek & Sinclair, 2001; Shepard & Smith, 1986; Stipek & Byler, 2001; West, Meek & Hurst, 2001). While the practice of delaying children’s entry into schooling may appear to privilege children from higher income backgrounds by delaying their entry to school, much of the available research reveals otherwise (Datar, 2003; NASP, 2003; NAECCSSDE, 2000; Stipek, 2002). Aspirational middle-class parents, eager to provide their children with the best possible start in the education stakes and what might appear to be an educational advantage, may in the long term be buying their children an educational disadvantage or at best, no educational advantage at all.

### ***2.3.2 Returning children to Pre-school from Year 1***

A third practice associated with school readiness is the practice of returning children to repeat Pre-school after they have commenced Year 1. Apart from a brief mention of this practice by Allington and McGill-Franzen (1995) and Shepard and Smith (1988) who have researched Pre-school retention practices in the United States, this practice has rarely been mentioned in the literature. Both Allington and McGill-Franzen (1995) and Shepard and Smith (1988) noted the practice of returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 in the course of their research in relation to the professional embarrassment it caused Pre-school teachers who promoted some children to Year 1 only to be told by the Year 1 teachers that the children were ‘not ready’ for school. Shepard and Smith described the impact of this experience on the Pre-school teachers:

One of the most potent messages that convey next grade standards among teachers is to send a child back to the preceding grade. If the first grade teacher decides after three weeks that a student is “not making it” and sends the child back to Kindergarten, the Kindergarten teacher learns, in a professionally humiliating way, to scrutinize more carefully the children

who are promoted. These schools have adopted what amounts to a factory model that standardizes the curriculum for each grade; every child must measure up to the fixed and higher standards or be judged inadequate or unready (1988, p. 136).

Similar to repeating and delaying children's entry to school, the practice of returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 focuses on the child and the child's perceived inability to be school-ready. As such, when some children are unable to meet the requirements of schooling, they are perceived as 'inadequate' or 'unready'. An extensive search of the literature failed to identify research on returning children to Pre-school after they commenced Year 1. There may be several reasons why returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 has rarely been mentioned in the literature; it may be considered to be the same as repeating Pre-school or that it may be rarely practised. If returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 is identified as a similar practice to repeating children at Pre-school, its effectiveness and its consequences are likely to be similar. In reviewing Pre-school retention practices, Shepard argues, "[W]hether it is called by a special name (Transition), occurs for a special reason (immaturity), or takes place in Kindergarten rather than later, [it] is still retention – and still ineffective" (1989, p. 76).

### **2.3.3 *Transition classes***

According to Carlson and Galle, 'Transition classes' may refer to a range of practices, other than Pre-school retention, that add an extra year to schooling (2000). In the United States, Transition classes may also be known as 'Developmental Kindergartens' (Cain, 2005; California Content Standards (CCS), 2000; Carlson & Galle, 2000). Transition classes in the United States are provided as an alternative to repeating Pre-school (Cain, 2005; Meisels, 1999) and have been considered by some as a 'new grade' between Pre-school and Year 1 for children considered unready for school (Ostrowski, 1994).

Carlson and Galle argue that those who advocate Transition classes usually do so to evade the "potentially negative impact of (Pre-school) retention" (2000, p. 1). Cain argues that some educators see Pre-school retention as being less effective than providing children with a Transition program as repeated children simply "re-do" the same curriculum as they did the year before (2000, p.1). Transition classes, instead, provide a program different to Pre-school in that Pre-school concepts are not only revised but children are also exposed to aspects of the Year 1 program (Berger, 1988).

Despite the positive intentions of those who advocate Transition classes, they have attracted some criticism. Carlson and Galle argue that, based on previous longitudinal studies by Carlson (1995) “transition placements are ineffective in remediating academic difficulties regardless of whether the Transition program occurs prior to regular Kindergarten or between Kindergarten and First Grade” (2000, p.1). Further, Berger argues that “more than 70 percent of those in Kindergarten Transition classes are from minority groups, compared with the school system as a whole, which is 27 percent black and 16 percent American Indian, Asian or Hispanic” (1988, p. 1).

The CCS argues that some advocate Transition classes because they allow children “additional time for maturation” (2000, p. 1). As discussed previously, such views are underpinned by maturational theory which is considered problematic by some researchers (Connolly, 2004; Morrison, 2007) and early childhood specialists (NAECSSDE, 2000). The concept of Transition classes and programs appears to be a relatively unresearched area in Australia. As such, there is little known about its existence or practice in Australian schools.

#### ***2.3.4 Alternatives to repeating children at Pre-school***

The OECD argues, from data gathered worldwide, that the prevalence of repeating children at school in “any education system is more a manifestation of failure than an initiative likely to generate success” (1998, p. 21). There are other countries in the world where repeating children at school is not practised, including developed countries such as Japan and Finland, where the educational systems are considered to be among the best in the world (OECD, 1998). In countries where grade retention is not practised, such as Finland and Japan, achievement among its students is generally not lesser than other countries (OECD, 1998). This would have to “cast serious doubt on the effectiveness of repetition as an educationally approved approach” to addressing underachievement at, or unreadiness for, school (OECD, 1998, p. 21). As a result of increasing evidence to suggest that grade retention is an ineffective approach to low school achievement, it “has been abandoned by some countries – including Denmark, Greece, Ireland, Norway and the United Kingdom” (Kovacs, 1998, p. 2).

More recent indicators from the OECD confirm that the achievement level is relatively high amongst students in countries, such as Japan and Finland, where repeating children at school is never or rarely practised. The school achievement indicators have been drawn from PISA, a program of the OECD set up to measure student achievement across a range of countries worldwide. In the PISA 2000 and PISA 2003 assessments, students aged 15 years were tested in

reading, mathematics, science and problem solving literacy (OECD, 2003). The results were then collated and compared across countries (OECD, 2003). Results from the PISA assessments scores showed that in countries such as in Finland and Japan, students received among the highest scores on PISA assessments (Dawkins, 2007). Despite the fact that interventions, such as school and Pre-school retention are never or rarely practised in Finland or Japan (OECD, 1998), students from such countries received assessment scores that are among the highest in the world.

As the ranking of scores was obtained from an Australian source (Dawkins, 2007), they have been assembled in Table 2.2 to provide a comparison with Australian schools. Table 2.2 shows a comparison of the average or mean scores of students aged 15 years from various countries in the world (Dawkins, 2007, p.10; OECD, 2003). While the scores are mainly from OECD countries, other non-OECD countries (identified by italics) have been included as well. Finland and Japan as well as Australia and the United States have been highlighted for easy reference.

**Table 2.2 Mean Performances in PISA Assessments - Country Rankings**

	Reading PISA 2000	Mathematics PISA 2003	Science PISA 2003	Problem Solving PISA 2003
Behind	<b>Finland</b>	<i>Hong Kong-China</i> <b>Finland</b> Korea Netherlands	<b>Finland</b> <b>Japan</b> <i>Hong Kong-China</i> Korea	Korea <i>Hong Kong-China</i> <b>Finland</b> <b>Japan</b>
Australia's Rank	2 <sup>nd</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>
Tied With	Canada New Zealand <b>Australia</b> Ireland <i>Hong Kong-China</i> Korea United Kingdom <b>Japan</b> Sweden	<i>Liechtenstein</i> <b>Japan</b> Canada Belgium <i>Macao-China</i> Switzerland <b>Australia</b> New Zealand Czech Republic	<i>Liechtenstein</i> <b>Australia</b> <i>Macao-China</i> Netherlands Czech Republic New Zealand Canada Switzerland	New Zealand <i>Macao-China</i> <i>Liechtenstein</i> <b>Australia</b> Canada Belgium Switzerland Netherlands
Ahead of	Austria Belgium Iceland Norway France <b>United States</b> Denmark Switzerland Spain Czech Republic Italy Germany <i>Liechtenstein</i> Hungary Poland Greece Portugal <i>Russian Fed</i> <i>Latvia</i> <i>Israel</i> Luxembourg <i>Thailand</i> <i>Bulgaria</i> <i>Romania</i> Mexico <i>Argentina</i> <i>Chile</i> <i>Brazil</i> <i>FYR Macedonia</i> <i>Indonesia</i> <i>Albania</i> <i>Peru</i>	Iceland Denmark France Sweden Austria Germany Ireland Slovak Republic Norway Luxembourg Poland Hungary Spain <i>Latvia</i> <b>United States</b> <i>Russian Fed</i> Portugal Italy Greece <i>Serbia</i> Turkey <i>Uruguay</i> <i>Thailand</i> Mexico <i>Indonesia</i> <i>Brazil</i>	France Belgium Sweden Ireland Hungary Germany Poland Slovak Republic Iceland <b>United States</b> Austria <i>Russian Fed</i> <i>Latvia</i> Spain Italy Norway Luxembourg Greece Denmark Portugal <i>Uruguay</i> <i>Serbia</i> Turkey Thailand Mexico <i>Indonesia</i> <i>Brazil</i> <i>Tunisia</i>	France Czech Rep Denmark Germany Sweden Austria Iceland Hungary Ireland Luxembourg Slovak Rep Norway Poland <i>Latvia</i> Spain <i>Russian Fed</i> <b>United States</b> Portugal Italy Greece <i>Thailand</i> <i>Serbia</i> <i>Uruguay</i> Turkey Mexico <i>Indonesia</i> <i>Tunisia</i>

The most recent results from PISA assessments conducted in 2006 revealed similar results, particularly in regard to Finland (OECD, 2007). Finnish students were the top performers in science, among the top performers with Korea, Chinese Taipei and Hong Kong China in mathematics and ranked second in reading after Korea. While Japan's rankings were lower in 2006 than they were in 2003, they were rated "statistically significantly above the OECD average" in science and mathematics (OECD, 2007, pp. 22, 47).

It is interesting to note that the United States, where a considerable amount of educational investment is directed towards grade retention, was rated as "statistically significantly below the average" in science and mathematics (OECD, 2007, pp. 22, 47). No scores were available for the United States for reading. Results drawn from the PISA 2000, 2003 and 2006 assessments of reading, mathematics, science and problem solving literacy of children aged 15 years (OECD, 2003, 2007) may call into question the educational benefits of school and Pre-school retention when countries such as Finland do not practice it and consistently have among the highest educational outcomes in the world. While it is acknowledged that other factors are likely to impact on Finland's high educational outcomes, it has nevertheless shown that it is possible to achieve high educational outcomes without the use of grade retention and its associated practices.

#### **2.4 Identifiable Groups of Children Associated with Pre-school Retention Practices**

Pre-school retention and its related practices are generally seen as a way of addressing low school achievement and readiness for school. While Kovacs agrees that retention is "a common way of tackling low achievement", she argues that it is generally offered to "vulnerable children" from particular social groups (1998, p. 1). In the United States, such groups have included children relatively young for their year level, boys and children from low-income and ethnic minority groups (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Shepard & Smith, 1989, 2004).

While much of the available data on repeating children at Pre-school has been drawn from the United States, data from Australia, particularly data from the case studies to be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, reveals a more complex picture of repeating children at Pre-school in Australia. Although similar groups of children in the United States are repeated in Australia, not all practices related to repeating, or perceptions of these practices, fall as neatly into the categories offered by researchers in the United States. Further, many of the narratives from the United States regarding grade retention and its related practices appear to be underpinned by narratives of underachievement, focusing on children's perceived deficits. As discussed previously, and as will become more apparent in Chapters 5 and 6, many parents and teachers in Australia, while drawing

on a range of practices related to grade retention to support children's learning at school, appear to perceive such practices from an aspirational perspective rather than a deficit one. In this section, the assumptions about which groups of children are more likely to be impacted by repeating and its related practices in Australia are based on research mainly from the United States. Thus the groups of children more often given Pre-school retention practices in the study were assumed to be children younger for their year level, boys, low income children and Indigenous children. Each group will be discussed in turn.

#### ***2.4.1 Younger children***

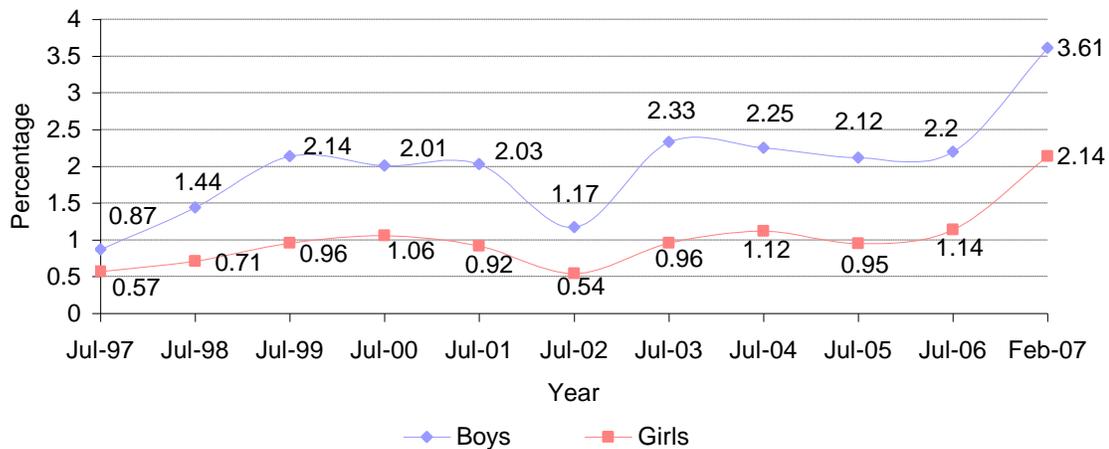
Younger children are more likely to be considered unready for school (Dockett & Perry, 2006; McGrath, 2006) and thus repeated at Pre-school (NAECSSDE, 2000). Decisions over which children are considered 'younger' or 'older' by teachers and parents can be quite subjective. When parents or teachers talk about 'younger children' they generally refer to children whose birth date is close to the cut off date for school entry, which varies from state to state in Australia and may vary in other countries. What might be considered close to the cut-off date also varies. In some cases, children whose birthday is up to six months before the cut-off date for school entry may be considered 'younger', but in most cases it is more likely to refer to children whose birthdays are closer to the cut-off date for school entry.

The view that younger children are less ready for school is more often influenced by the child development theories of Piaget (Morrison, 2007) which will be addressed more fully in Chapter 3. Educators generally believe that younger children are academically and socially disadvantaged in comparison to their year level peers (Griffin & Harvey, 1995). As discussed in Section 2.3.1, some studies have shown that while some differences in achievement between younger children and older children may exist when they commence school, the differences are minimal and diminish by mid-primary school (Grissom, 2004; Jimerson, 2001a; Shepard & Smith, 1988). While a second year of Pre-school for younger children to prevent possible school failure is undoubtedly well-intentioned by teachers and parents, the literature (Hong & Raudenbush, 2002) and current understandings of how children learn (Morrison, 2007) do not support this view.

#### ***2.4.2 Boys: Immaturity and behaviour issues***

Research in the United States (Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005) and data from Australia (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003) show that boys are more often repeated at Pre-school than girls.

While there appears to be more available literature in the United States regarding Pre-school retention rates, the data available from Education Queensland offers some indicators regarding trends in repeating boys and girls at Pre-school in Australia. Figure 2.5 shows the percentage of boys and girls repeated in Queensland schools from July 1997 to February 2007.



**Figure 2.5 Repeated Boys and Girls Aged 5 Years, Queensland State Schools, 1997 – 2007**

Figure 2.5 shows that while the difference between the percentage of repeated boys compared with the percentage of repeated girls was slightly less in some years, the overall trend indicates that boys are nearly twice as likely to be repeated in Queensland state Pre-schools as girls. There appears to be no other comparative data on the percentage of boys and girls repeated at Pre-school in Australia. In the United States, Mortenson argues that for every 100 girls who repeat Kindergarten, 194 boys repeat (2006).

Research on repeating children has consistently shown that boys are repeated far more often at Pre-school than girls due to the perception that boys are less ready for school than girls (New South Wales Centre for Parenting and Research (NSWCPR), 2003; Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; McGrath, 2006) because of their comparative ‘immaturity’ (Griffin & Harvey, 1995). Another reason offered for repeating boys is their “social behaviour” and in particular, their unacceptable behaviour at school (Reynolds, 1992, p. 102).

In one Australian study, Childs and McKay found that “Low Income boys [...] display(ed) significantly poorer learning behaviours at age 5 in terms of distractible behaviour, compared with Middle Income boys and with girls generally” (2001, p. 303). Although the study indicated that

learning and behaviour problems may be related to SES, Childs and McKay argue that it is “an oversimplification to blame family socialisation” as the main cause (2001, p. 312). From their studies, Childs and McKay concluded that boys’ “lack of self regulation” appeared more to be “determined by gender attributions” rather than SES related factors (2001, p. 312).

Current research reveals that boys’ lower levels of achievement appear to extend well beyond the Pre-school years. As a whole, boys fare less well than girls at all levels of schooling (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2002; Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), 2003a, 2003b; Lingard, Martino, Mills & Bahr, 2002). Some researchers (Alloway, 1999; Childs & McKay, 2001) argue that while gender may impact on school achievement as indicated by the gap between boys’ and girls’ achievements at school, socio-economic background also appears to be related to both girls’ and boys’ achievements at school, as indicated by the fact that not all boys are underachieving at school and not all girls are doing well at school (Alloway, 1999; Childs & McKay, 2001; Connolly, 2004). For instance, boys from higher socio-economic groups generally have higher achievement scores than girls from lower socio-economic groups (Alloway, 1999; Childs & McKay, 2001). It is therefore not possible to make generalisations about all boys or all girls.

Explanations for boys’ generally lower levels of achievement and readiness for school in relation to girls have been sought for all levels of schooling. The impact of dominant forms of masculinity that influence boys’ lives generally and some boys’ lives more particularly, namely boys from low SES and some ethnic minority groups may be related to boys’ achievement levels and readiness for school. The different masculinities taken up by boys from different social groups may explain the varying achievement gaps between boys from different social classes and ethnic groups. It may also explain the comparatively narrow gender gap between middle-class girls and middle-class boys and the comparatively wide gender gap between working-class girls and working-class boys. However, when discourses and their resulting practices taken up by boys or girls from any social group are incongruent with the dominant discourses of schooling, children from any social group are less likely to achieve at any level of schooling.

In Australia, Alloway has researched the area of masculinities and young boys’ behaviours and offers some explanations for boys’ unacceptable and particularly aggressive behaviours at school (1995). Alloway suggests that one of the more dominant forms of masculinity in our society is based on “violent domination and control” (1995, p. 82). This dominant form of masculinity not

only pervades every level of society but has also been marketed through the media, toys and electronic games (Alloway, 1995). When the more dominant forms of masculinity are sanctioned and promoted in society, and through forms that are accessible to children, it is “not surprising that at school, boys’ modes of behaviour reflect the masculine values dominant in our society” (O’Doherty, 1994, p. 25). Because the more dominant and aggressive forms of masculinity have been considered by many in society as ‘natural’, most boys will already have taken up this form of masculinity to some degree by the time they enter Pre-school (Davies, 1989).

The more dominant forms of masculinity in society that favour violence, domination, independence and control, however, are at odds with the practices of schooling that favour co-operation, obedience, diligence and adult control (Connolly, 2004; Cortis & Newmarch, 2000). Childs and McKay argue that more restrictive practices of schooling seem to present a greater challenge to boys who “have greater difficulty adjusting to the physically restrictive nature of the classroom [...] having to remain seated” and “attend to instructions and conform to rules” (1997, p. 39). Connolly’s study of boys aged 6 years in Ireland (2004) showed that the restrictive practices of the Year 1 classroom presented a much greater challenge for working-class boys than they did for middle-class boys. The more dominant forms of masculinity would appear to impact negatively on the achievements at school for boys generally but for some boys more particularly.

There is a need, therefore, to problematise the notion of masculinity and encourage both boys and teaching professionals to question the dominant forms of masculinity that prevail in society as a whole and at all levels of schooling. As boys and professionals are encouraged to question such dominant discourses that impact negatively on boys’ attitudes to learning, through reports such as *Success for Boys* (DEET, 2005b), *Boys’ Education Lighthouse Schools (BELS) Programme* (DEET, 2003a); *Educating Boys: Issues and Information* (DEET, 2003b), *Boys: Getting it right* (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 2002), *Boys, literacy and schooling: expanding the repertoires of practice* (Alloway et al., 2002), *Rethinking gender in early childhood education* (McNaughton, 2000), *Boys and literacy* (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997), then it is likely that alternative ways of being might enhance boys’ achievements at school.

#### ***2.4.3 Children from low-income groups***

A search of the literature revealed that in Australia, data on grade retention and children’s SES status does not appear to be available. While Education Queensland collects retention data for Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, boys and girls, retention data on children in relation to

their SES status is not collected (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003). Although studies have shown that SES is a critical variable in relation to student outcomes (Alloway, 1999; Australia. DEST, 1997; Lokan, Greenwood, & Cresswell, 2001; Masters and Foster, 1997), it has not been considered in relation to repeating children at school in Australia.

The general pattern in Australia, where low SES children are more likely to have low levels of school achievement, follows the general pattern for international populations as a whole (Lokan et al., 2001). Children from low SES groups are more often among those children who are considered educationally disadvantaged (Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000). Collins et al. argue, “(E)ducational disadvantage is often understood as poor performance in all school leaving areas” (2000, p. 67). In the long term, educational disadvantage is generally expressed in terms of “being unable to convert one’s schooling into further training, education or secure work” (Collins et al., 2000, p. 67). Educational disadvantage may be evident even at the Pre-school level. Children from low SES backgrounds more often commence their Pre-school year with already lower levels of school readiness and achievement than children from higher SES backgrounds (Currie, 2004; Meyer, Princiotta, & Lanahan, 2004).

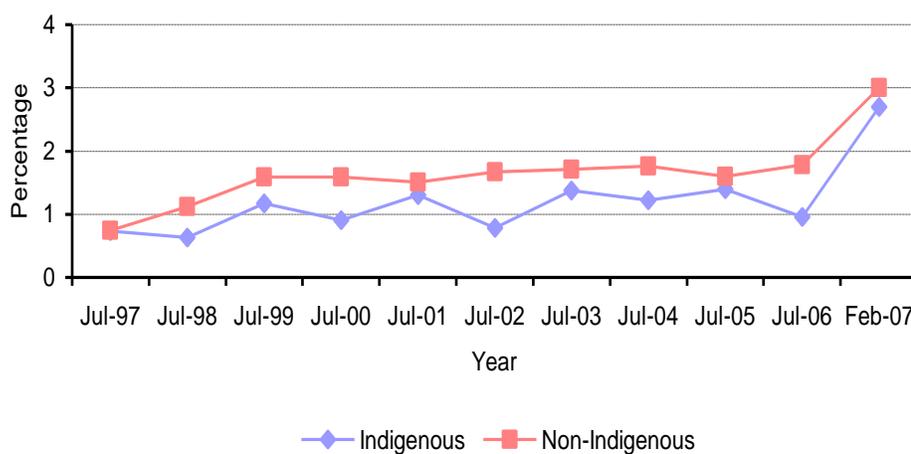
Evidence of the impact of SES on school achievement becomes apparent when testing commences in early schooling. In a review of literacy standards in Australia for Year 3 children, it was found that 12 percent of children from high SES status in contrast with 38 percent of children from low SES status did not meet the literacy benchmarks (DEST, 1997). Masters and Foster similarly found that children from low SES backgrounds have significantly lower levels of achievement in literacy compared with children from other backgrounds (1997). Freebody argues that “educational practices are nothing but social and cultural” (2003, p. 9). Social and linguistic practices valued in education are often more compatible with what is valued in the higher SES and often more dominant social groups, but may not be valued by other social groups (Comber and Hill, 2000; Freebody, 2003). This mismatch which impacts on children’s achievement at school will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3.

Studies from the United States have revealed that children from low-income groups are more likely to be repeated at school (NASP, 2003; Reynolds, 1992) and Pre-school (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). In the United States, Reynolds found that some school decisions to repeat children were strongly influenced by the child’s SES background (1992). He found that even when some children

from low SES backgrounds and particular ethnic groups preformed at the same year level as their peers, they were often retained simply because they were identified with particular social groups (Reynolds, 1992). Retaining certain groups of children has been considered a solution for addressing a wide range of perceived problems that these children might have besides academic ones (Reynolds, 1992).

#### ***2.4.4 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children***

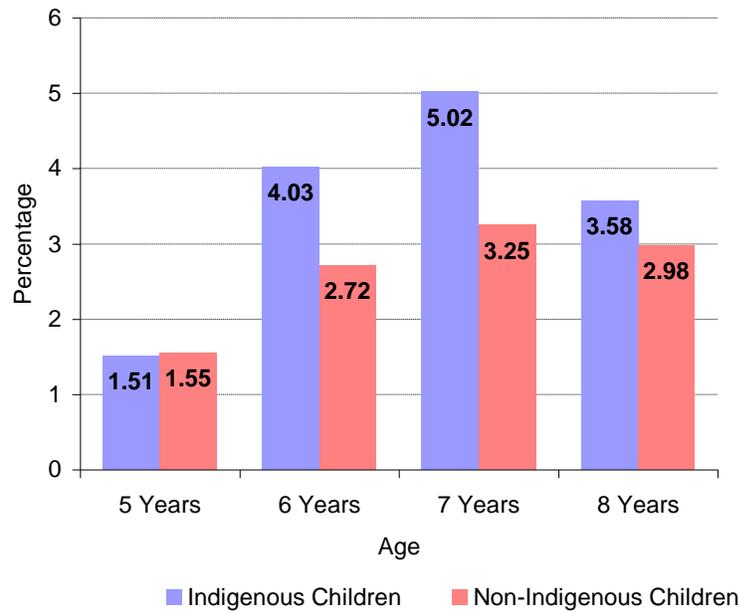
Concern has long existed over school achievement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who, as a group, have been considered disadvantaged in schooling (Banks, 2005; Department of Education Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Branch, Queensland, 1996). Data available from Education Queensland, as seen in Figure 2.6, shows that as a group, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or Indigenous children are less likely to repeat Pre-school than non-Indigenous children for each year from 1997 to 2007 (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003).



***Figure 2.6 Repeated Indigenous/Non-Indigenous Children Aged 5 Years, Queensland State Schools, 1997 – 2007***

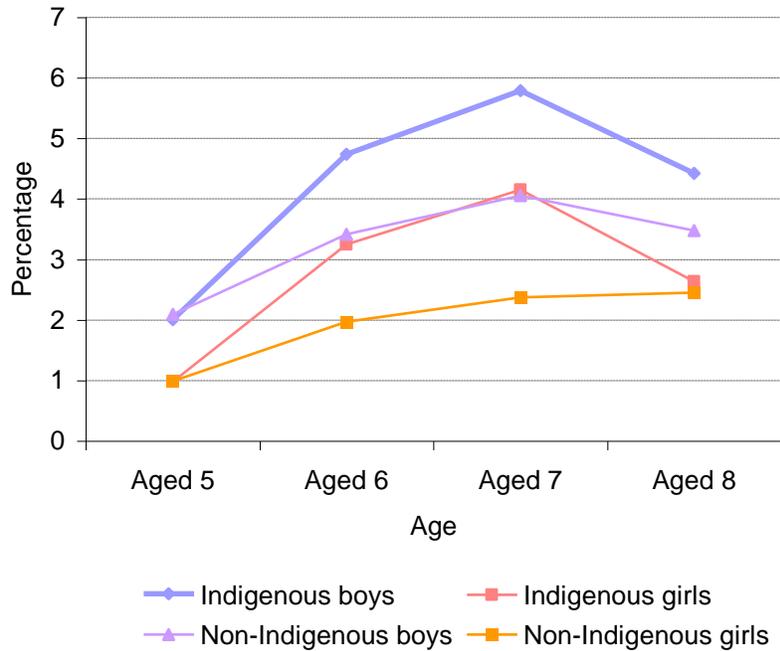
Given that Indigenous children, as a group, are often seen as being disadvantaged in education (MCEETYA, 2000), it is interesting that a practice that is considered by researchers in the United States as one that provides children with few advantages in education (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005) is generally employed for non-Indigenous children who are generally more advantaged in Education (MCEETYA, 2000). The findings from the case studies in Chapters 5 & 6 might reveal why this is the case.

However, in Years 1 to 3 at school, the reverse is true. Figure 2.7 shows the percentage of Indigenous children compared with non-Indigenous children aged 5 to 8 years who were repeated in Queensland schools in February 2001, the first year of the data collection stage.



***Figure 2.7 Repeated Indigenous/Non-Indigenous Children Aged 5 to 8 Years, Queensland State Schools, 2001***

While non-Indigenous children were marginally more likely than Indigenous children to be repeated at Pre-school, Indigenous children were more likely than non-Indigenous children to be repeated in Years 1 to 3. While both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children were more likely to be repeated at aged 7, 5.02% of Indigenous children compared with 3.25% of non-Indigenous children were repeated in Year 2 in 2001 in Queensland state schools.

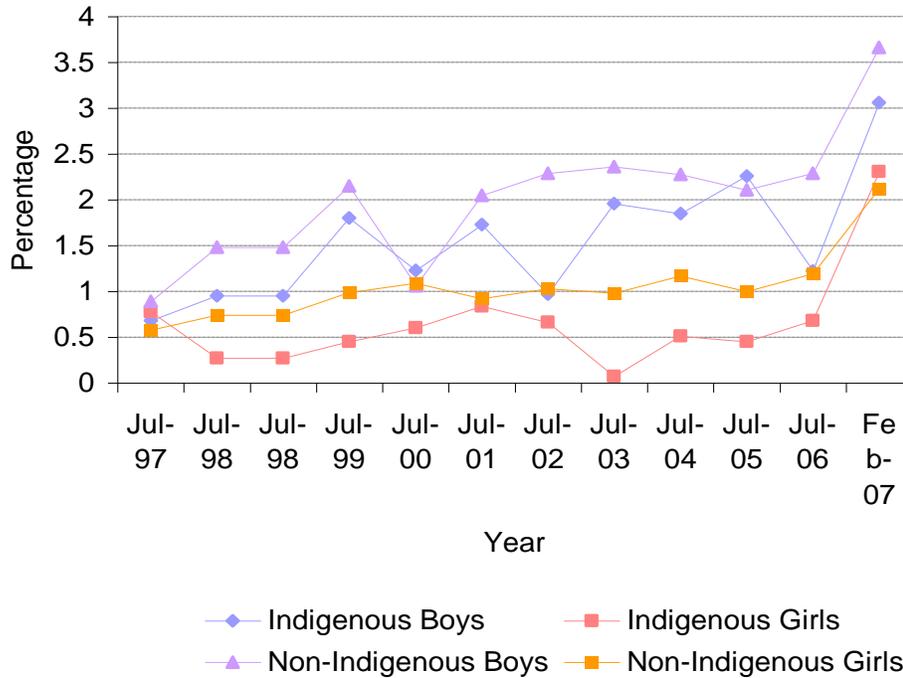


**Figure 2.8 Repeated Indigenous/Non-Indigenous Boys and Girls Aged 5 to 8 years, Queensland State Schools, 2001**

Data from the same group of children (Indigenous and non-Indigenous boys and girls aged 5 to 8 years) is further considered in Figure 2.8 in terms of gender. Figure 2.8 shows the percentage of Indigenous and non-Indigenous boys and girls aged 5 to 8 years who were repeated in Queensland schools in February 2001.

Figure 2.8 shows that Indigenous boys were most often repeated in Years 1 to 3 and non-Indigenous girls were least often repeated. Indigenous boys are more than twice as likely to be repeated as non-Indigenous girls in the early years of schooling. At Pre-school the reverse was true; non-Indigenous boys were the most often repeated group and Indigenous girls were the least often (although marginally) repeated group of children. When considered over the last decade the pattern is similar. Figure 2.9 shows the percentage of Indigenous and non-Indigenous boys and girls aged 5 years who were repeated at Pre-school in Queensland state schools between July 1997 and February 2007.

Figure 2.9 shows that between July 1997 and February 2007, non-Indigenous boys were the most likely group of children to be repeated at Pre-school and Indigenous girls the least likely group of children to be repeated at Pre-school. Further research in this area might indicate why this might be the case, particularly in regards to Indigenous girls.

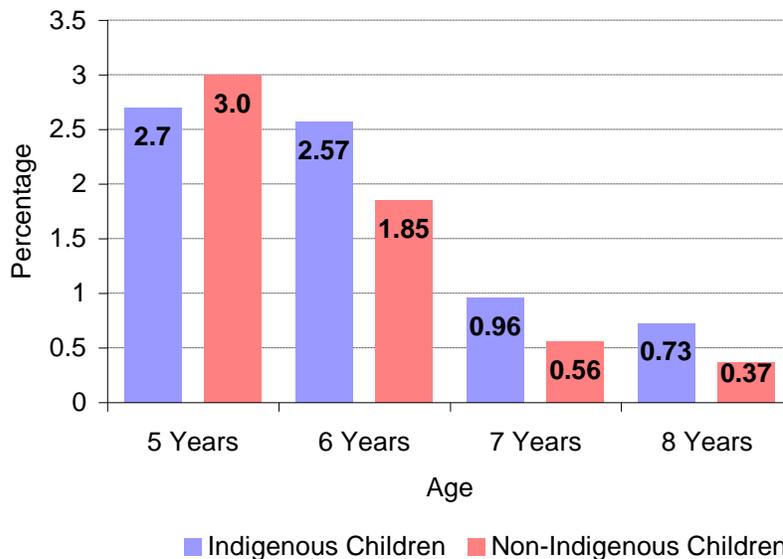


**Figure 2.9 Repeated Indigenous/Non-Indigenous Boys and Girls Aged 5 Years, Queensland State Schools, 1997 – 2007**

Thus, data from Education Queensland shows that generally, Indigenous children are less likely to be repeated at Pre-school than non-Indigenous children (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003) although this pattern is reversed from Years 1 to 3. Such findings were contrary to what was anticipated at the outset of the study. Data gathered from Education Queensland on repeating children in the early years of school has been included in this section to support findings in the case studies that will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. The case studies will show that the issue of repeating children at Pre-school in Queensland schools offers a more complex picture of repeating children at Pre-school than was anticipated at the outset of the study. The findings from the case studies in Chapters 5 and 6 will show that teachers in Queensland schools are finding alternative ways of addressing the learning needs of Indigenous children other than by repeating them at Pre-school.

Figure 2.10 shows more recent data available in 2007 on the percentage of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children aged 5 to 8 years repeated in Queensland schools. Figure 2.10 is an update on the data shown in Figure 2.7. In comparing the data from Figure 2.7 with Figure 2.10, a changing pattern for repeating children in the early years of schooling can be seen. Figure 2.10 shows that while children were more likely to be repeated at Pre-school and less likely to be repeated in Years

1 to 3 in 2007 than they were in 2001, similar patterns for repeating Indigenous and non-Indigenous children still remain. Data from both Figures 2.7 and 2.10 shows that non-Indigenous children are more likely to be repeated at Pre-school than Years 1 to 3 and Indigenous children are more likely to be repeated in Years 1 to 3 than at Pre-school.



**Figure 2.10 Comparison - Indigenous/Non-Indigenous Repeated Children Aged 5 to 8 Years, Queensland State Schools, 2007**

Indigenous children may be less likely to be repeated at Pre-school than non-Indigenous children as well, partly because, as Dockett, Mason and Perry argue, “Indigenous students are less likely to participate in Pre-schooling than their non-Indigenous peers” (2006, p. 1). This finding by Dockett et al. among Aboriginal children in New South Wales is similar to Taylor’s findings (2004) in the Thamarrurr Region Northern Territory and MCEETYA’s findings (2000).

Data available from ABS indicates that in 2001, 45.9% of Indigenous children participated in Pre-school education compared with 56.9% of non-Indigenous children (2004). More recent data gathered between 2004 and 2005, indicates that the number of Indigenous children enrolled in Australian Pre-schools (children aged 3 – 5) has decreased slightly<sup>19</sup>, while non-Indigenous enrolments have increased by 4% (ABS, 2007). Although such participation rates indicate the number of children enrolled in school or Pre-school, they do not indicate how many children

<sup>19</sup> The percentage of decrease was not offered.

actually attend school or Pre-school regularly. One factor working against Indigenous children's participation in Pre-school education may be the non-compulsory requirement of Pre-school education in Queensland, as well as in other Australian states ( The State of Queensland, Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2002a). This fact alone may create the perception that Pre-school has less value and has little impact on children's success at school. However, studies in Australia (Thorpe et al., 2004) and overseas reveal quite the opposite is true (Mustard, 2006; Schweinhart et al., 2005). Pre-school participation has been shown to have a positive impact on school achievement (Schweinhart et al., 2005) and may prevent possible interventions such as grade retention at a later date. Researchers such as Dockett et al. (2006) have considered ways to better support Indigenous children's learning at school.

In a study of transition to school for Australian Aboriginal children, Dockett et al. looked at how the participation rates of Aboriginal children and their families might be better supported (2006). Although the study was conducted with children who commenced formal schooling, similar principles are likely to apply to children commencing Pre-school. Dockett et al. found that there was a need to make the presence of Indigenous children in the school more visible through displays that reflected their culture. Also, the presence of Indigenous teachers, Teacher-aides and general staff was considered to encourage the participation of children and their families in their children's schooling. Dockett, et al. found that such strategies were "crucial to helping make young Aboriginal children feel as if they belong in the school environment" (2006, p. 142).

The relationship between children's positive outcomes at school and parental involvement has been long documented (Toomey, 1989). While the perception has existed in schools that Indigenous parents have little interest in their children's schooling, Dockett et al. noted that the Aboriginal families in their study understood the need for family involvement in schooling and that this involvement was linked to positive educational outcomes for their children (2006). Schools that appeared to have more success with involving Indigenous families in preparing children for schooling were those that offered less structured and more relaxed activities where the parents could interact freely with others such as 'open days' (Dockett et al., 2006). 'Open days' included such activities as opening the classroom to families as well as the children on the first day of each term so that everyone had the opportunity to become familiar with the school environment (Dockett et al., 2006).

The importance of cultural studies in the curriculum to motivate, increase attendance and improve self-identity of Indigenous children of all levels of schooling has been noted in further studies (Bourke, Rigby, & Burden, 2000; Kale, 1995). Incorporating children's cultural backgrounds and different orientations to learning into school practices has long been recognised as necessary for both early and long term participation in schooling (QSA, 2007; Department of Education Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Branch, Queensland, 1996; The State of Queensland, Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2002a, 2002b).

Studies have shown also, that the Pre-school literacy experiences of Indigenous children may not always match those available at school and may not be valued in the same way as those of the dominant cultural groups (Kale, 1995; MCEETYA, 2000). Kale found in her study of literacy and oracy practices of Torres Strait Islander families, that although literacy practices were present, they were different (1995). Although some teachers may perceive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children as having deficits in literacy experiences, studies have shown that their communication skills can be quite strong (Kale, 1995; Malin, 1990). Teachers' perceptions of Indigenous children's low literacy levels may also stem from Indigenous children's use of their own dialects or kriols rather than Standard Australian English. Dockett et al. argue that many teachers may believe that children are using 'bad English' instead of their own dialect or kriol (2006). There is a current emphasis in some schools to incorporate Indigenous languages, culture, history and civics programs into their curricula. The *National Statement of Principles and Standards for More Culturally Inclusive Schooling in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* argues that a curriculum should be provided for young Indigenous students that avoids discrimination, allows children to have the same learning opportunities as non-Indigenous students within their own cultural beliefs and practices and enables them to value and understand their own Indigenous cultures and knowledge (MCEETYA, 2000). Such policies may increase the participation rates of Indigenous children at Pre-school.

Although education departments may offer the view that Indigenous children's prior-to-school experiences need to be taken into account and valued as a resource on which to build further learning (QSA, 2007), Dockett et al. noted that the Aboriginal parents believed that their children had a range of competencies that were valued in their culture and in life generally, but not at school (2006). Malin (1990) reports similar findings in a study she conducted of young Aboriginal children in Victoria. Although the children in her study appeared to be socially competent, engaging with and supporting other children in the classroom, the teacher appeared to place less value on such competencies; valuing instead the capacity for children to work quietly and independently (Malin,

1990). Dockett et al. argue that schools need to support Indigenous children and their families by recognising children's strengths and prior learning experiences and incorporating children's learning at school (2006). When these factors are considered, Indigenous children may be less likely to be repeated at school or pre-school.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

Chapter 2 has considered the context of schooling in Australia that may have contributed to school and Pre-school retention practices. Available data on Pre-school retention, drawn from Education Queensland represents a significant finding in the study as there has been very little available data on Pre-school retention in Australia (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003). This data was used in the literature review to lay an empirical base for the study, providing evidence for the practice of Pre-school retention in Queensland where the study was conducted.

Although the comparative Pre-school retention rates may appear to be lower in Queensland in Australia than North Carolina in the United States, the practice of Pre-school retention in Queensland schools still represents a concern. The basis of this concern, one of the prime concerns of the study, was detailed in school and Pre-school retention literature drawn mainly from the United States. The literature provides empirical evidence for the ineffectiveness and possible harm to children who are repeated at school or Pre-school (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Jimerson, 2001a, 2001b, 2004; Shepard, 2004).

While the study focuses on Pre-school retention, a range of related Pre-school retention practices were considered including delayed school entry and returning children to Pre-school from Year 1. Transition classes were considered as an alternative to Pre-school retention. Findings of the study in Chapters 5 and 6, however, show that teachers in some Queensland schools appear to be devising different ways of preparing children for school other than repeating them. The final section of the chapter considers the groups of children who may be the target of some Pre-school retention practices. They include children younger for their year level, boys and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. On the basis of international data (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Reynolds, 1992), it would also be important to investigate the relationship between Pre-school retention and children's SES status.

While Chapter 2 considers Pre-school retention practices and the groups of children who are more often the target of these practices, the next chapter, Chapter 3, considers why such practices might be employed for different groups of children. Two different theories have been drawn on to explain why Pre-school retention practices might be employed for particular groups of children.

# CHAPTER 3

## PRE-SCHOOL RETENTION PRACTICES: THE EXPLANATIONS

### **3.1 Introduction**

To understand why some groups of children were less likely to experience success at Pre-school and school, explanations from the wider field in education were initially used. Because children's failure at school has often resulted in their being repeated at school (OECD, 1998), theories of school success and failure were used to understand why teachers and parents employed Pre-school retention practices. While theories of school success and failure were initially used to analyse the case study data, it became apparent during the second stage of data analysis (which will be more fully explained in the next chapter) that early childhood teachers drew on 'school-ready' discourse to explain children's 'failure' at Pre-school and subsequent need to repeat. At that stage, theories of school readiness (Meisels, 1999) became more prominent in analysing the case study data. Again, much of the literature framing the discussion about theories of school readiness and theories of school success and failure has been drawn from the United States. Where possible and where it has been made available, Australian sources and examples are used.

Section 3.2 discusses school readiness. Section 3.2.1 defines school readiness and Section 3.2.2 looks at why many believe it is important. The different theoretically based ways of understanding school readiness are considered in Section 3.1.3, while Section 3.1.4 looks at the domains of school readiness. While many of these explanations are clearly applicable to the United States, the literature is less clear about their applicability to the Australian context. Theories of school success and failure are discussed in Section 3.2. Sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 consider genetic and cultural deficit theories respectively and trace the development of such theories that have underpinned and guided the practices of governments, education departments and school personnel in preparing children for school. Although theory development is presented from an historical perspective and incorporates earlier theories that were underpinned by deficit discourse, current talk of teachers may still be underpinned by deficit beliefs about some groups of children.

School-ready discourse and how it might be veiled in deficit understandings of some children's readiness for school is explained in Section 3.2.3 while Section 3.2.4 considers the complexity of the current study from a theoretical perspective. While some research on Pre-school retention practices has equated such practices with deficit discourse, results of the study's findings appear more complex and do not fit quite as easily into the categories traditionally offered by some researchers. Section 3.2.5 considers alternative explanations and practices that cater for children's low levels of readiness for, and achievement at, school.

## **3.2 School Readiness**

### ***3.2.1 What is school readiness?***

Taylor et al. see school readiness as a “controversial, complex and ambiguous construct [... which] raises the question, ‘Ready for what?’” (2004, p. 25). Different understandings of school readiness address this question in different ways. ARACY argue “this question has been answered in two significantly different ways – in terms of *readiness to learn* and in terms of *readiness for school* (Kagan, 1990, 1992)” (2004, p. 25). When readiness is defined in terms of *readiness to learn*, chronological age becomes important (ARACY, 2007). When it is defined in terms of *readiness for school*, readiness is “conceptualised in terms of specific skills and competencies that [can] be measured and assessed against established norms and standards” (ARACY, 2007, p. 4). In both cases, the focus is largely on the child to be ‘ready for school’ or ‘school-ready’. More recent conceptualisations of school readiness have moved the responsibility for school readiness to include not only the child but also the family, school and the community (ARACY, 2007). Generally, teachers and parents “make decisions about enrolling a child in year 1, according to their perceptions of a child’s maturational readiness and relative to the type of program offered in the classroom” (Taylor et al., 2004, p. 25). The theories underpinning perceptions of school readiness will be elaborated in Section 3.2.3.

### ***3.2.2 Why is school readiness important?***

Regardless of whichever view of school readiness is held by governments, education departments, parents or teachers, school readiness is generally seen as important because it is foundational to children’s success at school and to life opportunities generally (ARACY, 2007). For instance, this view gained particular prominence when Phillips’ research in the United States (1990) established that high quality Pre-schooling made a significant difference to educational outcomes for children from less privileged backgrounds. Phillips’ research has led to further research in Canada (McCain

& Mustard, 1999) and the United States (Schweinhart et al., 2005; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997) into school readiness and the development of early intervention programs, especially for children from low socio-economic groups.

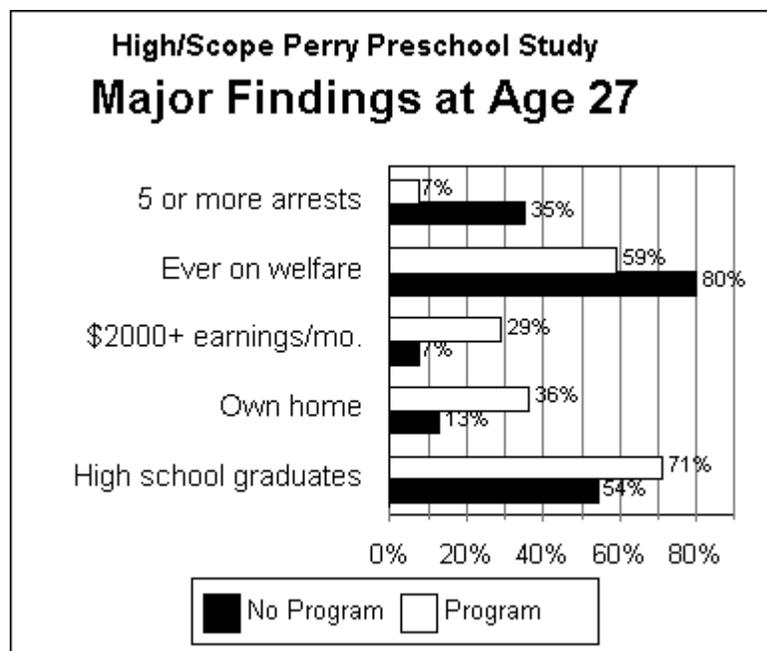
Through their studies in Canada in early childhood development, McCain and Mustard (1999) have drawn on “powerful new evidence from neuroscience” to support evidence in their own studies that learning in the early years is critical and foundational to all subsequent learning in later life (p. 5). They argue that “the early years of development from conception to age six, particularly for the first three years, set the base for competence and coping skills that will affect learning, behavior and health throughout life” (McCain & Mustard, 1999, p. 5).

Thus “early life experiences, both positive and negative, can set patterns on which school and lifelong learning and behaviour are built” (Mustard, McCain, & Bertrand, 2000, p. 2). Mustard argues that patterns set by “experience-based brain development in the early years (conception to age 6)” lay foundations that affect all “learning, health and behaviour” throughout life (Mustard, 2006, p. 2). Early foundations are particularly critical for language development (Mustard, 2006). Mustard’s research suggests that the degree of exposure to reading and talking in the early years of development “affects learning in the school system” (2006, p. 31) and “has a significant effect” on children’s “verbal skills and language at later stages of development” (Mustard, 2006, p. 26).

Longitudinal studies have further supported arguments for investment in early childhood education. Beginning in 1967, the High Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison study selected 123 African American children born in poverty in the United States and considered to be educationally ‘at risk’ (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). At ages 3 and 4, the children were randomly placed in two groups; one group received a high quality<sup>20</sup> Pre-school program (High/Scope curriculum) and the other group did not (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). In reporting on the study, Schweinhart et al. found that children who participated in a high quality Pre-school program at ages 3 and 4 had “better life outcomes as adults than children without exposure to the high quality program” (2005, p. 1). At age 27, 95 percent of the children who participated in a high quality Pre-school program were interviewed. The data from these interviews along with additional data gathered from school records, social services and arrest records were collated. The findings can be seen in Figure 3.1.

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<sup>20</sup>A ‘high quality’ Pre-school program or High/Scope curriculum as defined by Schweinhart and Weikart (1997) emphasises the use of a curriculum model that promotes child-initiated activities as opposed to the use of Direct Instruction. A ‘high quality’ Pre-school program promotes planning, reasoning and a range of social skills.



**Figure 3.1 Major Findings of High/Scope Perry Preschool Study**

As can be seen from Figure 3.1, children who participated in the program had fewer arrests, higher earnings, greater property wealth and higher educational outcomes. The better social, economic and educational outcomes were attributed to “the emphasis on planning, social reasoning and other social objectives” that were found in the High/Scope curriculum but not in the Direct Instruction curriculum (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997, p. 117). The High/Scope curriculum, as compared to the Direct Instruction curriculum, encouraged children to take control of and accept responsibility for their own learning through hands-on learning experiences. Teachers were seen as facilitators and a resource to guide and support children’s learning. Much emphasis has been placed on the type of program used to achieve the positive outcomes of the High/Scope study. Schweinhart et al. argue that high quality Pre-school programs “empower children, by encouraging them to initiate and carry out their own learning activities and make independent decisions” (2005, p. 117). The Queensland Studies Authority (1998, 2005, 2007) advise a similar pedagogical approach and curriculum model for learning in the early years (P-3). Findings from the High/Scope study revealed that effective early learning programs may enable ‘at risk’ children to develop a sense of agency over their learning at school and develop skills to support life-long learning (Schweinhart et al., 2005).

The financial investment in early childhood education has reaped long term financial dividends (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). It was estimated that over the children’s lifetimes, the public received back “an estimated \$7.16 for every dollar originally invested” in the Pre-school program

(Schweinhart et al., 2005, p. 1). Such programs are considered a viable economic investment, for the children personally and for the country nationally. By contrast, during 2001 – 2002, the United States state of North Carolina spent \$51,468,928 on repeating children at Kindergarten (PRF, 2003). Thus, investment in quality early learning programs as described by Schweinhart and Weikart (1997) and promoted by the QSA (2007) may be a more positive and effective alternative to Pre-school retention, not only financially, but for children personally as well.

Findings from the above studies (McCain & Mustard, 1999; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997) clearly support the need for early learning programs before children commence formal schooling, particularly programs that develop children's social competencies. As children's early learning experiences "set them on life trajectories that, over time, become increasingly difficult to modify", ensuring children have the best possible Pre-school foundations has become the focus of concern (ARACY, 2007, p. 5). The question remains for governments, education departments, teachers and parents: Which is the best way to ensure all children are 'ready' for success at school?

### ***3.2.3 Theories of school readiness***

Age has been the officially used criterion for determining children's readiness for school in Australia (NSWCPR, 2003). In most Australian states, including Queensland, children start school at approximately five years of age (Crnic & Lamberty, 1994; The State of Queensland, Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2002a). However, what it means to be 'ready' for school has been "interpreted differently in different contexts" (Lewitt & Baker, 1995, p. 128) and according to different theoretical views of school readiness (ARACY, 2007). Thus children may be considered 'ready' or 'unready' for school depending on which understanding of school readiness is held by parents and teachers.

Based on teachers' understandings of school readiness in the United States, Meisels has constructed four theoretically different ways of understanding school readiness (1999). They include nativist/maturationist, empiricist/environmentalist, social constructivist and interactionist. Although Meisels (1999) and Dockett and Perry (2007) have identified four ways of understanding and assessing school readiness, de Cos (1997) sees social constructivist and interactionist views as being similar. Because of the considerable overlap in these categories, a combined constructivist/interactionist understanding of school readiness will be used to analyse the case studies. While the discussion in this section will also include other sources in the literature, Meisels' conceptual framework for school readiness will be used as a basis for the discussion.

### **A maturationist perspective**

From a nativist/maturationist or maturationist perspective, Janus and Offord argue that readiness is seen as developing within the child with minimal influence from the child's environment (2000). Based on the influential child development theories of Piaget, development is seen as unfolding within the child according to an inner biological time clock that no amount of external intervention can alter (Dockett & Perry, 2007). According to Piaget's theories of child development, all children develop along sequential, predictable and universal pathways that pass through four well-defined stages (Morrison, 2007). This view, which also includes the belief that children are generally capable of activities only within their current stage of development, has led to the widespread notion of 'developmentally-appropriate practice' which has been widely adopted by many early childhood educators, particularly in western societies (National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in the State Departments of Education (NAEYC/NAECSSDE), 1990). The notion of developmentally-appropriate practice has simultaneously led to the equally popular notion of children being 'ready for school'.

Within a maturationist perspective, teachers are advised to offer particular forms of learning only when children are 'ready'. Because readiness is believed to be acquired internally, intervention programs are considered to have minimal impact on hastening or even influencing the child's development. The NSWCPRE says that teachers and parents who hold maturationist views see that interventions such as Pre-school retention practices allow 'more time' for children to develop so that they will be 'more ready' for school (2003).

The child development theories of Piaget that underpin these beliefs have raised a number of concerns. Methodologically, recent studies questioning the artificial nature of Piaget's initial experiments and tests have shown that they have seriously underestimated the cognitive abilities and competence of young children (Connolly, 2004). The understanding that development occurs within the child has led to the belief that all children pass through similar and fixed developmental stages which are believed to be minimally impacted by children's social environment. This view, generalised from research on white western middle-class children, may not be applicable to all children from other social and cultural groups. Further, the developmental pathway that leads to rational scientific thinking is based predominantly on western middle-class thinking and, similarly, may not be applicable to all social groups and cultures. Because development is believed to occur within all children along a fixed sequential pathway, the impact of children's social contexts in their

acquisition of knowledge has been minimised. Current understandings of child development, which emphasise the impact of children's social contexts on learning and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) argue instead, that such learning and development takes place as children interact in their social and cultural environments, constructing knowledge that is relevant and significant to them.

### **An empiricist/environmentalist perspective**

The NSW CPR has conceptualised an empiricist/environmentalist view of readiness as focusing on measurable evidence-based learning, such as knowing shapes and colours and being able to write one's name (2003). This view is largely taken up by teachers who use direct instruction to guide children's learning through sequential steps; the goal being to prepare children for Year 1. De Cos argues that educators who adopt this view of school readiness see the child "like a puzzle" (1997, p. 10).

The goal of education is to identify the missing pieces (skills, abilities, and knowledge), and to provide instruction in order to complete the parts of the puzzle properly. The role of a teacher is to identify a child's deficiencies through assessments, and to provide appropriate experiences that correct these deficits (de Cos, 1997, p. 10).

Check-listing of skills required for school readiness is the prime form of assessment to determine whether or not children are school-ready. If the child is not ready, the school-ready skills and behaviours that have identified the child as being 'unready' can be re-taught. De Cos argues that "environmentalists consider interventions as vital, whereas maturationists consider them forbidden" (1997, p. 10). Those who seek to improve school accountability have largely adopted this view of readiness which Willer and Bredekamp define as "gate keeping" (1990, p. 22).

Eisenhart and Graue argue that both maturationist and empiricist/environmentalist views of readiness see school readiness as "a stable measurable capacity that exists within the child and can be measured by professionals and used to make decisions" about children's readiness for school (1990, p. 254). Because both views of school readiness focus on the child, the responsibility for being 'ready for school' is located with the child rather than the school. More recent conceptualisations of school readiness have broadened readiness understandings, which are seen "no longer as applying only to the child, but as a shared responsibility" that includes families, services and communities, as well as schools (ARACY, 2007, p. 5). Ackerman and Barnett contend,

“(T)he question is not just ‘is a child ready for school?’, but also if schools and communities are ready for children” (2005, p. 9).

### **A constructivist/interactionist perspective**

A broader understanding of school readiness incorporates what Meisels describes as social constructivist and interactionist views of school readiness (1999). Eisenhart and Graue argue that because readiness is “situationally specific and inherently social” it needs to be considered within “the context of local history, demographic and educational trends, and interpersonal relationships and values” (1990, p. 254). Meanings of school readiness are thus generated in specific social contexts and have meaning only within those contexts. Meisels argues that while this approach incorporates the social context and advocates the consideration of multiple points of view, it does not focus on the child and does not provide adequate guidelines on how to resolve possible differences within communities (1999). Others (Alloway, 1997; de Cos, 1997) see a constructivist view as incorporating the same elements as an interactionist view, including a focus on the child. An interactionist view is nevertheless considered by some as a further elaboration of a constructivist view of school readiness (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Meisels, 1999). As mentioned previously, the study will blend the constructivist/interactionist categories in the data analysis because of their considerable overlap.

Dockett and Perry argue that an interactionist perspective incorporates elements of all preceding views, information about the child, the environment and perspectives of the community into an assessment of school readiness (2007). According to Meisels, “the interactionist view holds that readiness is a relational interactional construct that reflects a joint focus on the child’s status and the characteristics of the educational setting” which includes the child’s community (1999, p. 57). Readiness from this perspective, is shaped by the “skills, experiences, and learning opportunities that the child has had” as well as the “perspectives and goals of the community, classroom and the teacher” (1999, p. 57). While there is recognition that there are things children may not know, an appropriate learning environment is provided to stimulate and motivate children, through the guidance and support of the teacher, parent and others to develop in all areas of learning.

Similar understandings are described in what Bronfenbrenner calls an ecological approach, drawn from understandings of how children develop (1999). ARACY argues:

This (ecological) approach complements the brain development research emphasis on early years and early childhood experiences. The ecological perspective contextualises child development within the series of relationships that form the child's environment. In this model, these relationships are represented as layers (or systems), beginning with the child's immediate context of the family and extending through school, religion, community to the wider society and beyond that, to global relationships and structures ( 2007, p. 6).

Within a constructivist/interactionist view of school readiness, the child is seen as contributing to her/his own learning in the environment and all those in the learning environment (family, school, services and community) are seen as contributing towards the child's learning (ARACY, 2007). This approach to school readiness represents a significant shift in readiness orientation from the individual child within a maturationist and empiricist/environmentalist approach, to include the child's social context. The more recent conceptualisation of school readiness has led to the notion of a "Ready Child Equation" which includes "Ready Families + Ready Communities + Ready Services + Ready Schools = Children Ready for School" (ARACY, 2007, p. 7).

'Ready Families' focuses on the necessity of supporting children's families so that they can support their children's readiness for school; 'Ready Communities' refers to the community support provided to families within a community and 'Ready Services' describes programs which enhance children's development and readiness for school (ARACY, 2007). 'Ready Schools' describe the characteristics of schools which promote children's success at school (ARACY, 2007).

Ready schools and Pre-schools need to develop strong links with community services such as Kindergartens and Day-care centres as well as children's families to ensure a continuity of children's experiences between home and school (Dockett & Perry, 2007). In preparing for children's entry to school, ARACY suggests that school and Pre-school programs:

- are responsive to the needs of the child. How the child feels about the transition is important to the program's success. Listening to the child and giving them voice in the process builds the child's sense of competence and confidence
- recognize that children are capable learners with their own experiences and expectations. Children are likely to have quite distinct expectations of school and these are acknowledged and respected. Children's strengths and interests are built upon
- develop positive, reciprocal relationships and communications among and between children, families, early childhood services and communities

- involve the child's family and support parent-professional partnerships (2007, p. 15).

The educational benefits for children in school/community partnerships have been acknowledged for some time (CCS, 2007; Janus & Offord, 2000; Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman & Cox, 1999; QSA, 2007). The CCS defines a school community as:

[...] a set of partnerships and a place where services, supports and opportunities lead to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Using public schools as a hub, inventive, enduring relationships among educators, families, community volunteers, business, health and social service agencies, youth development organizations, and others committed to children are changing the educational landscape - permanently - by transforming traditional schools into partnerships for excellence (2007).

The Early Development Instrument (EDI), devised in Canada, is a community approach; one that shifts the focus from the child to the community in assessing children's readiness for school (Janus & Offord, 2000). Drawing on a constructivist/interactionist understanding of school readiness to assess how well communities provide for their young children against the wider societal norm, the EDI was developed from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) to measure "the readiness of Canadian children to learn at school" (Janus & Offord, 2000, p. 73). The measurement of children's 'readiness-to-learn at school' refers to their "ability to meet the task demands of school, such as being co-operative and sitting quietly and listening to the teacher, and to benefit from the educational activities provided by the school" (Janus & Offord, 2000, p. 74). While it measures children's "preparedness for school", results are "interpreted for groups of children, not individuals" (Janus & Offord, 2000, p. 73). Rather than using a deficit model that focuses on a small group of 'at risk' children and their families, the focus is on all children in the community (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Janus and Offord argue:

The major problem in understanding the concept of readiness to learn at the practical, policy level lies in translating it into action. A highly individualised approach will advocate a process in which children identified as "at risk" are targeted early for specific intervention programs. An alternative is to identify problem areas for groups of children in a process of population level assessment, with interventions having a central universal component (2000, p. 73).

The NLSCY examined correlates of healthy development of children and youth to produce five domains for assessment: physical health and well-being; social knowledge and competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive development; and, communication skills and general knowledge. School readiness, within this approach, measures the effectiveness of early childhood policies and support services within a community, including schools, to support its children's entrance into, and through, schooling. Shonkoff and Phillips argue that all children should be offered a good start in life to increase their life chances and by focusing on communities as a whole, human and social capital is increased so that negative trends such as unemployment, mental illnesses and suicide might be reversed (2000).

While the EDI was designed to measure children's school readiness-to-learn, it was intended that the data obtained would then be used to "mobilise communities to help all children" (Janus & Offord, 2000, p. 71). Group results are made available to the community so that, in collaboration with the community, services can be provided to overcome apparent gaps and improve outcomes for children. Data from the EDI indicates that, in communities where early childhood and family support are provided, children have higher readiness-to-learn scores at school entry (Janus & Offord, 2000). This model allows for the community "to have input into, and take responsibility for developing programs, rather than having programs imposed on them" (NSWCPR, 2003, p. 12). A version of the EDI is being developed in Australia (Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH), 2007a; Goldfeld, 2006).

In Australia, the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) is being developed as a community measure of young children's development CCCH (2007a). During children's first year of formal schooling, teachers use the AEDI checklist which measures five areas of development which include physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and communication skills and general knowledge (CCCH, 2007a). Based on the EDI, the AEDI has similar goals of providing communities with a holistic picture of children's well-being with no labelling of individual children or families and a tool from which the community can develop and monitor community programs and resources to achieve better outcomes for children (CCCH, 2007a; Goldfeld, 2006; Stewart, 2006). Communities that compiled the AEDI in 2004 were using the results to mobilise community-wide support to improve child development outcomes (CCCH, 2007a). In the Mirrabooka community, programs such as 'Literacy Links' to foster literacy and the 'Community Parks Program' have been developed by the community to improve outcomes for children (Stewart, 2006).

The AEDI is being trialled in 42 communities in Australia (CCCH, 2007a). In communities in the general region where the case studies were conducted, preliminary findings have been made available (CCCH, 2007b). Table 3.1 (below) shows how the AEDI presents the results of groups of children in different communities in a region so that communities might know how prepared their children are for school and how they might be able to provide further support in preparing them for school (CCCH, 2007b, p. 5).

**Table 3.1 AEDI: Results Showing Children’s Performance**

<b>Suburb or area</b>	<b>Number of Children</b>	<b>% of children developmentally vulnerable</b>	<b>% of children performing well</b>
Babinda/Miriwinni	15	26.7	26.7
Bayview	36	13.9	58.3
Bentley Park	82	22.0	43.9
Mount Sheridan	81	16.0	37.0
White Rock	54	33.3	37.0
Woree	39	28.2	43.6
Yarrabah	57	52.6	15.8

The results focus on the children in the community, rather than on specific children in the community. In keeping with a constructivist/interactionist approach to support children’s readiness for school, a range of community stakeholders are involved in the process of preparing children for school.

### **3.2.4 Domains of school readiness**

Which domains of children’s development are important in considering school readiness have often differed between parents and teachers (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2007). However, it is generally agreed that assessing school readiness is not restricted to children’s cognitive development but involves all aspects of children’s development (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; ARACY, 2007; NAYEC, 1997). The NAYEC, one of the most influential early childhood bodies in the United States, argues that readiness domains should include social competence, emotional adjustment, physical health, language and cognitive development (NAYEC, 1997). ARACY adds general knowledge and communication skills to this list (2007).

### **Social competence**

Social competence has long been considered by early childhood specialists to be foundational for children's success at school because of its association with academic success (Blair, 2002; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). Perry et al. found in their study of children starting school that both teachers and parents considered children's social adjustment to school to be the most important attribute in supporting children's transition into school (2000). Dockett and Perry define social adjustment to school as the expectation where children are able to "adjust to the changed organizational demands of the school and the school classroom" (2007, p. 118). In other words, children's success at school was linked to their understanding of the discursive practices of schooling. When children are familiar with the discourses and practices of school, they are more likely to adjust, and to take advantage of learning opportunities, at school. In Perry's et al. study, children believed that knowing the 'rules' at school was an important aspect of commencing school (2000). Thus children believed they needed to be familiar with what Kress calls the discourses or the "rules, permissions and prohibitions of social and individual action" that govern social groups as schools and classrooms (1985, p. 7). Alternatively, children who have little understanding of the discursive practices of school are less likely to be considered 'school-ready'.

### **Emotional adjustment**

Along with social competence, emotional adjustment has been considered a necessary attribute of children's readiness by early childhood specialists in preparing children for school (McClellan & Katz, 2001; NAYEC, 1997). Emotional adjustment, labelled 'adjustment' in Dockett and Perry's study (2000) is closely linked to social adjustment and was rated by parents and teachers as being an essential component in considering children's readiness for school.

### **Physical health**

Physical health is seen as an essential component of readiness assessments (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Lewitt & Baker, 1995). Early childhood teachers and specialists generally focus on fine and gross motor competencies in assessing children's school readiness (McClellan & Katz, 2001; NAYEC, 1997).

### **Language development**

Although language and cognitive abilities have been considered an important aspect of children's readiness for school by early childhood specialists (QSA, 2007; NAYEC, 1997) and researchers (Janus & Offord, 2000), neither parents nor teachers mentioned language as being an important

aspect of children's readiness for school in Perry's et al. study (2000). Teachers in the study however, mentioned the necessity for children to understand and follow directions as being important which may be a form of language competency. Katz has noted that although some children appear to speak the same language, they do not necessarily understand some words and concepts of that language ordinarily used at school (1991). Researchers have argued that when a child is unable to understand the language and associated practices of school, the child's chances of success at school may be limited (Corson et al., 1990).

Regardless of whichever school-ready attributes various stakeholders consider important, when the assessment of school readiness focuses solely on the child and the child's need to have particular attributes to be considered school-ready, the absence of such attributes may lead to deficit beliefs about the child or the child's background. Such deficit views of the child may in turn influence decisions to repeat children at Pre-school or to hold children out of formal schooling until they are school-ready. More recent conceptualisations, however, see school readiness as an interactive process between the skills, experiences and learning opportunities of the child prior to school and the goals and perspectives of the school and the community (ARACY, 2007).

### **3.3 Theories of School Success and Failure**

To provide overarching explanations for children's underachievement in schooling, researchers have drawn upon discourses used by school personnel, education departments and governments (Valencia, 1997a). These explanations or theories that have underpinned and guided the practices of governments, education departments and school personnel to support children's learning at school and Pre-school are traced from an historical perspective. While theories are discussed more from an historical perspective, and while earlier theories were underpinned by deficit beliefs about some groups of children, current understandings may also be underpinned by deficit beliefs about some children. Only theory considered relevant to the analysis of data in the study will be considered.

#### ***3.3.1 Genetic deficit theory***

One of the earliest explanations for children's low levels of readiness for school that was prevalent during the first half of the twentieth century was the genetic deficit theory (Gould, 1981; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). This theory focused on the perceived genetic deficits of some groups of children. Connected to social Darwinism, the genetic deficit theory embraced the belief that all human cultural groups could be identified somewhere along a cultural evolutionary continuum (Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). During the era of social Darwinism, researchers linked inherited

abilities with social groups (Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). Such investigations attempted to explain the cause of social stratifications in society comparing the ‘poorer less intelligent’ social groups with the ‘wealthier more intelligent’ social groups. The basis of such investigations, however, was seriously flawed:

In some of these early investigations, the correlation coefficient was calculated to quantify the relation between intelligence and SES. Hereditarian researchers violated the major dictum of what is often admonished about the concept of correlation: ‘Correlation does not imply causality’ (Valencia & Solorzano, 1997, p. 55).

Within the genetic deficit thinking, the child who fails to be ready for school is unready because of innate deficiencies. Such deficits are believed to manifest in “limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn and immoral behaviour” (Valencia, 1997a, p. 2). The genetic deficit theory was the construct of American behavioural psychologists and has influenced many sectors of education including early childhood education (Valencia & Solorzano, 1997).

Unready children were generally identified by such behaviours as hyperactivity, immaturity and distractibility and were generally considered ‘unready’ to learn at school (Arlington, 1983; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). Maturationists similarly contend that children are unready for school because of innate developmental delays. The form of intervention generally suggested is ‘more time’, evidenced through practices such as delayed school entry, repeating children at Pre-school or returning them to Pre-school from Year 1. An empiricist/environmentalist perspective of school readiness may similarly consider some children as unready for school because of innate deficits. Though offered for different reasons, both views of school readiness provide a range of ‘intervention’ strategies such as Pre-school retention practices to address children’s perceived deficits. Both school-ready views deflected attention from the learning environment at school and any structural or curriculum changes that might be needed, to the unready child and the child’s perceived deficits (McLaren, 1989; Valencia, 1997a).

Ryan argues that when the focus remains solely on the child, the responsibility remains on the child to change rather than the school (1971, p. 8). Valencia identifies this as a process where “the more powerful blame the innocent” (1997a, p. 3). Ryan argues that deficit beliefs about some groups of children tend to mobilise particular pathways of action (1971). Firstly, the problems of those perceived as having deficits are identified. Secondly, a study or tests identify the differences

between those with and those without the perceived deficits. Thirdly, the differences are then identified as the cause of the problem. Finally, intervention can be activated to correct the perceived deficits (Ryan, 1971). The process identified by Ryan (1971) may apply in some cases to children considered 'not ready' for school. Children who do not have school-ready skills and behaviours are firstly identified, the gap or differences between their perceived deficits and the school readiness requirements are highlighted through tests, these differences are then identified as the problem and some form of remediation or intervention is usually provided.

### ***3.3.2 Cultural deficit theory***

It was noted over time that a number of children with low levels of school achievement came from impoverished backgrounds. Children's capacity to achieve at school therefore became linked to children's cultural backgrounds. As this view emerged and gained momentum during the 1960s in Australia and the United States, it became known as the cultural deficit model or the cultural deprivation model (Foley, 1997). Lack of stimulation and experiences, particularly Pre-school experiences which would support children's readiness for school, coupled with unsupportive and poorly educated parents deficient in parenting skills and unable to cope generally, were considered responsible for children's underachievement at school (Valencia, 1997a). To 'compensate' for children's perceived deficiencies, various intervention programs were devised.

Large scale intervention programs such as Head Start in the United States were developed to compensate for the perceived readiness deficits in some groups of children, either within the children themselves or their home backgrounds (Valencia, 1997a). While some see 'compensatory' programs as being provided to 'correct' deficits of children born in poverty (Valencia, 1997a), others (Friedman, 2004) may have taken a different and more aspirational view of such programs and the children to whom they are offered. Those who offer economically disadvantaged children the same privileges as economically advantaged children, may have high and very positive aspirations for the future of such children, that is, they may be looking to what economically disadvantaged children might be able to accomplish with support in the future, rather than their 'present perceived deficits' (Freidman, 2004; U. S. Department of Health and Human Services: Administration for Children and Families (DHHSACF), 2005).

Such programs have been offered particularly in the United States and include Headstart, High/Scope, Abecedarian Intervention and Chicago Child-Parent Center programs (Freidman, 2004; DHHSACF, 2007). Programs such as Headstart, an initiative of the DHHSACF, commenced

in 1965 to provide comprehensive education, health, nutrition and parent involvement services to economically disadvantaged Pre-school aged children and their families (DHHSACF, 2007). The program has particularly focused on developing early literacy and numeracy skills of children from low-income families so that they will be provided with a better start to school (DHHSACF, 2007). There is considerable emphasis placed on involving parents both in their child's learning and in Head Start programs. To gauge the effectiveness of the Head Start program, a 17-year follow up study of Head Start was conducted by Oden, Schweinhart, Weikart, Marcus and Xie (2000). A group of 622 young adults at aged 22, born in poverty, were selected. Some of the young adults participated in Headstart at age 5 and some had not (Oden et al., 2000). Oden et al. (2000) found that those who participated in Headstart had reaped similar long term benefits to children who participated in the High/Scope Perry Preschool study (Schweinhart et al., 2005) discussed in the previous Section 3.2.2. These benefits, which focused on school success and social responsibility, included a higher likelihood of completing high school and fewer arrests for crime (Oden et al., 2000).

Others report positive benefits of other early intervention programs as well (Barnett & Hustedt, 2005; Freidman, 2004). Friedman argues:

Longitudinal studies conducted on the Perry Preschool Project, Abecedarian Intervention and Chicago Child-Parent Centre have yielded sound empirical evidence that high quality early childhood programs yield significantly positive benefits for children in terms of IQ, school achievement, grade retention, need for special education, and social adjustment (2004, p. 5).

The long term benefits for children who participated in the Abecedarian Intervention and Chicago Child-Parent Centre appear similar to those for children who participated in the High/Scope Pre-school programs, that is, children participating in such intervention programs have a "higher likelihood of graduation/college enrolment, higher wages/ employment potential, lower teen pregnancy (and) less delinquency" (Freidman, 2004, p. 5). Thus while some may see early intervention programs in an aspirational way (Barnett & Hustedt, 2005; Freidman, 2004; Schweinhart et al., 2005; DHHSACF, 2007), others may see intervention programs in a different way believing that such programs highlight the perceived deficits of some groups of children (Ryan, 1971; Valencia, 1997a).

Supported by some research which propagated the view that children's unreadiness for, and underachievement at, school was related to their deprived home lives (Maclaine, 1965). Ideas of compensatory education also flourished in Australia (Prochner, 2004). During the 1960s, a barrage of early childhood programs, which followed the compensatory ideas of Project Head Start in the United States, was established in Australia to ensure such children were 'school-ready' (Prochner, 2004). In 1972, Pre-school education was made "available to every Australian child" in the hope that it "might compensate for poor home backgrounds – thus giving all children an equal start, if not in life, at least in the education race" (Brennan, 1998, p. 77).

Again, while some may argue that such programs are provided to 'compensate' for children's perceived deficits, others may see such programs, and the children to whom they are offered, in a more positive way, believing that such children can achieve similar outcomes at school as more privileged groups of children when their development is supported by similar experiences. Such beliefs underpin current understandings of equity ( Department of Education and the Arts, Queensland, 2005a). While Pre-school is no longer offered in Australian schools as a compensatory program, there may be some cases where Pre-school is offered as a form of early intervention to better support Indigenous children's readiness for school. Prior to 2007, Education Queensland offered a Kindergarten year, that is, a year before the Queensland Pre-school year, in remote Indigenous communities such as Thursday Island in the Torres Strait (Australian Government: Productivity Commission, 2006). Such programs have been offered to better prepare children living in remote Indigenous communities for entry into formal schooling. While the provision of such early intervention services may be seen by some as compensating for the perceived deficits of Indigenous children, others may see such a provision as aspirational and provided to support children's successful entry into school.

While the offer of such programs might be seen by some as aspirational, McLaren argues that children's "home environments" may still be blamed for children's failure at, or lack of preparation for, school (1989, p. 224). McLaren argues that blaming children or their family background not only positions children in a negative way but simultaneously protects "the social environment from sustained criticism" (McLaren, 1989, p. 221). In this way, it could be argued that the dominant school-ready discourse and its resulting Pre-school retention practices may be protected from critique.

Because the dominant discourses and practices of schooling generally reflect those of white middle-class homes, children who have little access to, or understanding of, such discourses may also be less familiar with the discourses and practices of schooling (Connolly, 2004; McLaren, 1989). Such children, therefore, may have less success at school or may be considered less ready for school and repeated. The cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977), or the skills and behaviours many white middle-class children acquire ‘naturally’ at home, may allow them a greater familiarity with the discourses and practices of school than children from other social groups.

While similar reasons may explain the general absence in schools of parents from low socio-economic groups, teachers and school administrators may interpret such an absence as an indifference towards children’s schooling (Crozier, 2000; Toomey, 1989). Toomey argues that parents are less likely to respond to invitations to assist in classroom and school activities when they are unfamiliar with schools’ language and practices (1989). In a study conducted by Delgado-Gaitan, it was found that for parents to participate effectively in children’s schooling through the conventional avenues offered to them, parents require “specific cultural knowledge (which in essence, is power)” (1991, p. 20); that is, a familiarity with the discourses and practices of schooling, to participate.

While the cultural or linguistic capital or resources valued by schools is not equally available to all children, some schools may “still operate as if all children had equal access to it” (Corson, 1993, p. 11). Bourdieu argues that educational opportunities for children who have had less access to the dominant discourses and practices of schooling are limited because “the school demands competence in the dominant language and culture which can only be acquired through family upbringing” (1977, p. 9). Thus, children whose discourses and practices at home are compatible with those of schooling have generally acquired the cultural and linguistic capital or resources to be considered ‘ready for school’. Children who do not have such resources may be considered ‘unready’ for school and repeated. The next section explains how school-ready discourse can position children as having perceived deficits.

### ***3.3.3 School-ready discourse as deficit discourse***

Education systems generally favour certain types of cultural capital or resources which some believe are also more congruent with the discourses and practices of the more privileged social groups (Bourdieu, 1984; Connolly, 2004). Children, whose prior-to-school experiences have allowed them to gain such a familiarity with the discourses and practices of school, are more likely

to have acquired the particular forms of cultural capital or cultural resources that are valued at school to be considered ‘school-ready’. Children whose prior-to-school experiences have not enabled them to acquire the resources or capital valued at school are less likely to have the skills and behaviours required to successfully commence school. Further, children who do not have school-ready skills may be positioned as ‘other to’ the ‘ready’ children, that is, they may be positioned as ‘unready’ and thus in a negative way. The way in which such negative positioning occurs through school-ready discourse might be better understood through the concept of binary thinking.

Binary thinking is created in the discourses of our culture and within the discourses of schooling (Davies, 1994). School-ready discourse places children in the binary or dualistic categories of ‘ready’ and ‘unready’ for school. Moreover, binary thinking privileges one side of the binary order and downgrades the other (Davies, 1994). In Table 3.2 for instance, the first category of ‘Ready for school’ contains attributes that are valued and privileged within school-ready discourse. The second category, ‘Not ready for school’ includes attributes that have less value and are less privileged within school-ready discourse. Table 3.2 was constructed from particular skills and behaviours valued by the dominant school-ready discourse which were drawn from the literature (NAECSSDE, 2000). Attributes valued by school-ready discourse and which are associated with being ‘school-ready’ can be seen on the left hand side while attributes associated with being ‘not ready for school’ are placed on the right hand side in Table 3.2.

***Table 3.2 Binary Categories of Ready and Unready Attributes***

<b>Ready for school</b>	<b>Not ready for school</b>
Pre-literacy skills	Few pre-literacy skills
Pre-numeracy skills	Few pre-numeracy skills
Pre-writing skills	Few pre-writing skills
Compliant behaviours	Non-compliant behaviours
Maturity	Immaturity

Although these categories offer teachers and parents a recognisable set of behaviours and skills through which they can identify ‘ready’ and ‘unready’ children, some groups of children who may commence school with particular skills and behaviours not valued at school may be placed in the category of unready for school. The groups of children in Table 3.3, more often identified as being ‘ready’ or ‘unready’, have also been drawn from the literature (Dockett et al., 2006; Meisels, 1999; Reynolds, 1992).

**Table 3.3 Binary Categories of Ready and Unready Groups of Children**

<b>Ready for school</b>	<b>Not ready for school</b>
Girls	Boys
Middle-income	Low-income
Middle-class	Working-class
Non-Indigenous	Indigenous

Placing groups of children in binary categories may lead to the unconscious association of particular groups of children with one category or another (Davies, 1994). It is through binary thinking that negative beliefs about particular groups of children can be held intact and perpetuated. Further, within binary thinking, the cultural resources of the ‘unready’ and less privileged groups is highlighted and contrasted with the cultural resources of the ‘ready’ or privileged groups which becomes the standard against which others are judged.

Children who have taken up discourses and practices which are different or ‘other to’ those required to be ‘school-ready’, are not only positioned as ‘lacking’ particular school-ready skills and behaviours but are seen as having deficits which are highlighted and need to be addressed through some form of intervention such as Pre-school retention. When children’s languages, ways, beliefs and practices are positioned as ‘other to’ those valued by dominant ‘school-ready’ discourse, they are positioned as having less value than those of the dominant group. Such children may be marginalised in schooling because of their different cultural and linguistic practices. Thus when teachers draw on school-ready discourse, which can be underpinned by deficit discourse, their explanations for children being unready for school are more likely to focus on children’s perceived deficits rather than the ways and practices of schools.

### **3.3.4 The complexity of the study**

In considering deficit explanations for some children’s low levels of readiness for school, Pearl argues “cultural deficit models are not informed by well articulated theory” (1997, p. 129). Explanations for the exceptions to this theory are minimal and cannot account for the substantial numbers of children from ‘culturally deprived’ circumstances who have become successful in life (Pearl, 1997). Also, studies that correlate school readiness and achievement with children’s social background imply causality, and as discussed previously, “correlation does not imply causality” (Valencia, 1997b, p. 55). Further, binary thinking associated with some discourses of Western societies can unconsciously correlate characteristics with particular groups of children, leading to generalisations about those groups of children.

Similarly in the literature, there has been a tendency to define practices related to repeating children at Pre-school in particular ways and to offer particular categories to understand those definitions and practices. However, the findings of the study do not fit as comfortably with the categories traditionally offered for repeating children at Pre-school or its related practices. While some Pre-school retention practices may appear similar, they may be underpinned by different school-ready beliefs. The understanding that similar practices might be underpinned by different beliefs has earlier been noted in the chapter. Teachers who have either maturational or empiricist understandings of school readiness may both repeat unready children.

Because similar retention practices can be underpinned by different school-ready beliefs or different discourses, some retention practices which may position children in a negative way may not be underpinned by deficit beliefs about such children. As the case studies will reveal in Chapters 5 and 6, although practices such as delaying children's entry into schooling may be considered by some to be a similar practice to repeating Pre-school (NAESSDE, 2000), such practices may be underpinned by alternative, more aspirational, beliefs about delayed children.

While the literature, particularly in the United States, often associates unready children with low socio-economic or ethnic minority families, data from the case studies shows a far more complex picture regarding Pre-school retention practices than was initially understood from the literature. Such differences not only relate to Pre-school retention practices themselves but also to the discourses that underpin these practices. Assumptions made about Pre-school retention practices may be different in Australia, at least in the schools in the case studies. Further, the study incorporates a range of understandings about these practices and from different perspectives. The perspectives of teachers and parents in the study may be different to those of researchers and academics whose understandings primarily inform the literature. Because the flexibility of the study allowed for different understandings of repeating children at Pre-school to emerge, a different and perhaps more complex picture of repeating children appears to exist in some Australian schools. These differences will be further discussed in the findings in Chapters 5 and 6.

### ***3.3.5 Difference theory***

As part of the social justice emphasis on equity and access of governments and education departments in Australia, an interest in cultural diversity emerged during the 1990s in Queensland state schools (Department of Education, Queensland, 1994a). Much of the deficit thinking foundational to intervention practices that had grown out of the psychological research associated

with child development and education began to be questioned by critics in the fields of anthropology, sociology and linguistics (Kale, 1995).

A 'difference model' was "advanced primarily by linguists who argued the case for the children's first language or dialect to be conceptualized as a resource rather than as obstacle" (Kale, 1995, p. 10). While deficit beliefs focused on the deficiencies of some groups of children and their families, the difference model offered the view that some children have been socialised in homes that may value cultural and linguistic practices that are different to those valued in schools. Several studies (Connolly, 2004; Heath, 1983) have demonstrated the link between children's cultural and linguistic practices at home and success at, and readiness for, school.

Heath's study (1983) focused on groups of children from three different communities in the Piedmont Carolinas in the United States. Each group, the Trackton children from a black working-class community, the Roadville children from a white working-class community and the town children from a middle-class cotton milling town, had different cultural and linguistic practices. To understand why the town children had more success at school, Heath analysed the cultural and linguistic practices of each community. She concluded that because the town children had acquired the cultural and linguistic capital valued in schooling in their home and prior-to-school experiences, they had more success at school. Thus, the children from the two other communities were less prepared for, and less successful at, school because the discourses and practices with which they were familiar had less cultural purchase at school.

Connolly's more recent study (2004) contrasted two groups of 5 – 6 year old boys from schools in Northern Ireland. One group of boys was from a school located in a deprived working-class area and the other group of boys was from a school in an affluent middle-class area. Connolly's observations of children's success and failure at school in relation to their social groups were similar to Heath's. Connolly found that the boys from the working-class area, which included boys from ethnic minority groups, were as a whole, underachieving at school while boys from the school in an affluent middle-class area were, on the whole, doing well at school. To explain the differences in school success between the two groups of boys, Connolly examined the discourses and practices taken up by each group of boys. He found that there was a high correspondence between the boys' disposition towards school, their home background, the type of masculinity they took up and success at school. Connolly argued that because the middle-class boys' home practices were more compatible with the discursive practices at school than the working-class boys' home practices, they

experienced more success at school. Thus both Heath (1983) and Connolly (2004) concluded that when the discourses and practices of school are more compatible with the discourses and practices of children's home backgrounds, children are more likely to experience success at school.

As previously stated, if children have acquired, in their social contexts before they commence school, the discourses and practices compatible with the dominant discourses and practices of school, they are more likely to have the necessary cultural and linguistic resources to be considered 'ready for school'. The dominant discourses, such as school-ready discourse, privilege particular languages, ways, beliefs and practices and marginalises others (Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). Because non-dominant languages, ways, beliefs and practices are positioned as 'other to' the dominant discourses of schooling and as being deficient, they are more highlighted and open to critique, while the dominant discourse continues to remain less visible and unquestioned. Valencia and Solorzano argue that "not only does deficit thinking demonstrate an adherence to current social thought and educational practice, but by all indications it continues to gain ground" (1997, p. 152). While it is also unknown how pervasive deficit thinking is in Australia, current educational policy in Queensland has attempted to cater for children from all social groups, valuing their linguistic and cultural resources (QSA, 2007; Department of Education and the Arts, Queensland, 2005a).

The difference theory has attempted to move explanations for low levels of school readiness and success away from the child and the child's family to an increasing emphasis on schools and the wider community to prepare children for school. Assessment of school readiness at a community level focuses on monitoring children's progress so that community resources, both human and material, might be mobilised and directed to where they are most needed. Although children are evaluated, the focus for evaluation is not on individual children or their parents. The focus for evaluation shifts to community and government policies and programs to ensure they are doing their best to support young children's development and readiness for school.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has considered beliefs about school readiness that may influence parents' and teachers' decisions to repeat children at Pre-school. When the focus is on the child to be ready for school, as it is within school-ready discourse, either the child or the child's social background is likely to be seen as the cause of the child being unready for school. However, not all understandings of school readiness focus on the child. While maturationist and empiricist/environmentalist understandings of school readiness focus primarily on the child in assessing the child's readiness for school, a

constructivist/interactionist approach to school readiness shifts the focus for being 'ready' from the child (or the child's family) to include the school, intervention services and the community in preparing the child for school. Within a constructivist/interactionist approach to school readiness, the child is unlikely to be positioned as 'unready' and is therefore not likely to be repeated at Pre-school.

In proposing overarching theories for some children's low levels of readiness for, or lack of success at, school, researchers have drawn on various explanations. Some earlier explanations, similar to some school-ready beliefs, were underpinned by deficit beliefs about particular groups of children. Other explanations provide an alternative and more aspirational view of children and their potential to achieve at school. Although deficit thinking may have influenced educational thought and practice fifty years ago, some argue that the situation may not have changed a great deal since then (García & Guerra, 2004; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). Although deficit explanations were considered 'earlier' in an historical sense, they may be evidenced currently through school-ready discourse.

More recent understandings based on research (Connolly, 2004; Heath, 1983) have theorised children's low levels of readiness for, and achievement at, school as a mismatch between the discourses and practices of school and those of children's home backgrounds. When the discourses and practices of children's home lives are incompatible with those of school, children are less likely to be ready for school and less likely to experience success at school (Heath, 1983; McLaren, 1989; Valencia, 1997a). More recent understandings of school-readiness from a constructivist/interactionist approach to school readiness incorporate the school community, re-conceptualising it as a culture that includes a diverse range of cultures and sub-cultures. When the focus for school readiness moves away from the child to include the school and the community, the child's perceived deficits are less likely to be highlighted. Instead of the child or the child's parents being responsible for the child's school-readiness, the community as well as schools share the responsibility in this process.

This chapter also foreshadows the complexity of the study and how the conventional categories, drawn upon to analyse the findings of the study, do not fit as readily into the theories and practices found in the literature. The explanations outlined in this chapter will be used to analyse teachers' and parents' talk about why they employed a range of Pre-school retention practices for particular groups of children. The following chapter, Chapter 4, explains how the study was constructed, how

the stories of the teachers and parents were gathered, and how the stories were analysed to provide an understanding of why, in one case study in one North Queensland town, Pre-school retention practices continue to be provided.

# CHAPTER 4

## CONSTRUCTING THE STUDY

### 4.1 Introduction

A qualitative research method was considered the most appropriate research method or strategy to address the research questions which focused on a complex social practice, Pre-school retention. Denzin & Lincoln argue that qualitative research is particularly suited to addressing the *why* of complex social concerns (2005). Since one of the main questions asked why Pre-school retention practices and alternatives are employed, qualitative research was considered the most suitable research strategy. Case study was considered the most appropriate research strategy to answer the research questions drawn from naturalistic settings, that is, within schools (Stake, 2005). The paradigm of inquiry used was constructivism (Charmaz, 2005). A case study, using a constructivist approach allowed for movement between the literature in the field, from which the research questions were initially framed, the theories that frame current understandings of Pre-school retention and its related practices and the emerging data. A reflexive approach facilitated the construction of new understandings of Pre-school retention, particularly within an Australian context. As noted previously and as Chapters 5 and 6 will reveal, some assumptions relating to Pre-school retention that I had made at the outset of the study, based on much of the literature available from the United States, were different at the conclusion of the study.

In conducting a qualitative study, Denzin and Lincoln argue that major five areas need to be considered (2005). The chapter considers these areas in five sections: the Researcher, the Research Paradigm, the Research Strategy, the Data Collection Methods and Analysis, and Presentation. In Section 4.2 of the chapter, I discuss my position as researcher along with the ethics and politics of the research process as they relate to the participants in the study. In section 4.3, I define a research paradigm and describe the particular constructivist research paradigm used in the study.

Section 4.4, the Research Strategy, describes the strategy or method used, that is, case study. A pilot study and a survey which was used for selecting the case study sites are explained. The final selection of the case study sites, as well as the benefits and limitations of a case study approach, is outlined. The immediate context of the study, the case study sites, is described along with the participants in the study in Appendix F. Lincoln and Guba argue that “the phenomena of study”,

Pre-school retention practices and alternatives in this case, “take their meaning as much from the contexts as they do from themselves” (1985, p. 189). The participants stories of Pre-school retention cannot be separated from the time and the context which “spawned, harboured and supported” them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.189). As such, an understanding of each school site provided in Appendix F may provide further insight into why parents and teachers adopted particular school and Pre-school retention practices.

Section 4.5, Data Collection Methods and Analysis, describes the methods used in the study, which include interviews, participant observations, journal and field notes and document and artefact collection. A description of how the collected data was analysed is also provided. Discourse was used to analyse the emerging data. The concept of discourse, along with the related concepts of subjectivity, positioning, hegemony and deconstruction, are discussed in this section. The final section, Section 4.6 Presentation, outlines several considerations which were observed in presenting the collected data. They include criteria for judging adequacy, ethics and confidentiality, reflexivity, reciprocity and writing the story.

## **4.2 The Researcher**

My position in the research endeavour is reflective of a constructivist research paradigm, that is, it reflects the multiple constructed realities of the participants in the study and me. As researcher, I facilitated the construction of the study, one case study, or ‘a’ story of Pre-school retention practices in Queensland schools co-created by me and 51 participants connected with nine schools in one North Queensland town.

### ***4.2.1 My position as researcher***

I cannot claim that my position was ‘neutral’ or that my interpretation of the data was untainted by “researcher bias or the ambiguity of language” (Scheurich, 1997, p. 29). Scheurich argues that the researcher can bring so much conscious and unconscious “baggage” to the research endeavour that “the written representation is largely, though not completely [...] a mirror image of the researcher and her/his baggage” (1997, p. 74). Commencing in Chapter 1, I have attempted to highlight aspects of this ‘baggage’ to provide the reader with some idea of what I am bringing to the research process.

Throughout the research process, I moved between the different subject positions of researcher, teacher and work colleague which shaped the construction, the analysis and the writing of the study.

As discussed in Chapter 1, I have worked as a teacher in Queensland schools for more than thirty years. Many of the teachers in the study, who I knew on both a personal and professional level, appeared to accept me as a work colleague rather than as a researcher. My familiarity with many of the teachers may also have influenced their stories. A sense of trust that appeared to be established with the teachers, however, enabled me to enlist, with little difficulty, the support I needed for the study.

With the parents in the study, I adopted the position of ‘researcher’. To enlist the parents’ support for the study, I consciously set out to find ways of developing a sense of trust with them so that they might “feel safe” and the research process might proceed smoothly (Hollway & Jefferson, 2002, p. 30). One way in which I attempted to develop a sense of trust was to visit the schools well before the interviews commenced to allow the participants, particularly the parents, to become familiar with me and the research project.

#### ***4.2.2 Ethics and politics of the research***

Before I entered the research field, I was cognisant of the ethics and politics of the research process (Christians, 2005; Deyhle, Hess & LeCompt, 1992). The necessary ethical procedures and protocols were observed before data collection commenced between 2000 and 2002. I sought and received an Ethics Approval (H1115) from the university to conduct the study. I also sought permission from the District Directors of both Education Queensland and Catholic Education to conduct research in selected schools (see Appendix G). Approval was also sought from each school Principal, Day-care or Kindergarten Director in the schools and centres where the surveys, and later some case studies, were to be conducted (see Appendix H). Attached to the surveys was a convenient reply note and stamp addressed envelope (see Appendix I). Following approval from the District Directors and school Principals/Directors, I commenced the process of selecting possible case study sites by firstly conducting a pilot study and then a survey. Before the pilot study and survey (see Appendix J) were conducted with the teachers, I explained the research project. The teachers, who chose to participate in the survey, were offered further explanations in both verbal and written form (see Appendix K) which included the research ethics that underpinned the study. Although the necessary entry had been gained through the formal gatekeepers, that is, Education Queensland, Catholic Education and individual government and non-government schools to conduct the case studies, I was also cognisant of my “duty to avoid causing harm to participants and to the socio-political environments in which, and with which, they work” (Busher, 2002, p. 83). Confidentiality through pseudonyms was incorporated into all aspects of the research process and study.

From the survey, the case study sites at nine different schools were selected. Before interviews commenced at each of the school sites, I explained, in both written and verbal form, to school staff (see Appendix K) and parents (see Appendix L) who I was and the intentions of the research. The research ethics that underpinned this study were also clearly explained and outlined in written form. Being a standard practice for university research projects, the conditions of each person's participation was explained. These conditions included participants' voluntary involvement, as well as the option to leave at any time or refuse to answer any question without explanation. Each participant was assured that complete confidentiality would be observed and that pseudonyms would be used for all locations and for all participants. If the participants were still willing to offer their stories after these explanations, I then proceeded with the interviews. An agreement was made with the participants that the interviews would be audio tape recorded after which a typed transcript of the interview would be made available for their information and authentication. Only when they were completely satisfied with the completed transcripts was it agreed that sections might then be incorporated into the study. None of the participants withdrew themselves or any part of their stories from the study. Assurances were given in written and verbal form. A written consent form can be seen in Appendix N.

The study looked at the complexities of Pre-school retention practices as they impacted on schools and those connected to them. These practices impacted not only on children in schools and their parents but also teachers and school administrators who attempted to prepare children for school in a range of ways. As such, the terrain through which the research was conducted was not only complex but could have been at risk of exposing some of the more sensitive issues involved in repeating children at Pre-school, particularly with some parents. I was cognisant of the issues between each of the participants in the study and my relationship between the researcher and the researched. My intent was to maintain trust, which had already been well established in schools with many of the teachers and school administrators prior to the study. My intent was to also develop trust with the parents, some of whom appeared to have a basic mistrust of the schools and school personnel in general. The research process was constructed upon these principles.

### **4.3 The Research Paradigm**

#### ***4.3.1 A research paradigm***

A research paradigm is "a basic set of beliefs [...] taken in connection with a disciplined inquiry" (Guba, 1990, p.17). Denzin and Lincoln argue that a research paradigm is "the net" which "contains

the researcher's epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises" which guide the research process (2005, p. 22). As such, a research paradigm represents a particular worldview and provides an "interpretive framework" through which the researcher's world can be studied and understood (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 22). The research paradigm, upon which the study can be understood, is constructivism.

#### ***4.3.2 A constructivist paradigm***

Wells, Hirshberg, Lipton and Oakes argue that a constructivist research paradigm supports a more "tentative, inductive, and interpretive form of data collection and analysis" (2000, p. 332). As the nature of the research question required an "inductive and interpretive approach", a constructivist approach was considered an appropriate methodology (Pitman & Maxwell, 1992). A constructivist paradigm privileges: "a relativist ontology", that is, there are multiple constructed realities; "a subjectivist epistemology", that is, the researcher and the participants interact with and influence one another to co-create new understandings; and, "a naturalistic (set in the natural world, in this case, schools) set of methodological procedures" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 24). Similarly Charmaz argues, "[C]onstructivism assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims toward interpretive understanding of subjects' meanings" (2000, p. 510).

#### **Ontology**

Ontology describes the ways in which reality can be understood. Within a constructivist approach there are multiple constructions of reality that are local and specific (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). O'Dowd argues that "knowledge arises from social processes and interaction" from which "people make their own reality" (2003, p. 41). Schwandt similarly contends that "constructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it" (2000, p. 197). Knowledge is continually tested, modified and re-constructed in the light of new experiences which are constructions of an individual's historical and socio-cultural understanding (Schwandt, 2000). As such, a constructivist approach incorporates the view that there is no single truth and that all truths are partial (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Charmaz distinguishes between the real and the true; "[T]he constructivist approach does not seek truth – single, universal and lasting. Still, it remains realist because it addresses human realities and assumes the existence of real worlds" (2000, p. 523).

Realities within a constructivist paradigm are constructed by different people, at different times and in different locations as people interact and take up discourses at particular times and in particular social contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Pitman & Maxwell, 1992). Lincoln and Guba argue that the only reality that exists is the reality constructed by the participants as they attempt to make sense of the issues with which they are confronted (1985). Reality is constructed and re-constructed in the light of new experiences and, as such, the study is a reconstruction of individual and shared realities. Consequently, the study does not represent ‘the’ reality of Pre-school retention practices but ‘a’ reality of Pre-school retention practices.

“Reality” or the constructed worlds of the participants is not “out there waiting to be captured by language” and simply transposed (Britzman, 1995, p. 232). Britzman argues that, unlike many who hold to traditional understandings of qualitative research, the researcher cannot “guarantee access to truth” simply by being immersed in the research situation (1995, p. 232). My telling (and retelling) of the participants’ stories is partial and limited by the discourses of the particular time and context of this study. Lather agrees that because data cannot be considered a necessary guarantor of truth, it is best considered as “material for telling a story” that will “*vivify* interpretation rather than ‘prove’ it” (1991, p. 10). She argues, “[D]ata might be better conceived as the material for telling a story where the challenge becomes to generate a polyvalent database that is used to ‘vivify’ interpretation as opposed to ‘support’ or ‘prove’ (it)” (Lather, 1991, p. 10).

Thus reality does not exist in an objective sense waiting to be ‘discovered’ but is constructed through the discourses that exist in the social environment and are taken up in different ways by different parents and teachers attempting to explain why they employed various Pre-school retention practices. The views of the participants in the study constitute the text or the stories told of repeating children at Pre-school. Davies warns that although text “enables us to see possible worlds” of the participants, it does not reveal “a ‘real’ objectively knowable world to which the text simply points” (Davies, 1994, p. 14). Through the stories of Pre-school retention practices, further insight is gained into the struggles parents, teachers and school administrators have faced in attempting to prepare children for school.

### **Epistemology**

Epistemology is concerned with the theory of knowledge, what knowledge is and how it is acquired (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). It describes, through our myriad of influences, how we come to know the world and how we see the relationship between the researcher and the

researched (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Within a constructivist approach, the researcher and the researched interact with and influence one another (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Throughout the study, I was interactively linked to the participants in the study. In particular, I was well known to the teachers, many of whom were my work colleagues. Not only is the research subjective but it is co-created with the participants in the study. While the data collected for the study may be subjective, it was not used to prove a theory, but instead, has been used to tell a story of Pre-school retention, told by the researcher and the researched. Many traditional research approaches require the removal of “‘subjectivity’ from any research endeavour, as if objective truth could be established in this way” (Davies, 1994, p. 3). Angus argues, as well, that we carry so many cultural and theoretical influences that our perceptions can never be totally impartial (1986). Stories then, of the researcher and the researched, are filtered through the lens of personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, ethnicity and language (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As such, this study does not claim to be objective.

The concern of this study, then, has not been with measurement, predictability and reliability as are the concerns of those who work within a positivist paradigm, but with the link between the stories of the participants, the documents and data available in the schools and the literature. My aim was to develop stories which describe individual cases of Pre-school retention rather than make “generalisations that are truth statements free of time and context” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 38). Further, there is no illusion given that these stories are representative of all parents, teachers or school administrators.

### **Methodology**

Methodology describes the ways in which knowledge of the world can be gained (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Constructivism assumes an ‘interpretive approach’ and a “naturalistic (set in the natural world) set of methodological procedures” or “strategies of inquiry” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 24). The strategy of inquiry puts the study’s paradigm of interpretation, that is, constructivism, “into motion” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.25). Denzin and Lincoln argue that the most appropriate strategy of inquiry is one that will most effectively answer the research questions and connect the research paradigm to the strategy of inquiry and data collection methods (2005). The strategy of inquiry which would situate the study in its natural setting and address the research questions was a case study approach.

A case study approach provided the basic framework through which data could be collected. The process of data collection is seen as story collection and story (re)construction. Farran argues “data collection” is “data construction” (1990, p. 91). The data collected are the reconstructed experiences of the participants rather than the original experiences themselves. As new data emerged, a constructivist approach allowed for moderation and flexibility which suited the changing conditions of the research process (Charmaz, 2000). Data were considered “narrative constructions” and as such were “constructions of the experience [...] not the experience itself” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 514). The cases were not defined and bound but allowed new categories and understandings to emerge from the data and provide not only a story, but also new understandings of Pre-school retention practices in Queensland and why such practices were employed.

#### **4.4 The Research Strategy**

This section of the chapter describes the research method used to collect the data. While “all researchers need to be concerned with describing their procedures” (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. xi) the research design must also “connect theoretical paradigms [...] to strategies of inquiry” then to “methods for collecting [...] material” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 25). The research strategy, case study, was suited to the constructivist research paradigm.

##### **4.4.1 Case study**

Eisenhardt defines a case study as “a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings” (2002, p. 8). The case study method evolved out of the need to understand complex “social phenomena”, that is, the issues related to repeating children at Pre-school, in their “‘natural’ context”, that is, the schools (Hird, 2003, p. 22). The case study, as a research strategy or method, may involve one or several individuals or groups (Hird, 2003). The present study uses nine small case studies at different school sites to provide one larger case study of Pre-school retention practices.

Wolcott argues that while a case study does “not implicate any particular approach”, it can be “most appropriately regarded as an outcome or format for *reporting* qualitative/descriptive work” (1992, p. 36). Stake adds that a case study “is both a process of inquiry about a case and the product of that inquiry” (2005, p. 444). This research uses the case study method as a *process of inquiry* and a *format for reporting* the study’s findings.

Eisenhardt argues that case studies focus on the dynamics within social contexts (2002). As the purpose of this study is to provide further insight into the dynamics that underpinned repeating children at Pre-school, the case study method was chosen. Case studies allow the issues in question to be studied in their social context, that is, within schools and within the lives of those involved in repeating children at Pre-school. Stake argues that understanding a few cases may lead to “better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases” (2005, p. 437).

Wells, Hirshberg, Lipton and Oakes argue that cases are theoretical in nature and are created through investigations. As such, cases “do not exist until researchers construct them or co-construct them with their respondents” (2000, p. 339). As the case studies were built inductively from the stories of the participants, they became more defined. If the cases had been predefined, the emerging conceptual development may not have occurred and the new understandings of Pre-school retention may not have emerged. Informed by the continual interaction between case study data, the literature and the incorporation of theories of school readiness into the emerging data, the case study became a more refined theoretical construct. From “an inductive approach grounded in the points of view” of the participants in the study, a better sense could be gained of Pre-school retention practices, why they were employed and their impact on the participants’ lives and work (Harper, 1992, p. 142).

Each school selected in the multiple-site case study addressed the issue of repeating children at Pre-school in different ways. Wells et al. suggest, “case selection in multiple-case or comparative designs is dependent on the theoretical framework that specifies the conditions under which the phenomenon of interest [...] is likely to be found” (2000, p. 334). The nine schools were not chosen randomly but were selected for their range of philosophical views and resulting practices in regard to repeating children at Pre-school.

#### ***4.4.2 Selection of case study sites: The pilot study***

To select schools for the case study, I conducted a pilot study, then a survey in the city where I intended to undertake the study. At a monthly meeting of the local early childhood group, I explained my interest in the research topic and the purpose of the study. While this early childhood body was representative of all early childhood personnel, namely Pre-school to Year 3 teachers, Teacher-aides, Early Childhood Education Advisory teachers and other support personnel connected with Pre-schools, it was mainly supported and represented by Pre-school teachers. At the same meeting, I conducted a pilot study with the teachers present (approximately fifty). The pilot

study enabled me to gauge whether or not Pre-school retention was practised in the city where I intended to conduct the study. I was also able to gauge how many Pre-schools had repeated and returned children and how many teachers were willing to participate in the study. By gauging interest for the study at a meeting, I was able to readily determine both the viability of the topic as well as the support and interest needed to sustain the study. Not only did this process make it quick to ascertain the viability of, and support I needed for, the study, but also the teachers were offered the opportunity to ask questions about the project and determine whether or not they wished to participate in the study. As the teachers' response was positive and many research sites appeared to be available, I constructed a survey to determine more specifically the availability of research sites and participants for the study.

#### ***4.4.3 Selection of case study sites: The survey***

The survey was used to not only select schools for the case study but also to provide me with a better understanding of Pre-school retention in the locality where the study was to be conducted. Before conducting the survey with the local Pre-school teaching cluster, I sought permission from the District Directors of both Education Queensland and Catholic Education to conduct research in the relevant schools (see Appendix G). Approval was also sought from each school Principal, Day-care or Kindergarten Director in the centres where the surveys with the Pre-school teachers were to be conducted (see Appendix H). A convenient reply note and stamped addressed envelope were also included with the survey to hasten and streamline responses and to assist busy teachers and school administrators.

I decided to include children who had been returned to Pre-school from Year 1 separately from the children who simply repeated Pre-school. In both the survey and the case studies, the returned children were treated as a separate group from the repeated children to ascertain possible differences between the two groups. After explaining the purposes of the research (see Appendix K) and obtaining the teachers' written consent (see Appendix N), the teachers were asked to fill out two separate survey forms, one for repeated children and one for returned children (see Appendix J). Although returning children to Pre-school was a rarely discussed practice among teachers (particularly in the literature), 39 children had been returned to Pre-school from Year 1 at 14 schools in the survey within a three year period (1998-2000). Prior to my differentiating between the two groups, repeating children at Pre-school and returning them to Pre-school from Year 1, most teachers had regarded both practices as being the same. Where teachers had children from

both groups, they were asked to fill out both forms. Several teachers did not have children from either group so they no longer remained candidates for the survey.

One of the survey questions asked about alternatives to repeating children at Pre-school or returning them to Pre-school from Year 1. As some teachers had heard of alternatives or thought there should be alternatives, three schools that provided alternatives to both repeating children at Pre-school and returning them to Pre-school from Year 1 were sought for inclusion in the study.

The survey was conducted in 39 schools with 64 teachers. Five teachers withdrew from the survey and 59 out of the original 64 teachers participated, giving a response rate for the survey of more than 92%. While the results of the survey were presented at a regional conference and a regional seminar, and on a third occasion at a state-wide conference, they were not included in the findings of the study. Although the results of the survey were not dissimilar to the findings of the case studies, the survey was used mainly to facilitate the selection of case study sites.

#### ***4.4.4 Selection of case study sites: The schools***

Schools were first of all selected on the basis of the teachers', school administrators' and parents' willingness to participate. Of these schools, those with the highest frequencies of repeated and returned children were selected to maximise participants for the study. Finally, an attempt was made to select schools that reflected a range of social groups from the schools' catchment areas. For the repeated and returned groups, an attempt was made to select three types of schools:

- a state school whose catchment area was marked by families of middle to high socio-economic advantage;
- a state school whose catchment area was marked by families of lower levels of socio-economic advantage; and
- a non-government school.

However, when schools' <sup>21</sup>IRSED ratings were checked, schools with the highest frequencies of repeated and returned children were more often schools whose catchment areas were marked by families of middle to high socio-economic advantage. While some schools whose catchment areas were marked by families of lower levels of socio-economic advantage were included in the study,

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<sup>21</sup> IRSED indicators provide an estimate of a school's relative dis/advantage based on the socio-economic status of the school's catchment area (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland., 2007b). IRSED indicators will be more fully explain in Section 5.4.1.

they were not schools with repeated or returned children. They were schools where alternatives to Pre-school retention practices were employed.

At the Pre-schools where children were repeated and returned, several part-time Pre-school classes operated. The number of repeated or returned children at each site is reflective of all Pre-school classes at the centre.

Schools which employed Pre-school retention practices were:

- Maroochee State School – Catchment area marked by families of middle to high SES level
- Willow Park Kindergarten – Non-government school
- Windemere State Preschool - Catchment area marked by families of middle to high SES level

Although no children in the study attended Willow Park Kindergarten, two children attending Crestleigh State Preschool had spent their ‘first’ Pre-school year at Willow Park Kindergarten. Both parents made me aware that their children were having a ‘second’ year of Pre-school at Crestleigh State Preschool, which was included in the study as a school where children were returned to Pre-school from Year 1. To distinguish them from the returned children at Crestleigh State School, they will be identified with Willow Park Kindergarten. Following my initial discussions with the parents their revelation of a further Pre-school retention practice led me to include Willow Park Kindergarten, the ‘hub’ of a different Pre-school retention practice, delayed school entry, into the study.

Schools selected for returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 were:

- Raintree State Preschool - Catchment area marked by families of middle to low SES level
- St. Christopher’s College - Non-government school
- Crestleigh State Preschool - Catchment area marked by families of middle to high SES level

The survey revealed an interest by some teachers in alternatives to pre-school retention. As such, three schools that employed alternatives to pre-school retention were sought for inclusion in the study. The selection of schools that provided alternatives to repeating and returning children to Pre-school proved more difficult as there appeared to be fewer schools in this category. Three schools,

each with a different way of providing alternatives to repeating and returning children to Pre-school, were eventually found and were willing to participate in the study.

Schools which employed alternatives to Pre-school retention practices were:

- Riverview State School
- Woodrow State School
- Gardenia State School.

#### ***4.4.5 Learning from the case study***

While the case study focused on particular instances of repeating children at Pre-school, it enabled those who had been involved in the experience of Pre-school retention to (re)tell their story, so when others read their story they might come to know what happened and be able to relate others' experiences to their own experiences. Stake suggests that the readers can also “experience these happenings vicariously and draw their own conclusions” (2005, p. 450). If research is to benefit people, it needs to be framed in the context of people's everyday experiences (Stake, 2005). One might also learn from a single case study by comparing how it is similar or dissimilar from other known cases. As all knowledge is socially constructed, the case study might further assist in the construction of knowledge about Pre-school retention.

Hird argues that case studies rely on “analytical generalisation” that can be generalised to general theory (2003, p. 23). She argues:

Surveys rely on statistical generalisation, whereas case studies [...] rely on analytical generalisation – that is generalisation to theory. Generalisation is based on repeated observation and, like a single experiment, one case study provides an observation that can be generalised to general theory, particularly when considered in concert with other studies (2003, p. 23).

My goal in the case study, was, as Yin also suggests, to “expand and generalise theories” (1989, p. 21). Stake suggests that case studies can be of value for “refining theory and suggesting complexities for further investigation” (2005, p. 448).

## **4.5 Data Collection Methods and Analysis**

Case studies rely on a range of sources such as interviewing and observing as well as the collection of artefacts, documents and records to collect data. The data collection methods chosen for the study included unstructured interviews, participant observations, journal and field notes and document and artefact collection. Eisenhardt argues that the collected data may be “qualitative (e.g. words), quantitative (e.g. numbers) or both” (2002, p. 9). The data collected from the interviews was qualitative while the documents and data collected in the schools were both qualitative and quantitative. Data collected from Education Queensland was quantitative (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003). Participant observations enabled me to better understand the context of each individual case study and to become familiar with each of the participants, allowing the participants to become familiar with me and the study. Each of the data collection methods will be discussed in turn. The section will conclude with a description of how the data was analysed and a description of the specific tools for analysis.

### **4.5.1 Interviews**

Dexter argues that an interview is “a conversation with a purpose” (1970, p. 268). The unstructured interviews were conducted over an eighteen-month period, between 2001 and 2002, and formed the major part of the qualitative data collection. They were conducted with two main groups of people: parents (and in some instances grandparents) of the repeated and returned children and teachers. The teachers included Pre-school, Year 1 and Transition teachers. In cases where I felt it was relevant to a particular case study, Guidance Officers, principals, Deputy Principals and Teacher-aides were also interviewed.

Initially, semi-structured interviews were used (see Appendix O). Mishler (1986) argues that the question and answer method of interviewing, even with semi-structured interviews, has the capacity to suppress participant stories. By imposing certain “a priori categories” on the issue at hand, “the field of inquiry” may be limited (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 653). In reconsidering new issues raised by the participants in the initial interviews, I changed the interview format to a more unstructured narrative approach (Holloway & Jefferson, 2002). Through the use of unstructured in-depth interviews, new understandings were given more scope to emerge and provide a more composite picture of why particular Pre-school retention practices were employed for particular groups of children.

The question “Why was the child returned/repeated?” related to one of the main research questions, set the course of the interview. In this way, no ‘a priori categories’ limited the teachers’ and parents’ constructions of the topic. The aim of the interviews was to foreground teachers’ and parents’ understandings of, and reasons for, employing the various Pre-school retention practices and alternatives. After the initial question had been posed, the interview effectively took on a “narrative approach” where “the researcher’s responsibility is to be a good listener and the interviewee [...] a storyteller” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2002, p. 31). In some cases, ‘stories’ continued for up to two hours. Generally, the conversation was guided by the responses from each storyteller so that the positions they took up and the issues that were important to them were allowed to unfold in a more natural and conversational approach. When certain issues which I considered relevant to the study were not covered or clarified, I raised these issues towards the end of the interview. Although the stories of Pre-school retention are not intended to provide ‘truths’, “story telling stays closer to actual life-events than methods that elicit explanations” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2002, p. 32).

Initially, the repeated children were interviewed as well. Although I had interviewed a number of children, I decided to discontinue interviewing children when the interviews appeared to yield very little information on the children’s experiences of repeating. This may have been due to some children’s limited capacity at approximately five years of age to articulate clearly their experiences of Pre-school retention to someone relatively unfamiliar to them. Further, some parents appeared anxious about their children being ‘interviewed’, particularly as, according to some parents of the returned children, the experience had been a less than happy one. In such cases, I respected their views and did not pursue interviewing children. Although I abandoned this component of the study for ethical reasons, I believe that interviewing repeated children might offer a further dimension to understanding Pre-school retention, but this would be a different study.

The interviews at each school commenced with the Pre-school teacher. This strategy was employed as the Pre-school teacher provided an overview of the practices and the groups of children for whom they were provided. At three schools where alternatives were employed interviews commenced with the Principal. Parents, grandparents, Year 1 teachers, Transition teachers, Teacher-aides, Principals, Deputy Principals and Guidance Officers were then interviewed according to their significance in each retention case and their availability. I visited and immersed myself in each school, until the interviews were complete. Some schools where multiple interviews

were carried out, I visited twelve times, other schools I visited only three or four times. On average, each visit would last from two to three hours.

Because of school demands placed on teachers, school administrators and parents, interview times and places were flexible. Each interviewee was invited to suggest a possible time and venue for the interviews. Interview times were totally at the discretion of the interviewees and occurred when and where it suited them. The interviews with teachers were mostly conducted before or after school and in almost all cases, in their classrooms or offices. Interviews, particularly with the parents, were suggested in places that were familiar, more relaxed and non-threatening, such as their homes, their work places or the school and Pre-school gardens and verandas.

A total of fifty-one interviews were conducted with Pre-school teachers, Year 1 teachers, Transition teachers, Guidance Officers, Principals, Deputy Principals, Teacher-aides, parents and (initially) children. The large number of interviews was conducted in a range of educational contexts that included a range of Pre-school retention practices involving a range of participants to provide a general understanding of these practices and whether they were employed for different groups of children. In a number of cases, particularly with the teachers, several interviews were conducted. The approximate length of time required for each interview session ranged from between thirty minutes to two hours. Thus the case study provides a story based on fifty-one constructions of what, why and for whom Pre-school retention practices were employed in one Australian location.

### **Transcribing the interviews**

The interviews were audio taped and processed into written transcriptions as soon as it was practically possible. In this way, as Silverman puts it, “you are able to focus on the ‘actual details’ of one aspect of social life” (2000, p. 839). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and returned to the participants for authentication. All participants agreed that what was written was remembered as being said.

Interviews were transcribed according to a numbering system where conversation alternated between one speaker and the next. In this way, sections of the interviews could be readily located. For example:

4. S: He was at the stage where he was going to be suspended.
5. R: From Pre-school?

6. S: From the state school.
7. R: Oh, from when he was in Year 1?
8. S: Yep.

In the discussion where sections of the transcripts are used, their source will be identified in several ways. Where the discussion is from one speaker, it will appear as:

*He was at the stage where he was going to be suspended* (Interview with Sue, Acting Principal, Raintree State School: 4).

In sections where there was an extended discussion on a topic, as interviewer, I am identified as ‘R’, for ‘Robyn’, and the interviewee in the following example is identified as ‘S’ for the pseudonym, ‘Sue’:

S: *He was at the stage where he was going to be suspended.*  
R: *From Pre-school?* (Interview with Sue, Acting Principal, Raintree State School: 4-5)

#### ***4.5.2 Participant Observations***

The prime purpose of my observations was to provide me with a context in which I could comfortably interact (Angrosino, 2000; Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2005). As a participant observer, my observations influenced my construction of such contexts as well as the teachers, children, parents and administrative workers who interacted in them (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Angrosino and Mays de Perez suggest, “even studies based on direct interviews employ observational techniques to note body language and other gestural cues that lend meaning to the words of the persons being interviewed” (2000, p. 673).

Before the interviews commenced, I spent some time at the schools and in classrooms observing the teachers, children and parents. The teachers allowed me, as one of their colleagues, to freely interact with the children and parents in order to get to know them better. I felt privileged to be able to participate as co-teacher in a number of classroom activities and lessons during this time. I was also given access to a range of other sites in the school such as the outdoor areas around the classrooms. Where the schools’ teachers or administrators considered it relevant to the study, I was also offered access to other areas of the school and other school programs. For instance, at Gardenia State

School, I was shown the Cultural Studies Program and spoke with the teacher who designed and taught this program, as it was considered an integral part of the school's programming. Further, it was on one such occasion that I was made aware of, and given access to, data from Education Queensland on school and Pre-school retention rates in Queensland state schools (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003). Understanding the educational settings in which Pre-school retention practices and their alternatives occurred along with the relationships among teachers, parents and children who interacted in them was imperative to an understanding of the context in which the participants' stories were situated.

#### ***4.5.3 Journal and Field notes***

During the data collection stage, I kept a journal of observations and discussions with each participant. Field notes and journaling enabled me to incorporate reflexivity, which will be discussed in Section 4.6.3, into the study. In cases where information from the field notes was incorporated into the study, they will be cited in this way:

(Field notes: Gardenia State School, 11-10-02).

The field notes were incorporated into the analysed data and aided my understanding of the time, contexts and positions of the storytellers in the writing up stages of the study.

#### ***4.5.4 Document and Artefact Collection***

Apart from the interviews, document collection was one of the major sources of data collection for the case studies in schools. From each of the nine schools, Parent Information Handbooks, School Annual Reports, teachers' Progress Reports, letters and any document considered relevant to the study were collected.

The *Preschool Curriculum Guidelines* (QSA, 1998) was used by teachers as a basis for programming in state Pre-school centres and at the two non-government schools during the data collection stage. Before the study was completed, two further curricula, the *Draft early years curriculum guidelines* (QSA, 2005) and the *Early years: Curriculum guidelines* (QSA, 2007) were introduced to Queensland Pre-schools. Two other documents that I considered relevant to this study were the *State Preschool Teachers Handbook* (Department of Education, Queensland, 1994b) and a memo sent to all schools which were attached to Northern region in 1994. This document was

entitled *Repeating Preschool: Guidelines for Schools: Northern Region* (Department of Education, Northern Region, 1994).

A further source of data that proved the empirical basis for the study was provided through Education Queensland’s data site, Corporate Data Warehouse (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003). As discussed in Chapter 2, data on school and Pre-school retention drawn from this site represented a significant finding of the study given the general dearth of available data on school and Pre-school retention in Australia. As explained in Chapter 2, although the data drawn from Education Queensland’s Corporate Data Warehouse site was as much a finding of the study as the case study data, I decided to locate it in the literature chapter to lay an empirical basis for the study. Table 4.1 provides a list of the documents collected at each school.

**Table 4.1 Documents Collected at School Sites**

<b>Name of School</b>	<b>Name of Document</b>
Raintree State Preschool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Raintree Preschool parent handbook, 2001 (Raintree State Preschool, 2001)</li> <li>▪ Raintree State School parent handbook, 2001 (Raintree State School, 2001)</li> </ul>
St. Christopher’s College	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ St. Christopher’s College Preparatory prospectus, 2001 (St. Christopher’s College, 2001b)</li> <li>▪ St. Christopher’s College Kindergarten prospectus, 2001 (St. Christopher’s College, 2001a)</li> <li>▪ St. Christopher’s College prospectus, 2001 (St. Christopher’s College, 2001c)</li> </ul>
Crestleigh State Preschool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Schools Surveys – Student Overview: All students, all parents, all staff: 1999-2001 Corporate Data (Education Queensland, 2001)</li> <li>▪ Crestleigh State School parent handbook, 2001 (Crestleigh State School, 2001)(Crestleigh State School, 2001)(Crestleigh State School, 2001)(Crestleigh State School, 2001) (Crestleigh State School, 2001)(Crestleigh State School, 2001)</li> <li>▪ Crestleigh State Preschool parent handbook, 2001 (Crestleigh State Preschool, 2001)</li> </ul>
Maroochee State Preschool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Maroochee State School parent handbook, 2001 (Maroochee State School, 2001)</li> </ul>
Willow Park Kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A philosophical framework of early childhood education (Willow Park Kindergarten, 2001b)</li> <li>▪ Parent information kit, 2002 (Willow Park Kindergarten, 2001a)</li> <li>▪ Position statement for developing curriculum in early childhood, 2002 (Willow Park Kindergarten, 2001c)</li> <li>▪ Teachers’ program reports – August, September, October, November, 2001 (Willow Park Kindergarten, 2001d)</li> </ul>
Windemere State Preschool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Windemere State School Handbook, 2001 (Windemere State School, 2001)</li> <li>▪ Windemere State Preschool Parent Information</li> <li>▪ Booklet, 2001 (Windemere State Preschool, 2001)</li> </ul>

<b>Name of School</b>	<b>Name of Document</b>
Riverview State Preschool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Riverview State School annual report, 2001 (Riverview State School, 2001a)</li> <li>▪ Riverview State School parent handbook, 2002 (Riverview State School, 2001b)</li> </ul>
Woodrow State Preschool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Woodrow State School prospectus, 2002 (Woodrow State School, 2001)</li> </ul>
Gardenia State Preschool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Gardenia State School information booklet, 2002 (Gardenia State School, 2002)</li> <li>▪ Gardenia State School 2003 – 2005: School improvement and accountability framework, 2002 (Gardenia State School, 202)</li> </ul>
<b>Documents and databases relevant to Pre-school retention:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Preschool curriculum guidelines, 1998 (QSA, 1998).</li> <li>▪ Draft early years curriculum guidelines, 2005 (QSA, 2005).</li> <li>▪ Early years: Curriculum guidelines, 2007 (QSA, 2007).</li> <li>▪ Repeating Preschool: Guidelines for schools: Northern Region, 1994 (Department of Education, Northern Region, 1994).</li> <li>▪ State Preschool teachers' handbook, 1994. Revised (Department of Education, Queensland, 1994b).</li> <li>▪ Corporate data warehouse: On-line analytical processing (OLAP) reports (School users) (Education Queensland, 2003).</li> <li>▪ Corporate data warehouse: On-line analytical processing (OLAP) reports (School users) (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a).</li> </ul>	

#### **4.5.5 Data analysis**

Data analysis is the beginning of developing the findings of the case studies. The analysis of the data began with the first interviews. There was a constant movement between analysis, reflection, (re)reading, (re)interviewing and (re)writing until the story was told. The process is complex but the research essentially involved consolidating, condensing and weaving together of individual stories to tell one story of Pre-school retention. Bryman and Burgess suggest that there “is no standard approach to the analysis of qualitative data” (1994, p. 12).

#### **Coding the data**

Management of the data proceeded through three distinct stages. The preparation stage involved transcribing the interviews and checking with interviewees that what was written was remembered as being said. To manage the volume of interviews (51), they were assembled according to the schools to which the participants were attached.

The second stage was the data identification stage where the “text data” was divided into “analytically meaningful and easily locatable texts” (Reid, 1992, p. 126). Data was drawn primarily from the interviews although some field notes were used. Analysis of the text data began with coding. Coding is a subjective process that provides meaning to sections of the data collected in the study (Miles & Huberman, 1993). As the process was subjective, the research process, my reading

and prior experience influenced how the data was coded (Miles & Huberman, 1993). Transcripts from the interviews were continually reviewed to identify recurring themes. While each of the participants told their own story, the task was to identify common themes and patterns in these stories (Miles & Huberman, 1993).

Themes or categories were constructed from the discourses on which the participants drew. The selection of categories was not objective but was shaped by the research questions, the literature and theories of school success and failure. When many of the participants' talk related to school readiness, I incorporated Meisels' (1999) school readiness framework to further analyse the emerging data.

The final stage of data analysis drew particularly on theories of school readiness to identify matching concepts and themes which were then connected to literature in the field. Some new categories were devised to accommodate new understandings of Pre-school retention. The data collected for the study was extensive and the process of categorising the data enabled it to be reduced to a manageable size. The concept of discourse and the related concepts of subjectivity, positioning, hegemony and the tools of deconstruction were used to assist in the analysis of the participants' stories.

### **Discourse as an analytical tool**

The concept of discourse defines ways of thinking within institutions, demarking boundaries of possible truths in language (Butler, 1990). Weedon argues:

Discourses, in Foucault's work, are ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious mind and emotional life of the subjects which they seek to govern (1992, p. 108).

Within early childhood education there are a range of competing and contradictory discourses which are influenced by discourses in the wider society. Discourses influence the types of Pre-school retention practices that are provided and how children are described or positioned within those discourses. Different discourses can describe the same children in different ways. While 'school-ready' discourse may describe a child as being 'unready' for school, an alternative

discourse may describe the same child as being 'ready' for school. Dominant discourses, such as school-ready discourse, offer particular meanings of school readiness and marginalise and downgrade other meanings. In this way, as was discussed in Chapter 3, school-ready discourse contributes towards the maintenance of Pre-school retention practices. The use of discourse to analyse the data allowed me to investigate how such practices as Pre-school retention are maintained.

### **Subjectivity**

Because we live in a network of social relations and are subject to a range of conflicting discourses in our social contexts, we can become sites for conflicting forms of subjectivity. Within each "new context, each new set of relations and positioning within discourses and storylines" children may be constituted in different ways (Davies, 1994, p. 4). Subjectivity is the product of discourses and how we can be continually constituted through them. Davies argues that subjectivity is "the result of intersections of discourses, storylines and relations of power" (1994, pp. 3–4). Within the dominant school-ready discourse, children might be constituted, or offered the subject position, 'ready' or 'unready' for school. The subject position 'not ready' not only positions children in a negative way, but such positioning may result in children being repeated at Pre-school, which is not beneficial for children and may also result in long term harm (Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 1999, 2004; Shepard, 2004; Temple et al., 2004). Because subjectivity provides "an interpretive lens" through which children might see themselves and others in their social worlds (Davies, 1994, p. 5) negative subject positions need to be highlighted and changed.

### **Positioning**

Discourses and their practices create children's subjectivity by describing or positioning the child in particular ways within particular discourses. Children might be offered a range of subject positions within discourses which can be taken up or resisted. For example, through school-ready discourse, some children may be positioned as 'unready' for school. Although some parents may take up this subject position on behalf of their children, other parents may refuse this positioning. Davies argues:

[D]ifferent positioning within discourses can give a person a position of power within existing discourses as well as the power they might gain through being able to use existing discourses competently. That power comes from being able to see the effects of discourses upon those who are constituted through them (1994, p. 26).

## **Hegemony**

Discourses are places where hegemony is produced (Wilson, 1995). The concept of hegemony describes the domination of one discourse, group or practice over another (Wilson, 1995).

Hegemony perpetuates the discourses and practices of both the dominant and marginalised groups to the extent where the marginalised groups can share and accept the views of the dominant culture. Often through a 'natural' or 'commonsense' discourse, the subject position may appear to be 'good' even when the beliefs and practices of that system are not in the best interests of those who are marginalised (Corson, 1993; Weedon, 1992). Through "their language usages" or discourses, the "non-dominant adhere to the linguistic norms created by the dominant groups, while not recognizing that they are being 'voluntary coerced' " (Corson, 1993, p. 6).

Through the concept of hegemony, an understanding of cultural capital was developed (Bourdieu, 1977). Cultural capital refers to the language, thoughts, meanings, desires, values and behavioural styles that are valued in particular discourses and their practices. Bourdieu's use of the term 'cultural capital' (1977) incorporates the collective knowledge and experiences people gain that enables them to succeed in social institutions such as schools in contrast to others who do not have the same knowledge and experiences. His use of the term 'cultural capital' also includes a social dimension, that is, cultural capital works as a social relation to give people more power and status. Although the study draws on Bourdieu's notion that particular forms of knowledge and experiences enable people to participate and succeed in social institutions, the social dimension has less applicability to the study. As such, the term 'cultural resources' will be used instead. Cultural resources refer to particular resources, such as knowledge and skills as well as an understanding of cultural practices of schools that enable children to successfully participate in school. Valencia argues that schools generally favour certain types of skills and behaviours and not others (1997a). Children who have not acquired the cultural resources favoured by the dominant discourses of schooling may have little purchasing power in an education system that does not value their particular skills, practices and ways of being (McLaren, 1989; Nakata, 1993; Valencia, 1997a). Thus, children who do not have the skills, behaviours, language and values required of the dominant school-ready discourse may not have the resources with which to be positioned as 'ready' for school.

## **Deconstruction**

Surber (1998) argues that language, historically and socially located in discourses, constitutes our social realities for us. Social realities "do not exist prior to their articulation in language" (Weedon,

1992, p. 41). De Saussure (1993) theorised language as consisting of signs and their interrelations, each of which has two parts, a signifier (sound or written language) and a signified (meanings). Although there is no natural connection between the sound and written language (signifier) and its meaning (signified) “the relationship between the two is crucial” (Surber, 1998, p. 160). Meaning can be gained from the sign’s difference from all other possible signs in the language chain. Because the human mind has a tendency to organise thoughts along “parallel but opposing chains of terms” each term or thought is “associated with the others in its own chain (and in a sense suitable to them) as well as contrasted with another term in the opposing chain” (Surber, 1998, pp. 165-166). These opposing chains of terms and thoughts have been called binarisms (Davies, 1994; Surber, 1998).

Within binarisms, the ascendant or privileged group can often go unmarked and remain invisible (Davies, 1994). Because the privileged group is often invisible, it remains intact, unaccountable and unquestioned (Davies, 1994). Thus while dominance and privilege remains invisible, marginality can be plainly visible and called into question. Binary thinking privileges one side of the binary order and downgrades the other (Davies, 1994). Binarisms are created in the discourses of our culture and within schooling (Davies, 1994). Chapter 3 discussed how school-ready discourse, through binary thinking, can remain generally unquestioned, while calling into question those more visible and ‘other to’ the ready children, the ‘unready’ children.

## **4.6 Presentation**

### ***4.6.1 Criteria for judging adequacy***

A constructivist study does not rely on the positivist concepts of rigor and validity; instead it derives its credibility from trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The trustworthiness of the study is derived from the participants involved in the research who are empowered with the knowledge to determine the trustworthiness of the constructed stories. Kincheloe and McLaren argue that stories are credible to those who have constructed them (2000).

Part of the credibility, and therefore trustworthiness, of the study also relates directly to the way the research is conducted and the ethics of the researcher and the participants. As such, particular processes were used to increase the trustworthiness of the study. These processes will be discussed in turn.

#### ***4.6.2 Ethics and confidentiality***

Stake argues that “(q)ualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict” (2005, p. 447). Because the lives and the stories of those portrayed in the study ‘risk exposure’, I, along with the participants, saw confidentiality and anonymity as being of the highest priority. Participants were assured that their names, positions or any reference to their schools would not be revealed in the study. The ethical procedures employed in the study have previously been detailed in Section 4.2.2, Ethics and politics of the research.

#### ***4.6.3 Reflexivity***

Guba and Lincoln argue that “reflexivity is the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher” (2005, p. 210). Reflexivity required that I continually consider the research process, myself and those engaged in it (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). A reflexive approach allowed for the continual shaping and adjusting of the research process along with the issues under study (Sullivan, 2002). Comments from the participants, along with my own journal reflections, enabled me to reconsider a range of previously held assumptions and make adjustments accordingly.

One way in which I incorporated reflexivity into the research process was when I reconsidered the use of semi-structured interviews after the first interview. The change to a narrative approach not only enabled the participants some control over the agenda, but also reduced the propensity for unequal power relationships between myself and the participants (Hollway & Jefferson, 2002). Aware of the propensity for unequal power relations between the researcher and the researched, and because the methodological approach of the study allowed for such adjustments, I decided after the first interview to use a “topic centred approach” which was “open to change and development” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2002, p. 31). As Villenas argues that by “objectifying the subjectivities of the researched, by assuming authority and by not questioning their own privileged positions” researchers may be at risk of becoming “colonizers of the researched” (1966, p. 713).

The focus for analysis became centred on the people who were telling their stories about repeating children at Pre-school rather than prior understandings of Pre-school retention practices drawn mainly from United States literature. Hollway and Jefferson argue that “while stories are obviously not providing a transparent account through which we learn truths, storytelling stays closer to actual life events than methods that elicit explanations” (2002, p. 32).

By continually reflecting upon and critically examining “the nature of the research process” (Fonow & Cook, 1991, p. 2), I attempted to foreground the views and issues relevant to the participants. Not only did I continually reflect upon aspects of the research process but the participants were also invited to reflect and provide feedback on the collected data. Most of the parents, teachers and school administrators were happy to review and comment on the transcripts.

#### ***4.6.4 Reciprocity***

Reciprocity is part of the process of give and take in research (Lather, 1986). Glaser defines reciprocity as “the exchange of favours and commitments, the building of a sense of mutual identification and feeling of community” (1992, p. 50). The participants in this research gave a great deal of time by offering stories of their personal experience. I was aware of the contribution made by the participants and how that contribution developed and sustained an atmosphere of community and mutuality between us.

The teachers particularly seemed to share the enthusiasm of the project and, as ‘joint owners’ of the research, began to ask for feedback. Following the survey, which involved 59 Pre-school teachers, I reciprocated the teachers’ support by presenting the results of the survey at an early childhood conference and an early childhood seminar in the town where the research was conducted. A paper on the case studies was also presented at a national conference and published in an educational journal. In this way, I could give something back to those who had shared in the research project.

#### ***4.6.5 Writing the story***

Charmaz argues that researchers make “moral choices about portraying respondents, designing how to tell their stories” (2000, p. 528). According to Charmaz, such choices “lead to the researcher’s assuming the role as the writer” (2000, p. 528). In writing the story of repeating children at Pre-school, I have attempted to foreground the participants and their stories.

### **4.7 Conclusion**

Chapter 4 provided a description of the researcher, the research paradigm, the research strategy, the data collection methods and analysis and the presentation of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As researcher, I outlined my ontological, epistemological and ethical position in the study along with the participants with whom I co-constructed the study. The research paradigm, constructivism, was chosen to allow for new understandings of Pre-school retention to emerge. The research strategy, namely case study, was considered the most appropriate means to frame the data collection process

and the means for reporting the stories of the participants in the study. Nine individual case studies were conducted and nine different schools formed one larger case study of Pre-school retention.

Interviewing was one of the main data collecting methods used for the case study, although the study used participant observations, journal and field notes, as well as document and artefact collection. Discourse and the related concepts of subjectivity, positioning and deconstruction were used to analyse the stories of the participants. As discussed in Chapter 2, part of the data collected in the schools included data collected by Education Queensland on state school and Pre-school retention since 1997 (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003). While this data represents a significant finding in the study, the reasons for its presentation early in the study were, as explained in Chapter 2, to lay an empirical base for the study.

Given the complexity of the study and the general dearth of literature available in Australia on Pre-school retention, the chosen methodology allowed for new understandings of Pre-school retention to emerge. The following chapter, Chapter 5, is the first of two chapters that present the findings of the case studies. As mentioned previously, the findings of the study challenged some assumptions made at the beginning of the study based on the literature drawn mainly from the United States.

# CHAPTER 5

## PRE-SCHOOL RETENTION PRACTICES: THE FINDINGS

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter is the first of two chapters which consider the findings of the case studies. It examined a range of Pre-school retention practices used at the six schools where children were repeated at Pre-school, returned to Pre-school from Year 1, offered Transition programs or where their entry into schooling was delayed. While the data drawn from Education Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003), discussed in Chapter 2, provided considerable empirical evidence that the practice of Pre-school retention exists in Queensland schools, the case studies sought to understand why such practices might not only exist, but continue in Queensland schools given that research warns of its ineffectiveness (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Hong & Yu, 2006) and possible harm to children (Jimerson, 2001b). Throughout both this chapter and Chapter 6, findings will be presented in the words of the participants, as much as possible, to privilege their perspectives and gain some understanding of why Pre-school retention practices were employed. As such, discussion and theorising regarding the findings of Chapters 5 and 6 will be expanded and presented in Chapter 7.

The study was constructed around two main sets of research questions; this chapter will consider the first set of research questions related to the range of Pre-school retention practices found in the six schools. The second set of research questions, which were related to alternatives to Pre-school retention practices, will be addressed in the following chapter, Chapter 6. The first set of research questions, discussed in Chapter 1 and reviewed again below, provided a framework on which to analyse the findings from the case studies:

- What practices are associated with repeating children at Pre-school?
- Are particular groups of children more likely to be repeated at Pre-school than others?
- Why are children repeated at Pre-school?

Essentially, the case studies asked why different practices might be provided for particular groups of children. Although the questions were essentially linked, Sections 5.2 to 5.4 of the chapter will address each question in turn. To understand why some practices were provided for particular groups of children, the study first examines the question of why children were repeated at Pre-school.

### **The context of Pre-school retention**

An analysis of the discursive practices needs to include information about the discursive site, that is, Education Queensland. In an era of increasing accountability during the early twenty-first century when the case study data was collected (2001 – 2002), Education Queensland emphasised the need for children to begin Year 1, “school-ready” (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a, p. 1). Thus, teachers’ practices were influenced not only by their discursive histories but also by the authorised way of preparing children for school, that is, children needed to commence Year 1 ‘school-ready’. ‘School-ready’ discourse is drawn from maturational and empiricist/environmentalist theories of school readiness, which located the prime responsibility to be school-ready with the child or the child’s family.

School entry provided the discursive site from which to examine Pre-school retention practices employed by teachers and parents to ensure children would successfully commence school. What was possible for teachers and parents to do, depend on the available and authorised discourses. Although multiple discourses were available, teachers drew on a dominant way of assessing children’s readiness for school, that is, children needed particular ‘cultural resources’ to be considered school-ready. When children were considered unready for school, a range of Pre-school retention practices were employed to enable such children to acquire the necessary cultural resources through which they could achieve success at school. The conceptualisation of Pre-school retention as a legitimate process for improving children’s readiness for school underpinned Pre-school retention (Education Queensland, 2003).

## **5.2 Why Pre-school Retention Practices were Employed**

### ***5.2.1 Dominant discourses of early schooling***

Several main discourses underpinned, and resulted in, various Pre-school retention practices in the study. They included school-ready discourse, age-ready discourse, and the aspirational, really-ready

discourse. Other discourses which influenced practices focused on accountability and in some instances, teachers drew on a welfare discourse. Each will be discussed in turn.

### **School-ready discourse**

The discourse most commonly drawn on by teachers in the study was school-ready discourse. As the focus in Education Queensland was on the need for children to be “school-ready” (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a) it was not surprising that school-ready discourse dominated teachers’ talk at each of the six schools where Pre-school retention practices were employed. School-ready discourse created binary categories of ‘ready’ and ‘unready’. The ‘ready’ category, constructed from teachers’ ideas of what constituted school-readiness, positioned some children as ‘ready’ and others ‘unready’. Although teachers’ ideas of what attributes constituted children as ready and unready varied from school to school, their use of school-ready discourse inevitably positioned some children as ‘unready’ for school:

*R: Can you remember why he was returned to Pre-school from Year 1?*

*K: He was not ready for a classroom situation. He couldn't sit, whether it was in the seat or on the floor. He had poor attention span. He would just get up and walk out of the room and go off somewhere ... within the school grounds. Just basically, I suppose, not ready to sit down and learn as in a classroom situation (Interview with Kate, Year 1 teacher, Crestleigh State Preschool: 6).*

*He wasn't ready for school ... didn't do any work (Interview with Rachael, Year 1 teacher, Crestleigh State School: 2, 6)*

*Those children (offered a Transition program) often needed the six months more of Pre-school before they were deemed quite .... you know, ready enough to cope (with Year 1) (Interview with Gwen, Pre-school teacher, Windamere State Preschool: 4).*

Some parents had similarly invested in school-ready discourse:

*The teacher's got to sit all these students down and say what we're going to do this ... and what we're going to do that ... and that's what I want him to be ready for (Interview with Marion, parent, Maroochnee State Preschool: 48).*

*Esther wasn't grabbing a lot of stuff and wasn't ready, and hadn't been, hadn't been at a level ready to come into Grade 1 (Interview with Sharon, parent, St. Christopher's College: 38).*

*She wasn't ready ... she didn't want to do homework or anything like that. She wasn't interested and it was too hard and she was struggling (Interview with Lydia, parent, St. Christopher's College: 2, 34).*

Within school-ready discourse, children were positioned as 'ready' or as 'unready' for school. Children positioned as 'unready' were repeated at Pre-school or returned to Pre-school from Year 1.

### **Really-ready discourse**

Some parents, who appeared to recognise schools' investment in school-ready discourse and how the school system worked, drew on an alternative, more aspirational, 'really-ready' discourse if they believed their children were 'at risk' of falling into the 'unready' category. If their children possessed attributes which they believed placed them 'at risk' of being 'unready for school', for example, boys with late birthdays, such parents drew on a more aspirational discourse to ensure their generally younger children were (re)positioned in a more positive and a more powerful way within a school system that emphasized the need for children to be 'school-ready'. Because the parents appeared to understand how the system 'worked', they appeared to work within this system, devising a practice underpinned by a more aspirational, 'really-ready' discourse:

*I realised it (delayed school entry) had lots of advantages, just, you know, giving them more time to make ... um hopefully make worthwhile decisions and perhaps being a leader and not a follower ... I suppose our thinking was ... he was really ready for Year 1 ... (Interview with Chris, parent, Willow Park Kindergarten: 2).*

The subject position, 'really-ready', was achieved for the child through the discursive practice of delaying the child's entry to school. Such parents who delayed their children's entry to school believed that children who were older than their peers might have an advantage in schooling. It was believed that this advantage might be gained by giving the child more time and increased opportunities to acquire the valued cultural resources that would not only ensure the child's success at school, but also enable the child to gain a competitive advantage at school to become a 'leader' and not a 'follower'.

### **Age-ready discourse**

While parents of the delayed children and some parents of the repeated children spoke of their children's need to be 'ready for school' or 'really ready' for school, other parents did not. Some parents of the repeated and returned children, while less familiar with school-ready discourse, understood 'age-ready' discourse. Within age-ready discourse, children were positioned as 'ready' for school, that is, they were legally entitled to commence school when they were the correct chronological age:

*So chronologically he was the right age for Grade 1* (Interview with Carmel, parent, St. Christopher's College: 6).

*He's able, legally to go at that age* (Interview with Renae, parent, Windamere State School: 90).

Parents who drew on this discourse were aware that it gave them more power to refuse, on behalf of their children, the more negative positioning of 'unready' for school as 'legally', age-ready discourse held more weight than school-ready discourse:

*Yeah, but they (the teachers) can only cast their views. They can't say, "He's staying down and that's that"* (Interview with Grace, grandparent, Crestleigh State School: 103).

Some parents, although familiar with age-ready discourse, appeared to be quite unfamiliar with school-ready discourse. One parent recounted how she was shocked when she was informed at the end of the year by a Pre-school teacher at another centre that her child would not be ready for Year 1 the following year when she had assumed, because he was the 'correct' age, he would commence Year 1 the following year:

*(T)hey said to me they thought maybe he didn't quite look like he would be ready for school. I could have like, eased him into it that he was coming back to Pre-school. But it was like two weeks before the year ended last year that they said to me, "Oh, we don't think he's ready." So, you know, he's had all that time of me saying, you know, "You're going to school next year" ... sort of thing* (Interview with Jodie, parent, Woolamaloo State School: 31).

Another parent, positioned her child within age-ready discourse as 'ready' for school because he was the 'correct' or 'legal' age to commence Pre-school and school. However, age-ready discourse, legitimised by Education Queensland (The State of Queensland, Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2002a), appeared to be at odds with school-ready discourse, also emphasised by Education Queensland, and which was taken up by most teachers (The State of Queensland, Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2002a). The parent's positioning of her child as 'ready' for school within age-ready discourse was at variance with the teacher's positioning of the child as 'unready' within school-ready discourse. Although the child fulfilled the legal age requirement of being 'ready' for school within age-ready discourse, one particular attribute, the child's relatively young age (December birthday), precluded his being positioned as 'ready' for school within school-ready discourse:

*R: And ... they (the teachers) said he was too young Renae?*

*Renae: Yeah. Because when he first started Pre-school they said that he is a bit too young and you (parent) should leave it for another year.*

*R: Oh ...*

*Renae: Yeah, but I said, "No, he can go (to Pre-school)", you know.*

*R: Yes ...*

*Renae: He is able, legally, to go at that age (Interview with Renae, parent, Windamere State Preschool: 85-88).*

As age-ready discourse was the 'legal' determiner in children's entry to Pre-school and school, it held more weight than school-ready discourse. However, because teachers generally believed that school success was possible only when children had particular school-ready attributes, such as being relatively 'older for one's year level', parents were often persuaded to similarly invest in school-ready discourse for the child's benefit:

*Renae: He was (turned) 5 then, when he went to Pre-school. So then I thought, oh, he can go to school...*

*R: Yeah ...*

*Renae: And they (Pre-school teachers) said, "No. He's got to repeat ... Pre-school".*

*R: Ok, so they said that he has to, or should?*

*Renae: No. They said that he had to do it.*

*R: Ok.*

*Renae: It was sort of like um ... they had to get my permission ... Yeah ... you know but I said, "Yeah, alright"* (Interview with Renae, parent, Windamere State Preschool: 92-98).

While some teachers might appear to have been overly coercive in persuading parents to repeat their children at Pre-school, it is likely that teachers who drew on school-ready discourse saw that the only avenue to success at school was through the possession of particular cultural resources such as age. Such understandings are often attributed to maturational beliefs about school readiness which equate more time with being more ready for school (NAECSSDE, 2000). However, it is possible that within the extra time, teachers and parents believed younger children in particular had more time to construct skills and behaviours to succeed at school. In this way, it is possible that teachers and parents also drew upon constructivist/interactionist views of school readiness.

Although teachers understood that Education Queensland allowed children to commence school when they were age-ready, while at the same time emphasising the need for children to be school-ready (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a), they appeared to more readily take up school-ready discourse as opposed to age-ready, possibly because of increasing accountability. To resolve this dilemma and provide a compromise between the opposing school-ready discourse preferred by the teachers and age-ready discourse preferred by some parents, Transition programs were devised which incorporated both discourses. Although some parents focused on their children being 'really-ready' or being 'age-ready', all the teachers in the study who employed Pre-school retention practices emphasized the need for children to be 'school-ready'. To determine whether children were school-ready, most teachers used some form of testing.

### ***5.2.2 Ready for what? Cultural resources for the Year 1 classroom***

Although teachers used a range of ways of assessing children's readiness for school, all teachers who drew on school-ready discourse saw children's success at school as being dependant upon their having *particular* cultural resources. Particular cultural resources included both skills and dispositions to learn or school behaviours.

#### **Assessing readiness for school**

As the Queensland Studies Authority recommended that children's learning and development at Pre-school be assessed in various ways *to inform the Pre-school program*, there was no formal requirement or means by which to test children's readiness for school in Queensland state schools

(QSA, 1998). Anxious, at the same time, to embrace Education Queensland's school-ready emphasis, some teachers devised checklists to ensure children entered Year 1 'school-ready'. Others drew upon the support of guidance officers or learning support personnel who used a range of standardised tests similar to the Binet 4 to test children's readiness for school. At St. Christopher's College, the Pre-school teacher used a school readiness test, similar to the Kindergarten Readiness Test (Anderhalter & Perney, 2007), which she used when teaching in the United States. Some teachers assessed children's readiness for school through observations and anecdotal records as recommended by QSA (1998, 2005, 2007).

Although teachers adapted tests to suit their own needs, tests generally focused on assessing children's pre-literacy, pre-numeracy skills and pre-writing development. These broad areas generally embodied what teachers believed were the necessary cultural resources through which success in Year 1 might be achieved. Equally important for many teachers were the discursive practices of the Year 1 classroom; children needed to be familiar with such practices to successfully participate in schooling. Thus, particular school-ready skills and an understanding of the required practices of the Year 1 classroom comprised the cultural resources through which children could achieve success in Year 1. The possession of such resources determined by teachers and assessed through testing, or observation and anecdotal records, positioned children as 'ready' for school. Children who did not have the particular cultural resources were positioned as 'unready' for school.

Teachers' need to assess children's readiness for school may not simply be the result of Education Queensland's school-ready emphasis; it may also be reflective of, and driven by, increases in school accountability at all year levels including Pre-school (Department of Education and the Arts, Queensland, 2005b). Although few teachers mentioned school accountability, accountability discourse was clearly evidenced through the use of testing at school entry. Teachers also noted that they were accountable for children's learning outcomes which necessitated the need for testing:

*And we can't just say, "Oh well, we'll just leave them" ... we have our curriculum and ... we have to show that they actually learn something (Interview with Rachael, Year 1 teacher, Crestleigh State School: 43).*

While teachers at four of the six schools tested children's readiness for school, teachers at the other two schools kept records and mapped children's progress at Pre-school. While testing has been more often associated with school-ready discourse (NAECSSDE, 2000), which appeared to be

driven by discourses of accountability, mapping or recording a child's progress through school is associated with a social constructivist/interactionist view of school readiness. While testing was more often used, both approaches in the study were used to assess children's readiness for school.

Although all teachers at the six schools where Pre-school retention practices were employed drew on school-ready discourse, the particular cultural resources required of children to be 'school-ready' varied between schools. At one Pre-school, one parent had been assured by the child's Pre-school teacher that he possessed the school-ready skills which positioned him as 'ready for school':

*The Pre-school teacher assured me that she had prepared him to a Grade 1 level within a state system, what the state system would be at Grade 1 level. And so he could ... he passed the basic test with knowing his name and writing, and sort of counting and colours and all that sort of stuff ... (Interview with Carmel, parent, St. Christopher's College: 6).*

However, when the child transferred to a different Pre-school, he was repositioned as 'unready for school' because he did not have the particular skills valued at that school:

*Right, well then, when we did the end of the term testing, yes, that's right, we did it in the term testing and he came out far, far, far below the other children. So it was just ... mum was spoken to on numerous occasions, showed them the test results and said, "We don't believe he's ready to go to Grade 1"... (He) skipped the Prep program (Pre-school program at the new school) – so that's all the letters and sounds and then pre-writing things too. He'd gone from a (state) Pre-school situation right to a Grade 1 situation<sup>22</sup>. So he was trying to cope with children who knew how to write in lines, and that's already children with their letters and sounds and number concepts. When he came to us he couldn't write his first name well. The other children (in Prep) were writing first and last names and in line (Interview with Sarah, Pre-school teacher, St. Christopher's College: 4, 16).*

While both Pre-schools drew on school-ready discourse and used testing to determine children's readiness for school, it was apparent that different cultural resources were valued and required at the different Pre-schools. Hence at some schools, children might be considered 'ready' for school,

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<sup>22</sup> The school operated a pre-year 1 class, between pre-school and year 1, where children learned letters, sounds, counting and writing.

while at other schools, the same children might be considered ‘unready’ for school. As the child did not have the necessary skills at his new Pre-school, he was positioned as unready for Year 1 and returned to Pre-school. The skills the child did not have included ‘knowing letters’, ‘sounds’, ‘how to write in lines’ and ‘number concepts’ which were identified through testing and taught in a special learning support class provided for such children two days per week when Pre-school was not available. This approach appears to draw on an empiricist/environmentalist view of school readiness (Meisels, 1999) where gaps in the child’s readiness were identified and intervention strategies were provided to ensure the child had the necessary resources to be positioned as ‘ready’ the following year. While some may see various retention practices in a deficit way (NAECSSDE, 2000), others may see the employment of such practices as a means by which ‘unready’ children are able to acquire the same cultural resources as the ‘ready’ children to succeed in Year 1.

Unless children had the particular cultural resources valued at the school, they were deemed ‘unready’ and parents were advised to give their children another year of Pre-school. While the parent from St. Christopher’s College accepted this subject position for her child, one parent from Crestleigh State School refused it on behalf of her child. Although teachers and school personnel understood Education Queensland’s emphasis on children being school-ready and while it was perhaps in teachers’ interests due to increasing accountability to have children school-ready, not all parents were familiar with, or took up, school-ready discourse. In some instances, teachers appeared to assume parents were as familiar with school-ready beliefs and practices as they were. Such misguided assumptions undoubtedly came from teachers’ dominant and more privileged speaking positions. One Guidance Officer explained that although he had used a standardised test such as the Binet 4 to validate the child’s (un)readiness status, the parent had difficulty in acknowledging the test results and the (negative) way in which the results positioned her child:

J: *My conclusion (from the tests) was that ... there was development occurring across all areas (of the child’s development) and there didn’t appear to be, just on a very brief observation, any cognitive difficulties. However, there were significant delays in his fine motor and in his expressive language which would have impacted on his readiness for school. Um, when I’d done that, I’d put my thoughts together in a report. And I had a meeting with Mum; I also had a meeting with Grandma, and I discussed my report and my observations and I talked about my concerns about his expressive language, about his fine motor and about his social immaturity ... ready to go to school, in other words, his readiness. And as a result of that, I said, “Look, my*

*observations are saying that this little boy, compared with his peers, he's immature, and you need to talk to your Pre-school teacher, keep liaising with your Pre-school teacher who has got the best idea of this little boy's readiness for school and be guided by what she says".*

*R: And how did the parents, grandparents ... feel about that?*

*J: It was quite a shock when both Melanie (Pre-school teacher) and I mentioned to the mum and to the grandma that this little boy was delayed in his development. And I think they took the delay, interpreted the delay as impaired. And they thought that we were saying there was something wrong with their son, while, where we took a lot of effort to try and explain, "No, we think he's a reasonably bright little boy, but he's just immature, he's not at the same level as other people (Interview with Jack, Guidance Officer, Crestleigh State School: 4-6).*

In binary opposites, such as ready and unready, the first term, defined by the dominant group such as teachers is normative and ascendant while the second term is seen as a deviation from the defined norm. From their position in the ascendant category, teachers did not appear to be aware of their categorisation. As Davies suggests, those in the ascendant category often "see themselves simply as a person whom anyone else is free to be like" (1994, p. 18). Those in the less privileged category are more conscious of their position and their less privileged status. Because teachers saw and spoke from a dominant and privileged position, they were often unable to see the negative effect on those who were positioned less powerfully and in the negative way of 'unready'. While the teachers' intentions were to provide the child with some agency through which to acquire the same cultural resources as the 'ready' children, the parent was offended by the less privileged subject position of 'unready' offered to her child. The parent refused this positioning for her child and advanced him to Year 1 for other reasons as well:

*R: So you initially wanted him to go to Grade 1?*

*T: Yeah, I thought it might have helped him a bit more being with older children (Interview with Thel, parent, Crestleigh State School: 87-88).*

The parent's view that the child may learn more from, and be supported by, his peers is supported by current theories of learning offered by Vygotsky (2007), current pedagogical practices (QSA, 2007) and current research (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005).

While particular cultural resources required to be school-ready varied between schools, such as pre-reading, pre-writing and pre-numeracy skills, teachers unanimously agreed that for children to successfully participate in Year 1, they needed to understand the discursive practices of the Year 1 classrooms. Children who did not have particular school-ready skills or an understanding of the discursive practices of the Year 1 classroom were positioned as ‘unready’ for school and repeated.

### **School-ready skills**

It was clear that teachers valued particular cultural resources which generally included pre-reading, pre-writing and pre-numeracy skills. Without such resources, children were positioned as ‘unready’ for school:

*Oh well the one thing he wasn't ... he didn't know any numbers, had trouble with knowing colours, had problems with colours ... had trouble writing his name ... a lot of the basics ... he hadn't mixed with other kids* (Interview with Janice, teacher, Maroochee State Preschool: 16, 52, 54).

While a knowledge of the ‘basics’ appeared to vary between schools, teachers often focused on skill development in two particular areas; pre-numeracy skills (numbers, shapes, colours) and some pre-writing skills (writing own name). Although language and communication has been considered a major area of pre-literacy development (QSA, 2007) it did not appear to be a major concern in assessing children’s readiness for school. While the same child did not have the same cultural resources valued by the dominant school-ready discourse, such as numbers, colours and writing his name, he had very good language skills according to both his teacher and his mother:

*Well, um, Martin is the one that – ask him anything about mowers, lawns, lawnmowers, whipper-snippers, machinery ... he knows* (Interview with Janice, teacher, Maroochee State Preschool: 110, 112).

*He's actually really, really good at speaking. Like he started talking really early and he's really good with words and what not. But yeah, obviously he needed to get used to being with a lot of other kids and getting on with them* (Interview with Felecia, parent, Maroochee State Preschool: 40).

It appeared that while some cultural resources were valued, others were not. Similarly, while another Pre-school teacher considered that a child “wasn’t ready” because “her (pre-numeracy) concepts were quite low” and “she wasn’t able to write her name”, she also noted on the other hand that there were “no problems with her speech and language” (Interview with Gwen, Pre-school teacher, Windamere State Preschool: 77). Although such children had good language and speaking skills, it appeared that these cultural resources had less cultural purchase at school. The same parent noted that while her child also had other qualities that were not valued at school, they were valued in life generally:

*And it’s unfortunate because I think the independent qualities are what you need after you leave school but you can’t run a school with that many independent thinkers I suppose* (Interview with Felecia, parent, Maroochee State Preschool: 94).

While particular cultural resources were deemed necessary to be considered ‘school-ready’, particular ways of acquiring the necessary skills and behaviours appeared to be favoured. While QSA (1998, 2005, 2007) advises that there are no culturally specific ways to acquire pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills, some teachers valued specific ways and practices. Children’s readiness for school was sometimes defined in terms of their taking up these specific ways, such as writing, in contrast to other activities, such as construction:

*He’s just starting to want to do things (writing and table activities) apart from um, blocks and constructions and stuff like that* (Interview with Janice, teacher, Maroochee State Preschool: 104).

Some teachers viewed children’s interest in school-type activities, such as writing and drawing, as an indication of their readiness for school. Although one child preferred to work with blocks and constructions to develop pre-numeracy and pre-literacy skills, and although he appeared to have good language and significant knowledge about machinery and outdoor pursuits and could work independently, he was repeated because his ways of learning and the skills he had acquired had less cultural purchase at this school (Interview with Janice, teacher, Maroochee State Preschool: 52). Another parent explained how her child, a boy, was less interested in indoor activities, such as drawing and writing, preferring instead outdoor activities and mixing with people at soccer:

*He does a lot more outside. He'll want to know the ins and outs of cars and what my son's doing with them mechanically, and me doing the gardening ... (He's) good socially, will ... have a chat with anybody, will go, be forward in ... wanting to know things and everything. But we felt he needs to know a little bit of his ABCs (Interview with Marion, parent, Maroochee State Preschool: 26).*

Davies has similarly noted boys' preference for hands-on and outdoor activities as well as a desire for boys to identify with outdoor pursuits (1994). Although some children were considered to have other strengths such as social competence, independence, good language and communication skills, these attributes had less value and less cultural purchase than the more academic skills of writing and pre-numeracy concepts.

### **School-ready dispositions or behaviours**

While Pre-school and Year 1 teachers in the study appeared to value particular cultural resources in relation to children's pre-academic skills, the Year 1 teachers took up a particularly definite position in relation to the expected cultural practices of the Year 1 classroom. If these practices were not taken up and evidenced in appropriate ways, it was an indication that the children were not ready for Year 1:

*He didn't do any work. He couldn't sit still long enough. He would be up out of the chair. He was just not ready to work. He couldn't sit in the chair; he couldn't understand what he was supposed to do with a task. He couldn't hold a pencil ... as in not physically hold a pencil, but he just couldn't apply himself (Interview with Kate, Year 1 teacher, Crestleigh State School: 36).*

*... he wanted to play all day. That's all he was interested in – was playing. And he couldn't sit on his seat. He'd have all the equipment that he had, all of the equipment, he just broke it – he tore it up. He just cut it to pieces ... didn't do any work (Interview with Rachael, Year 1 teacher, Crestleigh State School: 6, 8).*

*He physically didn't stay in the classroom. He used to run around the verandahs. He didn't sit still. You know, he really wasn't ready for the classroom. He was um ... he couldn't sit at the table and do an activity, handwriting, co-ordination (Interview with Sue, Acting Principal, Raintree State School: 2).*

*He didn't have the, even the skills to hold a pencil or, he wasn't interested in holding a pencil, or coming to sit down at the table and at least having a go... (Interview with Tammy, Year 1 teacher, Raintree State School: 16)*

*...when he's required or asked to sit at a desk and read or do something, as yesterday, he crawled under one of the tables and put all the cushions around him, and so I just left him there (Interview with Ewan, Year 1 teacher, Raintree State School: 16).*

*He was still at a play stage with concrete material, which is still Grade 1 as well, but he was more at the play stages of learning... (Interview with Mary, Year 1 teacher, St. Christopher's College: 2).*

*He wasn't settled ... and ready to learn (Interview with Sam, Year 1 teacher, Raintree State School: 30).*

The expected classroom practices were clearly outlined by the Year 1 teachers. Children were expected to follow the teacher's directions and complete the 'work' set by the teacher. Completing the 'work' set by teachers also involved sitting still and being 'settled', 'at the desk', 'writing' with 'pencils and paper' or 'reading'. Playing or moving about too much in the classroom generally indicated that children 'weren't ready' to 'work' or even 'learn'. If the expected classroom dispositions were not evidenced by the children, parents would be advised to return their children to Pre-school and repeat them at Pre-school. While both girls and boys were repeated or returned because they did not have the required school-ready skills or behaviours, it was only the returned boys who were noted by the teachers as having 'inappropriate' classroom behaviours. Girls and boys who were repeated and girls who were returned were not mentioned by teachers as having inappropriate classroom behaviours.

### **Boys' behaviours: He had punched a relief teacher**

The six returned boys in particular were reported by teachers or parents as displaying inappropriate behaviours at school:

*His behaviour was kicking and biting and he had actually ... he was at the stage where he had punched a relief teacher (Interview with Sue, Acting Principal, Raintree State School: 8).*

*He'd yell and scream at anything. Right in our face, there's no respect here for adults or anything like that. He used almost immature powers, like biting, hitting and those types of things that young children do to regain the power. He, he punched me once (Interview with Tammy, Year 1 teacher, Raintree State School: 30).*

*R: Were there any issues of behaviour ... any behaviour problems?*

*J: Yes. I think ... the best word would be 'tantrums' to get his own way (Interview with Jack, guidance officer, Crestleigh State School: 13-14).*

*R: Was behaviour an issue with any of them (returned children)?*

*M: Daniel ... he had some outbursts at home ... but nothing ever came to school and mum was sort of relieved about that because some of the outbursts weren't fantastic, no ... (Interview with Mary, Year 1 teacher, St. Christopher's College: 156-159).*

While some teachers believed that the returned boys did not display the appropriate classroom behaviours because their immaturity prohibited them from taking up these behaviours, other teachers believed that the boys' inappropriate behaviours were the result of their inability to 'cope' with, or participate in, Year 1. In some cases, the boys' inappropriate behaviours precipitated their return to Pre-school from Year 1:

*S: He was at the stage where he was going to be suspended.*

*R: From Pre-school?*

*S: From the state school.*

*R: Oh, from when he was in Year 1?*

*S: Yep. (Interview with Sue, Acting Principal, Raintree State School: 4-8)*

Another child at the same school was similarly returned to Pre-school from Year 1 after being suspended for a week for his inappropriate behaviours in Year 1 (Field notes: Raintree State Preschool, 05-09-01). Another child, according to his teacher had become "very angry and physical at home" and was "just totally frustrated" because he had commenced Year 1 without the necessary skills with which to successfully participate in Year 1 (Interview with Sarah, Pre-school teacher, St. Christopher's College: 14). Without the expected skills, the child was unable to participate in schooling or achieve any sense of success which affected his attitude towards school:

*He wasn't coping. He would come home from school; he didn't want to do his homework. He was really exhausted and I know that's a natural part of things but not to the extent that he was. And so we'd have tantrums as soon as he walked in the door. If you asked him to do his homework, it was worse. He didn't want to think about school* (Interview with Carmel, parent, St. Christopher's College: 14).

When the child was returned to Pre-school from Year 1, he was, according to his Year 1 teacher "much happier" (Interview with Mary, Year 1 teacher, St. Christopher's College: 13). The child's mother also indicated that the child was much happier at Pre-school than in Year 1:

*It wasn't a constant struggle all day which Grade 1 was ... it relieved the pressures almost immediately* (Interview with Carmel, parent, St. Christopher's College: 32, 34).

As the focus, within school-ready discourse is on the child, the cause of the child's lack of success in Year 1 was attributed to the child's lack of specific skills. To address the child's need of specific skills to succeed in Year 1, the child was returned to Pre-school where he could better acquire them. While the parent saw the teacher's provision of the practice as aspirational in that it 'relieved the pressures almost immediately', some may see that the practice also positioned the child as 'lacking' the required skills and thus in a negative way. When children attempted to participate in Year 1 with cultural resources which they did not have, they began to display an increasing inability to cope. For the returned boys, this was evidenced through teachers' reports of inappropriate behaviours:

*Apparently he was just being ... starting to be quite aggressive and being a difficulty in the classroom ... and emotionally just couldn't cope* (Interview with Janet, relief Pre-school teacher, Raintree State School: 31).

In most cases it appeared that when the child was returned to Pre-school, where there may have been less pressure to operate with the school-ready skills and behaviours they did not have, their 'inappropriate' behaviours improved. However, one child, who participated in a Transition program following his return to Pre-school from Year 1, attended Year 1 in the afternoons where his inappropriate behaviours continued:

*Overall, I ... I think it's another maturity thing. He, he has improved. Even now in Pre-school, he ... he's quite good. But as I said, when I go over to the school in the afternoon,*

*his behaviour is fairly abominable* (Interview with Ewan, Pre-school teacher, Raintree State School: 48).

Although the child's behaviour was reported to be acceptable at Pre-school in the mornings, it continued to be 'fairly abominable' in the afternoons when he went to Year 1 which the teacher attributed to 'immaturity'. There appeared to be a widely held view among teachers that children's 'maturity' played a part in their behaviour and their inability to cope in the Year 1 classroom. Teachers, who took up this view of school readiness, whether wholly or partially, usually believed that, given time, mature behaviours would develop within the child. However, as the interview with the teacher was conducted towards the end of the year (November), it appeared that the child had not 'matured' in his behaviours during his second year of Pre-school, particularly in regard to the expected Year 1 classroom behaviours. Such beliefs are drawn from maturational understandings of school readiness in which it is understood that given 'more time' to mature, children's behaviours will mature and thus improve. It appeared that the child's behaviours did not mature even though he had been given 'more time' at Pre-school. While it is likely that other forms of intervention, based on empiricist/environmentalist or even constructivist/interactionist views of school readiness were provided as well, such findings would appear to contest a maturational view of school readiness where it is believed that given time, children will simply develop 'mature' and more appropriate behaviours for classroom learning. In either case, intervention practices underpinned by school-ready discourse which are largely underpinned by maturational or empiricist/environmentalist views of school readiness, focus largely on the 'unready' child to acquire particular cultural resources before they can successfully participate in schooling.

Similar to other explanations for children's inability to cope in Year 1, the teacher believed the child's disruptive behaviours were related to "problems in his maturity" (Interview with Ewan, Pre-school teacher, Raintree State School: 12). In many cases, teachers regarded boys' inability to cope in Year 1, their resulting unacceptable behaviours and their need to be returned to Pre-school from Year 1 as being related to their general 'immaturity':

*When he came to Year 1 he was really immature* (Interview with Ruth, Year 1 teacher, Crestleigh State School: 20).

Despite frequent claims about boys' general immaturity, teachers and parents reported, in each case, an improvement in their behaviour after they were returned to Pre-school from Year 1.

Improvements in the boys' behaviour may also have been related to the particular school or Pre-school philosophy and the resulting pedagogical practice. Compared to the practices in some Year 1 classrooms, Pre-school pedagogical practices typically allow for a greater freedom of movement and independence, cater for a wider range of interests and offer a greater choice of curriculum activities. The pedagogical practices of Pre-school may also cater for a greater range of learning styles and developmental levels and value different ways of being, not just for boys but for children from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The recommended principles for effective teaching practices in the early years of schooling (QSA, 2007) are more often congruent with Pre-school pedagogy but may be less congruent with the more traditional approaches to learning offered in some Year 1 classrooms which may, as other studies have similarly found, offer a greater challenge to boys than girls (Connolly, 2004) and children from culturally diverse groups (McLaren, 1989, Valencia, 1997a).

**Girls' behaviour: She would be crying quite a lot**

Of the eighteen returned, repeated and delayed children, five were girls. There was no mention of any repeated or returned girls as having behavioural concerns. However, it was noted by the Year 1 teachers at two schools where children were returned to Pre-school from Year 1 that two girls were not 'coping' in Year 1. Tears and not wanting to go to school were reported behaviours that emerged when the two girls were unable to cope with the work in Year 1. A Year 1 teacher described one girl's reaction to the Year 1 classroom:

*I think she just wasn't coping in the beginning and it was just ... it was too much for her, she would be crying quite a lot (Interview with Marie, Year 1 teacher, Raintree State school: 66)*

The teachers at another school described a similar reaction by a girl to the learning situation in Year 1:

*... these tears and crying and upset, and just, you know, (she) wasn't coping (Interview with Sarah, Pre-school teacher, St. Christopher's College: 22).*

*But she wasn't coping with the work. Like, she wasn't coping in that she couldn't ... she didn't understand the sounds and the, you know, how to write them (Interview with Mary, Year 1 teacher, St. Christopher's College: 103).*

The same girl “would come to school ... crying, like crying through the day” and “would go home crying” (Interview with Mary, Year 1 teacher, St. Christopher’s College: 166 and 89). Her parents had to “cope with the tears in the morning trying to peel her off them to go into Grade 1” (Interview with Sarah, Pre-school teacher, St. Christopher’s College: 28). Because the girl became so upset about attending school each day, her parents allowed her to stay at home to relieve her from the pressure of the Year 1 classroom:

*And she was saying, “I don’t want to go to school today”. So they would keep her home. So she wasn’t even attending school. That happened like ... she would’ve like maybe missed a week by saying, “I don’t want to come to school”* (Interview with Mary, Year 1 teacher, St. Christopher’s College: 111).

Although these behaviours were not considered to be disruptive to the Year 1 classroom as the boys’ behaviours were, they were nevertheless evidence of considerable emotional distress on the part of the girls. By contrast, the returned boys appeared to take up the more dominant forms of masculinity that value domination, control, aggression and confrontation. These ways of being, taken up by some boys, were in conflict with the cultural practices valued in the Year 1 classroom such as compliance, following the teacher’s directions and completing the ‘work’ set by the teacher. While it was noted in a number of cases that the boys found it difficult to conform to the ‘practices’ of a Year 1 classroom, this was not noted by teachers in relation to the girls’ behaviours. While the boys’ behaviours and reaction to Year 1 included an unwillingness to cooperate with teachers, follow directions, confrontation and aggression towards others, the girls reacted by crying and wanting to withdraw from school.

Like the boys who reacted negatively to Year 1 and were returned to Pre-school, the behaviour of the two girls changed once they were returned to Pre-school. The tears and desire to stay at home subsided when the pressure to achieve in the Year 1 classroom was removed. The teacher described how one child and her parents were happy when she returned to Pre-school:

*R: And they’re happy about the situation now (being returned to Pre-school)?*

*S: Really happy as far as I know, yeah. She’s just soaring ... she’s at the top of her class. She’s the top of this class (Pre-school). She’s a confident little girl and she’s not thinking, “Well, what’s wrong with me? Why can’t I do this?”* (Interview with Sarah, Pre-school teacher, St. Christopher’s College: 30).

The other girl's Year 1 teacher also noted that once the pressures of being in Year 1 were taken off the child, the tears subsided and she was "quite good", even when she came into the Year 1 classrooms for the afternoon (Interview with Marie, Year 1 teacher, Raintree State school: 18).

Davies argues that children, including girls, have taken up the ways of being, considered appropriate in their social context, by the time they enter school (1989). Feminine ways of being which the girls had taken up did not include confrontation, aggression and tantrums as the boys took up but included withdrawal and tears instead. As discussed previously, there was no mention of the girls having any difficulty with the expected behaviours of the Year 1 classroom; rather, teachers reported that the girls were unable to cope with the 'work' rather than the required classroom behaviours. Some researchers have noted that the discursive practices valued in schools are more often associated with feminine ways of being (Alloway, 1995, 1997; Connolly, 2004; Davies, 1994). By contrast, in teachers' views, the returned boys in particular were less able to cope with the behavioural expectations of the Year 1 classroom. It seems that the more dominant forms of masculinity the returned boys took up were incompatible with the required behaviours of the Year 1 classroom.

In all cases, children were required to have the particular cultural resources valued by teachers at each school. These cultural resources included particular skills as well as an understanding of the cultural practices of the Year 1 classroom. When children did not have the necessary cultural resources, their perceived deficits were highlighted for attention and addressed through the employment of a range of Pre-school retention practices. From the teachers' aspirational perspective, such practices enabled 'unready' children to acquire the cultural resources necessary to successfully participate in schooling. Teachers who wholly or partially drew on maturationist views of school readiness believed that such practices enabled the child to have 'more time' to mature and develop the necessary behaviours and skills. Teachers who took up an empiricist/environmentalist view of school readiness identified the gaps in children's readiness skills and behaviours and employed various ways of addressing them such as an Individual Education Plan. While most teachers held a predominant school readiness view, all teachers appeared to be eclectic and incorporated both maturationist and empiricist/environmentalist versions of school readiness into their practices.

### 5.2.3 *Other reasons for the employment of particular practices*

#### **More time away from home**

Both Pre-school and Year 1 teachers drew predominantly on school-ready discourse, which required children to evidence particular behaviours and skills before they were considered ‘ready’ for Year 1. In some cases, teachers invested in a welfare discourse. If teachers believed that there were greater needs in children’s lives other than academic needs, school-ready requirements were overlooked. Teachers seemed genuinely concerned about the children in their care and attempted to provide for the perceived needs in children’s lives other than academic ones.

At two different schools in the study, Pre-school teachers knowingly advanced some ‘unready’ children to Year 1 in the belief that such children would be better to spend a full day in a Year 1 classroom for which they were considered ‘not ready’, than spending half a day at home as would be the case if they simply repeated half-time Pre-school. One teacher explained that this was the reason he chose to send an ‘unready’ child to Year 1:

*Anyway, um ... I, at the end of last year, I felt it was better for him to have a full day away from Mum, you know (Interview with Ewan, Pre-school teacher, Raintree State School, 8).*

The child’s Year 1 teacher seemed to have this same understanding:

*R: How come he went over there (to Year 1)?*

*T: Well, I don’t really know. It was Ewan’s (Pre-school teacher) decision, and I have spoken to Ewan and I think, Ewan might be able to tell you more, but I really believe, Ewan’s decision was to keep him safe from his home life ...home situation (Interview with Tammy, Year 1 teacher, Raintree State School, 23-24).*

When teachers believed children were from dysfunctional homes, they attempted to protect them from the perceived negative effects of their home lives by maximising the time they spent at school regardless of their readiness status. Within a welfare discourse, which some teachers drew on, children’s safety and social and emotional well-being was privileged over readiness needs. In another instance, when an ‘unready’ child commenced Year 1, the Year 1 teacher approached the Pre-school teacher to find out why she appeared to be operating at variance with the well-understood, dominant school-ready discourse:

*When he came to Year 1 he was really immature and when I went to see Melanie at the Pre-school and asked her why he went to school, she said mainly because he needed to be at school for a full day. He wasn't ready for school ... but it wasn't a good idea for him to be at home for half a day either (Interview with Rachael, Year 1 teacher, Crestleigh State School: 2).*

With the best of intentions, teachers appeared to not only support children in their learning at school but also to provide a measure of social support for children and their families as well. Although such actions may be considered by some to be about children's families, others would recognise the default social worker role that teachers often adopt to protect children when necessary and are intended to benefit the child.

### **Reading Recovery in Year 2**

School-ready discourse was also given a secondary emphasis with Reading Recovery (Education Queensland, 1998). Reading Recovery was used by Education Queensland between 1998 and 2008 to provide learning support for children who were less than 7 years and 2 months of age and who were identified as needing extra support in learning to read (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2008). If children repeated a year level before Year 2, they would most likely be older than 7 years and 2 months when tested in Year 2 and would thus be deemed ineligible for Reading Recovery even if test results revealed that children might require reading support. Several teachers mentioned that if 'unready' children could be given additional support through Year 1 to reach Year 2, they would remain eligible for Reading Recovery should they require it in Year 2. For this reason, the Acting Principal of Raintree State School opposed one child's return to Pre-school:

*...I wanted him to get into Grade 1 so that next year he'd be in Year 2, sheerly because if he's in Year 2 he can get Reading Recovery. Um, by repeating Pre-school, which is what they're doing with him now, next year he'll be in Grade 1. He won't be eligible. So that long term, I most certainly wanted him to be in Grade 1 (Interview with Sue, Acting Principal, Raintree State School, 16).*

Although the Acting Principal believed that it was more beneficial for one 'unready' child to remain in Year 1 rather than be returned to Pre-school, the Year 1 teachers argued that being 'school-ready' should be a higher priority:

*But I think very much the two teachers are a powerful lobby group with the Principal. So that I don't believe they ... they didn't want the boy back ... the best hope the boy had of learning to read was to be one-on-one, intensive. He's not going to get that now (Interview with Sue, Acting Principal, Raintree State School, 18).*

Other teachers were also aware of the practice of promoting 'unready' children to Year 1 so that they would be eligible for Reading Recovery in Year 2. One Year 1 teacher believed that it was the reason that few children were repeating Year 1:

*...which is why nobody's repeating Year 1 this year ...oh, there's one boy, I think (Interview with Rachael, Year 1 teacher, Crestleigh State School: 55).*

Although all teachers in the study invested in the school-ready view that success at school could be achieved when children had the correct cultural resources, the value of other intervention strategies, such as Reading Recovery, influenced their decisions to progress children to Year 1. Similarly, children's social and emotional welfare appeared to trump the need for them to be 'school-ready'.

#### ***5.2.4 School ready beliefs were underpinned by deficit discourse***

School-ready discourse created binary categories of 'ready' and 'unready' for school. Within this discourse, children's subject positions were organised in oppositional categories of 'ready' or 'unready' for school. When children were positioned as 'unready', their perceived deficits were highlighted. The 'ready' category contained particular attributes valued by teachers through which they believed success in Year 1 could be achieved. Attributes 'other' to the desired 'ready' attributes were thus believed by teachers to have less value and less cultural purchase in achieving success at school. Achieving success in the Year 1 classroom was thus attainable through the possession of particular cultural resources, defined by the dominant groups in schools, that is, teachers. Children who did not possess the desired cultural resources were positioned as 'unready' for school, as 'not having' the desired attributes and thus in a negative way. Ironically, teachers who were aspirational about the range of Pre-school retention practices they employed to support children's successful entry to school, positioned children in a negative way. For instance, when explaining why one 'unready' child was returned to Pre-school from Year 1, the teacher unwittingly highlighted the child's perceived deficits or his lack of cultural resources required of the dominant school-ready discourse to successfully participate in schooling:

*He was not ready... He would lose his bag in the port racks and get upset about that. He would get lost from the classroom to the eating area and wouldn't know where the classroom was again. After lunch he wouldn't return, he would be lost down at the oval and I would have other teachers bringing him back to the classroom. He couldn't sit. He had poor attention span ...* (Interview with Kate, Year 1 teacher, Crestleigh State Preschool: 6).

Because the teacher drew on school-ready discourse, her description of the child was largely in terms of what school-ready attributes he did not have in contrast to the school ready attributes the teacher believed he required to successfully participate in schooling. Thus her description of the child was largely in deficit terms: 'he wouldn't know', 'he wouldn't return' and 'he couldn't sit'. Other teachers who drew upon school-ready discourse inevitably did the same: 'he hadn't mixed with other kids', 'he didn't have the language skills to sort the problem out' and he was 'immature', he had 'poor fine motor skills, he 'couldn't write his name', 'he didn't know numbers, shapes and colours', 'he wasn't interested in table activities', 'he moved about the classroom', 'he wouldn't remain seated' and 'he wouldn't complete the work'. Thus, from teachers' talk about readiness attributes, children were positioned in the binary categories of 'ready' or 'unready' according to the particular cultural resources they possessed or did not possess as seen in Table 5.1 (below)

**Table 5.1 Binary Categories of Ready and Unready Attributes**

<b>Ready for school</b>	<b>Not ready for school</b>
Maturity	Immaturity
Good fine motor skills, ability to write name	Poor fine motor skills, inability to write name
Knowledge of numbers, shapes and colours	Limited knowledge of numbers, shapes and colours
Interest in writing, table and indoor activities	Interest in blocks, construction and outdoor activities
Regular attendance	Irregular attendance
Co-operation	Non-co-operation
Follow teacher's directions	Resist teacher's directions
Remain seated	Move about the classroom
Conforms to classroom rules	Resists classroom rules
Knowing where classroom, eating areas and playing areas were	Not knowing where classroom, eating areas and playing areas were

Children who were placed in the binary category of unready were thus described in terms of the skills and behaviours they did not have: 'he hadn't', 'he didn't' or 'she wasn't' and thus in a negative way. Parents who drew upon school-ready discourse similarly focused on the child and described the children in terms of what they could not do: 'he wasn't grasping at the baby things'

and ‘he couldn’t write his name’. Although teachers and parents were aspirational in their intentions for the children by employing Pre-school retention practices to enable them to acquire the necessary cultural resources through which they could achieve success at school, their simultaneous use of school-ready discourse positioned unready children in a negative way. Because teachers and parents drew on school-ready discourse, the child’s perceived deficits were highlighted. The predominant focus, then, was on the child to change and adapt to school rather than the school changing and adapting to the needs of the child.

**5.2.5 School-ready discourse created binary categories of ready and unready groups of children**

School-ready discourse not only positioned children in a negative way, but the oppositional categories of ‘ready’ and ‘unready’ appeared to place particular groups of children in the ‘unready’ category. This occurred at the six schools where Pre-school retention practices were employed. At those schools, boys, along with children with late birthdays, were more often associated with the category, ‘unready for school’. As one parent recalled, her child’s characteristics ‘fell into that category’ of children who were at ‘risk’ of being unready for school:

*And then I realised Fraser fell into that category and of course, I mean, I remembered a few years that I taught Year 1, at the start of the year, it was always very obvious that the girls were more mature than the boys. And during the year, the boys start to pick up. But I can remember thinking yep, Fraser’s birthday is at the end of the year (September) and boys are more immature than girls. So it definitely held some weight, you know, to start to equip him with some extra age (Interview with Chris, parent, Willow Park Kindergarten: 8).*

If children had characteristics associated with being unready, for example boys with late birthdays, they were at risk of being placed in the category of unready, even if they possessed several attributes of the ready category. The categories below in Table 5.2 were drawn from teachers’ and parents’ talk about groups of ‘unready’ children for whom Pre-school retention practices were employed.

**Table 5.2 Binary Categories of Ready and Unready Children**

<b>Ready children</b>	<b>Unready children</b>
Girls	Boys
Children with early birthdays	Children with late birthdays

Groups of children who some teachers and parents associated with being school-ready can be seen in the left hand column. In the right hand column were the children who some teachers and parents associated with being unready for school. These categories offered teachers and parents identifiable groups of children more likely to be unready for school. Through binary thinking, parents and teachers could associate characteristics of children with the required school-ready characteristics, which as one parent admitted, she did. Because her child was a ‘boy’ with a ‘late birthday’ he fell into the ‘category’ of children considered at risk of being ‘unready’ for school. As the child had two ‘risk factors’ she delayed the child’s entry into school.

### **Summary**

School-ready discourse dominated teachers’ talk. Because the predominant focus was on the ‘unready’ child to change and adapt to the needs of school rather than the school changing and adapting to the needs of the child, school-ready discourse and its resulting practices remained relatively unquestioned. School-ready discourse positioned children in oppositional categories of ‘ready’ or ‘unready’ for school. Children who did not have necessary cultural resources were positioned as unready for school and in a negative way. A range of Pre-school retention practices were employed for unready children to enable them to acquire the necessary cultural resources to succeed at school,

### **5.3 Pre-school Retention Practices Associated with School-Ready Discourse**

Intervention practices included repeating Pre-school, returning children to Pre-school from Year 1, repeating Pre-school with a Transition program, returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 with a Transition program and delaying children’s entry to school. Because explanations for readiness failure were generally focused on the perceived deficits of the child, these intervention practices were employed to address children’s perceived deficits. A summary of the intervention practices used by teachers and parents in the study can be seen in Table 5.3.

As noted earlier in the chapter, the research questions were linked to each other, that is, Pre-school retention practices were employed for children for different reasons. While Section 5.2 examined the overarching discourses from teachers’ and parents’ explanations of why Pre-school retention practices were employed, Section 5.5 will consider each retention practice individually, including the reasons teachers and parents employed each practice.

*Table 5.3 Summary of Pre-School Retention Practices in the Study*

<b>Practice</b>	<b>Description</b>
Repeating Pre-school	Children spent two consecutive years at part-time Pre-school
Returning children to Pre-school from Year 1	Children commenced Year 1 where they were in full time schooling but were returned to part-time Pre-school to repeat
Repeating Pre-school with a Transition program	Children repeated Pre-school but a Transition program enabled them also to spend an equal amount of time in a Year 1 class, giving them full-time schooling status
Returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 with a Transition program	Children commenced full-time Year 1 but were returned to part-time Pre-school. A Transition program enabled them to spend approximately half the time in a Year 1 class or Special Needs class and half the time part-time at Pre-school, giving them continued full-time schooling status
Delaying children's entry into school	Children spent two consecutive years at Pre-school at two different Pre-school locations

**5.3.1 They haven't matured enough: Repeating children at Pre-school**

Before the case studies commenced, a survey was undertaken during 2000 in the locality where the study was to be undertaken. The survey revealed that at thirty-nine Pre-schools in the geographic region, repeating children at Pre-school was practised. The existence of Pre-school retention as an educational practice in Queensland schools was further confirmed by data available from Education Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003). The data showed that during the time the survey was conducted in 2000, 581 children or 1.55% of children in Queensland state Pre-schools were repeated. As noted in Section 2.2.5, the percentage of children repeated in Queensland Pre-schools has steadily increased from 0.74% in July 1997 to 1.71% in July 2006 (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003). However, this number more than doubled from July 2006 to 3.61% in February 2007. One possible reason for the sudden increase in repeating children at Pre-school may be related to the introduction of the new Prep year in 2007 when, because of the changes in school age entry, parents were given the option to repeat their children at Pre-school if they had any concerns about their children's readiness for school.

Two schools selected for the case studies repeated children at Pre-school. At Maroochee State Preschool, two children were repeated and at Windamere State Preschool five children were repeated, giving a total of seven repeated children in the study. At Windamere State Preschool, four

of the five repeated children were further offered a Transition program which gave them full-time schooling status. The discursive practices at both schools were underpinned by school-ready discourse. Within school-ready discourse, the most commonly available storyline for achieving success at school appeared to be that children will be unable to cope in Year 1 or achieve success at school unless they commence school with particular skills. At both Maroochee and Windamere State Preschools, children were positioned as ready or unready for school and repeated in relation to this storyline:

*I think, I just think ... they haven't reached, haven't matured enough ...Socially, (Martin) didn't mix a lot ... he didn't know any numbers, had trouble with colours ... a lot of the basics ... Jaiden had a lot of trouble with any changes in routine ... he'd cry and get upset. So he wasn't coping really well ... Plus, he didn't have a lot of those basic ... that basic knowledge like shapes and colours and things either ... had trouble writing his name (Interview with Janice, Pre-school teacher, Maroochee State School: 26, 52, 54, 82).*

*Brian has language delays ... he gets very frustrated and very physical when children don't understand him ... (Caitlin) wasn't ready ... her concepts (numeracy) were still quite low; she wasn't able to write her name ... Justin had taken a dislike to fine motor tasks so he had some delays ... he really wasn't ready for Year 1 (Interview with Gwen, Pre-school teacher, Windamere State School: 61, 67, 77).*

Particular cultural resources or skills and behaviours positioned children as 'ready' or 'unready' for school. Knowing shapes, colours, numbers, being able to write one's name and language competence appeared to comprise particular forms of cultural resources valued at school. Children's lack of 'maturity', often associated with maturational beliefs about school readiness, was seen by one teacher as being the reason that the children did not have the necessary cultural resources and were 'unready' for school. The 'intervention' strategy from a maturationist perspective was to allow children 'more time' to mature by giving them a second year of Pre-school. However, teachers in the study were generally eclectic and simultaneously drew upon maturationist and empiricist/environmentalist versions of school readiness to address perceived gaps in children's readiness for school.

### **How teachers, parents and children saw the practice of Pre-school retention**

Teachers and many parents were aspirational about the practice of repeating Pre-school, with or without a Transition program, seeing it as the best way to enable unready children to become school-ready:

*They'll both be able to cope a lot better (with Year 1)* (Interview with Janice, Pre-school teacher, Maroochee State Preschool: 116).

*She has shown improvement ... she's started Pre-school a lot more confidently this year* (Interview with Gwen, Pre-school teacher, Windamere State Preschool: 69, 77).

*I'm exceptionally pleased, but I wasn't this time last year* (Interview with Marion, parent, Maroochee State Preschool: 48).

*She picked up everything she needed to know, like it wasn't as if she was lacking in her fine motor skills and things like that, you know* (Interview with Georgia, parent, Windamere State Preschool: 10).

*I'm really glad Jason did this to give him a bit of a boost up ... He's come along in leaps and bounds that I can see ... I think repeating Pre-school ... (is) the best thing to do ... just to give them a bit more of a base ... having a little bit more knowledge, going into Year 1 and being able to concentrate on the work* (Interview with Jodie, parent, Windamere State Preschool: 10, 17, 70).

Although unready children were positioned in a negative way, parents' silence about children's positioning as 'unready' legitimised the practice. It is likely that while parents may have been aware of the negative positioning of 'unready' for their children, they may have believed that there was a greater need for children to be school-ready, particularly as it appeared to be the (only) way school success could be achieved. Both parents' and teachers' intentions in repeating children appeared to be aspirational. Whether children had been given a Transition program or not, parents saw the offer of a second year of Pre-school as an opportunity for their 'unready' children to acquire the particular skills and behaviours through which success at school could be achieved.

Anecdotes from parents' experiences further supported their understanding of how schooling worked; that their children required particular cultural resources before they could successfully progress through the school system:

*If you go to school and you are worried because you haven't caught up with the other kids, you're banging your head against the wall every year and it's going to get worse and worse. And that's what happened to my brother – he just got worse and worse (Interview with Marion, parent, Maroochee State Preschool: 2).*

*I have a nephew for example who had difficulties in school and it wasn't picked up early enough and basically the rest of his school years were a bit of a disaster (Interview with Felecia, parent, Maroochee State Preschool: 146).*

Parent's anecdotes drew on readiness beliefs, that is, that children were required to have particular cultural resources before success at each year level of schooling could be achieved.

Although parents and teachers generally saw repeating Pre-school as a beneficial practice and although no parents reported any negative consequences of their children being repeated at Pre-school, some parents were conscious of how their children might be positioned within this practice:

*But some of the other mothers ... most are really good, but some say, "Oh, why isn't Martin going on next year?" and, "Oh, how old is he?" You know and you could see they were sort of sussing you out ... And I think that some people probably feel that pressure from other people not to repeat their child – it might be seen as a bit of a failure or something, even as early as Pre-school ... and I was pretty conscious. I didn't want to make him feel like all the other kids were going on and he wasn't good enough or something (Interview with Felecia, parent, Maroochee State Preschool: 118,134 - 140).*

Despite the parent's awareness that there was some risk that her child's repeating Pre-school could be perceived as a form of 'failure', she was also aware of the main storyline of school-ready discourse; that success at school is achievable through the acquisition of particular skills and behaviours valued by the dominant groups, that is, schools and teachers. Such skills and behaviours were believed to be best acquired through repeating Pre-school. Within a system where school-ready discourse was dominant, parents appeared to have few available options. If they advanced

their unready children to Year 1, the dominant storyline implied that their children would be at risk of on-going school failure which anecdotes from others' experiences (also based on school-ready beliefs) further confirmed. In an educational context that places a strong emphasis on being school-ready (The State of Queensland, Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2002a), such parents appeared to see Pre-school retention as being less of a risk than allowing their children to commence school 'unready' and failing school at a later date.

It was apparent that although both parents and teachers saw Pre-school retention as generally beneficial, only the parents noted the visible negative consequences of this practice. While the dominant school-ready discourse created categories of ready and unready, attributes that constituted children as 'ready' were constructed according to beliefs of the dominant group, in this case, teachers. The dominant position of 'ready', was not only constructed from the beliefs of the dominant group and not representative of all groups of children, but was also unmarked, ascendant and less visible. The unready children are marked as 'other to' ready children and more visible. Thus from the teachers' more privileged position, it was possible that they did not see how particular attributes of the marked 'unready' children were not privileged in school-ready discourse. To parents who represented the unready children, how their children were not privileged in school-ready discourse appeared to be more apparent than it was to the teachers.

### ***5.3.2 He was returned because he just wasn't coping in Year 1: Returning children to Pre-school from Year 1***

A survey conducted prior to the case studies showed that the discursive practice of returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 was not uncommon in the geographic region where the study was conducted. As returning 'unready' children to Pre-school from Year 1 had become a regular practice at one school, a form letter had been devised by the Year 1 teachers (see Appendix P). While the mention of this practice by Allington and McGill-Franzen (1995) and Shepard and Smith (1988) may indicate that this practice also exists in the United States, an extensive review of the literature failed to identify studies of this kind. Included in the case study were three Pre-schools that practised returning children to Pre-school from Year 1. They were St. Christopher's College, Crestleigh State School and Raintree State School. A total of nine children were returned to Pre-school from Year 1, three from each school.

A storyline, similar to the available storyline for repeating children at Pre-school, underpinned this practice, that is, children would not experience success at school unless they commenced Year 1

with particular skills and behaviours. Within this storyline, the ‘common-sense’ response was to return ‘unready’ children, or children who did not have the necessary skills and behaviours, to Pre-school:

*The Grade 1 teacher initiated it because Daniel was just not coping in Grade 1. He wasn't coping with the work ... he was just getting worse and worse and worse (Interview with Sarah, Pre-school teacher, St. Christopher's College: 2).*

*R: Can you remember why he was returned to Pre-school?*

*K: Yeah, he was not ready for a classroom situation.... (Interview with Kate, Year 1 teacher, Crestleigh State School: 5-6).*

*He was returned (to Pre-school) because he just wasn't coping in Year 1 (Interview with Janet, Relieving teacher, Raintree State School: 29).*

*R: What were the main reasons that she was returned to Pre-school?*

*M: Well Ewan (Pre-school teacher) suggested, I think he wanted her to repeat Pre-school. But the parents weren't too fussed on it, and I (Year 1 teacher) said to him I will have a look at her when she comes to Grade 1. And when she came to Grade 1 she um ... just wasn't coping emotionally and socially and academically. She wasn't even ready for Grade 1 (Interview with Marie, Year 1 teacher, Raintree State School: 45-46).*

The practice of returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 was employed for children deemed ‘not ready’ for Year 1. These children were believed to not have the skills and behaviours required of the dominant school-ready discourse to ‘cope’ with the Year 1 program.

One of the main reasons children at Crestleigh and Raintree State Schools were believed to not cope was related to their ‘immaturity’. While one teacher at St. Christopher's College did not specifically locate the cause of one child's inability to ‘cope’ with his ‘maturity’, she did note that he was still at the ‘play stage’ of development. Similar to the teachers at Crestleigh and Raintree State Schools, the teacher at St. Christopher's College appeared to draw on maturational understandings of school readiness, which locates the cause of children's lack of success in Year 1 largely with the child:

*R: Ok Melanie ... would you like to tell me ... why he came back to Pre-school?*

*M: Ok, well Nicholas was a little fellow who had a reasonably late birthday (September); he was generally immature and lacked awareness that children usually have of what's going on in the classroom (Interview with Melanie, Pre-school teacher, Crestleigh State Preschool: 1-2).*

*Rach: He was very immature.*

*R: In what ways was he immature?*

*Rach: Well ... he wanted to play all day. That's all he was interested in - was playing (Interview with Rachael, Year 1 teacher, Crestleigh State Preschool: 4-6).*

*Tanya wasn't a behaviour problem (unlike the two boys who were returned), she was just academically and socially immature (Interview with Ewan, Pre-school teacher, Raintree State School: 46).*

Children were positioned as 'immature' and 'unready' for school because they did not have the cultural resources required 'to cope' in the Year 1 classroom. Unready children were positioned within school-ready discourse as 'not having' such things as 'basic foundations', an 'awareness of what's going on in the classroom' and 'academic and social maturity'. Teachers saw these characteristics as being related to children's maturity which was related to children being at an early stage of development. The intervention strategy was to return the children to Pre-school where they presumably had more time to mature, where they were at a similar level of maturity and development as other children and where they could acquire the necessary school-ready skills and behaviours.

### **How parents and children saw the practice**

Although teachers had suggested to some parents of the returned children the year before that their children might not be ready for Year 1, such parents had resisted teachers' suggestion to repeat their children at Pre-school. One Pre-school teacher recalled how she unsuccessfully attempted to persuade a parent to repeat her child at Pre-school. The child, however, commenced Year 1 but was returned to Pre-school during his first week of school. The Pre-school teacher believed that the mother was resistant to the idea of her child repeating Pre-school because she saw it as a stigma:

*... I think mum regarded it (repeating) as a stigma. She took it as a personal attack. She ... quite a few comments were directed at myself as being ... um, I was putting him down or putting her down, or putting the father down (Interview with Melanie, Pre-school teacher, Crestleigh State School: 28)*

Similar to the repeated children, only the parents noted any negative consequences of children being positioned as 'unready' for school and repeated or returning children to Pre-school from Year 1. The teacher, as part of the dominant group and from her privileged position within school-ready discourse, appeared surprised at the mother's response to her offer of giving the child a second year at Pre-school, which she believed gave him an opportunity to acquire the necessary skills and behaviours to succeed at school. From her privileged position, the teacher could only see the practice as aspirational. She was unable to see how the child's skills and behaviours were positioned as 'other to' those valued by the dominant group to which she belonged and that the child's skills and behaviours, which had less value within school-ready discourse, positioned him in a negative way. Although the teacher's intention was aspirational and in the intended best interests of the child, the teacher was unable to 'see' from her less visible and privileged position how the child's attributes and ways of being were not privileged within school-ready discourse.

Generally, most parents of the returned children were initially not pleased with teachers' suggestions to return their children to Pre-school from Year 1 but were willing to co-operate with the teachers:

*R: How did you talk to the parents about that (returning the child to Pre-school from Year 1)?*

*M: Um, well it had already been discussed with the parents before she came to school (repeating Pre-school) and um I talked to her dad about it and he wasn't too happy about it, and then we (school administration and teacher) sent a letter home with Tanya (child) advising mum and dad that we thought it would be a good idea for her to be a dual enrolment (half Pre-school and half Year 1). And then the father actually signed the forms that she could do it.*

*R: So there wasn't too much drama over that?*

*M: Oh he wasn't too impressed about having to do it, but he did come around (Interview with Marie, Year 1 teacher, Raintree State School: 46-48)*

Although the practice of returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 initially positioned children in a negative way, within school-ready discourse, it appeared to be the authorised and commonsense means for acquiring the necessary cultural resources for success at school. Both teachers and parents accepted it as the means by which ‘unready’ children could acquire the same cultural resources as the ‘ready’ children. When the ‘unready’ children did acquire the same cultural resources as the ‘ready’ children, the practice was perceived as successful. The same parent who was ‘not too impressed’ about returning his child to Pre-school from Year 1 changed his mind about the practice’s value when the child had acquired the necessary skills to successfully commence Year 1:

*R: And that seemed beneficial as far as you could see (returning the child to Pre-school from Year 1)?*

*P: Oh shit yeah!*

*R: Her coming back (to Pre-school)?*

*P: Definitely. It certainly has (Interview with Phillip, parent, Raintree State School: 37-40).*

Several parents commented on the expectations of the Year 1 classroom. One parent’s comments typified how a number of parents felt about the pressure and expectations of the Year 1 classroom with which they felt their children were unable to cope:

*L: I felt, I felt ... they got bombarded with so much in that First Grade, like, I mean immediately they had homework. Immediately they had a book every night to read.*

*R: This was at Coowarra (State School)?*

*L: This is at Coowarra, First Grade. Now they’ve come out of Pre-school where they’re sitting on the floor ... Like, they were excited to be going to school. Like she, “Oh, I can’t wait ...” That wore off in a week because it was just totally different – it was just a big shock (Interview with Lydia, parent, St. Christopher’s College: 28)*

The child’s enthusiasm to begin school ‘wore off’ in one week when the child did not have the resources to cope with the Year 1 classroom. Another parent recounted how she had eventually removed her child from the Year 1 classroom and, on the teacher’s advice, returned him to Pre-school:

*So we had tantrums as soon as he'd walk in the door ... and then it started from about halfway through the year. It started with the, "I don't want to go to school. I hate school ..."* So we talked it over ... what we really needed to do was release the pressure from him immediately ... like really quickly, just take the pressure off (Interview with Carmel, parent, St. Christopher's College: 28).

While some parents recognised that the program and the particular pedagogical approach might contribute to the child's lack of success in Year 1, children were held responsible because they did not have the necessary cultural resources with which to successfully participate in with Year 1. When the child was removed from the Year 1 classroom his attitude to school changed:

*It wasn't a constant struggle all day which Grade 1 was* (Interview with Carmel, parent, St. Christopher's College: 32).

In this way, the practice of returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 was perceived as an effective practice, particularly if children were able to acquire the school-ready skills and behaviours necessary for success in Year 1. However, a number of parents reported that their children did not like being returned to Pre-school from Year 1. While parents of the repeated children may have been able to protect their children from any possible negative positioning of 'unready', it appeared to have been a different case for the returned children, whose 'demotion' to Pre-school from Year 1 may have been a more 'visible' form of 'school failure'. It was further acknowledged by some teachers that this highly visible form of school failure could be seen by the children, and others, in a negative way. As such, one Pre-school teacher attempted to reposition a child in a more positive way within a 'helping' discourse. A 'helping' discourse, not uncommon particularly in early schooling, was used to reposition, and hopefully elevate, the returned child to the position of the teacher's 'helper':

*The way we approached it (the child's return to Pre-school) was he was going to come back and be my helper* (Interview with Sarah, Pre-school teacher, St. Christopher's College: 12).

Although the teacher attempted to reposition the child in a positive way, according to the child's mother, he 'wasn't fooled' by this approach:

*He wasn't fooled by that but, you know ... He probably complained about it for two weeks I would say ... but he decided that was ok* (Interview with Carmel, parent, St. Christopher's College: 32).

The child may have been willing to cooperate with being returned to Pre-school because of his continued lack of success in Year 1. Another parent similarly reported that her child was initially upset by the news that she would be returning to Pre-school from Year 1:

*Esther at first was a little bit funny about it because she felt like she was going back to the babies* (Interview with Sharon, parent, St. Christopher's College: 42).

One mother of a returned child also spoke of an older child who had been held back in Year 2, complaining eight years later in Year 10 that "he should be in the year above" (Interview with Sharon, parent, St. Christopher's College: 14). The older boy's grievance over having been repeated appears to have been carried for a long time and was believed by the mother to have negatively impacted his attitude towards school:

*I think that sometimes he just gives up because he feels he wasn't ... um, I, I think he just, he just doesn't try as hard as he could try. But I think that given the idea that he was kept down has put a dampener over his head* (Interview with Sharon, parent, St. Christopher's College: 32).

Similar to the findings of the study, other research (Jimerson, 2004; Shepard, 2004) has shown that retention practices, despite teachers' and parents' best intentions for the children, ultimately position children in a negative way. Other research has also shown that children can suffer a sense of shame and loss of self-esteem when they are repeated at any year level (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Jimerson, 2001b; McGrath, 2006; NASP, 2003).

### ***5.3.3 Pre-school retention practices: Transition programs***

Transition programs were offered at four of the six schools where some form of Pre-school retention was practised. Programs were provided at Windamere State School for four of the five children who were repeated at Pre-school; and at St. Christopher's College, Crestleigh State School and Raintree State School, for seven of the nine children who were returned to Pre-school from Year 1. *Transition programs* employed for children on an individual basis appeared different to

*Transition classes* in the United States (Cain, 2005; CCS, 2000; Carlson & Galle, 2000). Although the concept of *Transition classes* is discussed in the United States literature (Cain, 2005; Meisels, 1999) and is included in the study as alternatives to Pre-school retention, it was not anticipated at the beginning of the study that *Transition programs* would be incorporated into the practices of repeating children at Pre-school or returning them to Pre-school from Year 1.

As discussed in the previous sections, teachers suggested to parents of unready children that their children be repeated at Pre-school or returned to Pre-school from Year 1 so that the children had the opportunity to gain the necessary 'school-ready' skills and behaviours to successfully commence Year 1. However, some parents were resistant to such suggestions:

*R: How did it (the Transition program) begin?*

*G: Well, a mixture of feedback from the community. Some parents felt they couldn't sustain two years of part-time education (repeating Pre-school) with their jobs and things (Interview with Gwen, Pre-school teacher, Windamere State School: 17-18).*

Because a number of parents did not want their children to have a second year of part-time Pre-school, children were supplemented with a Transition program which gave them full-time schooling status. Transition programs were provided at St. Christopher's College, Crestleigh State School and Raintree State School for similar reasons. Because teachers drew on school-ready discourse and its main storyline, that success in Year 1 was achievable only when children possessed particular skills and behaviours, it seemed inconceivable to the teachers to send children to Year 1 when they did not have the school-ready skills and behaviours necessary for success. To accommodate both their school-ready views and parents' wishes, teachers created Transition programs which were additional to the practices of repeating children at Pre-school and returning them to Pre-school from Year 1.

Transition programs at each of the four schools were largely child-centred, focusing on the particular needs of each child. As Transition programs were tailored to suit the needs of each child, they also varied between each school. At Windamere State Preschool, four of the five repeated children were offered a Transition program which had operated in various forms for six years:

*We've had different models of Transition – some of them (repeated children) attended half a day Pre-school and half a day at Grade 1. They went over at lunch time or came back*

*here in the middle of the day – went to school in the morning, came back to spend the afternoon with us. So it ranged. This year we're doing the beginning part of the week in Year 1 and the ending part of the week at Pre-school. They spend half the time at Pre-school and half the time in Year 1* (Interview with Gwen, Pre-school teacher, Windamere State Preschool: 4).

At the three schools where children were returned to Pre-school from Year 1, the Transition programs varied. Crestleigh and Raintree State Schools used what the Acting Principal from one school described as “a split program” (Interview with Sue, Acting Principal, Raintree State School: 4). The ‘split program’ involved children spending approximately half the time at Pre-school and half the time in Year 1, giving the returned children continued full-time schooling status. One Year 1 teacher described the split program:

*So we decided ... it came to this agreement that he could do a half-and-half situation, where he could go to his Pre-school for the morning and then come back to me for the afternoon. And that way he was going to be here (at school) nine to three* (Interview with Rachael, Year 1 teacher, Crestleigh State School: 2).

The ‘split program’, where children attended Pre-school in the morning and Year 1 in the afternoon, was based on a similar Transition program of half Pre-school and half Year 1 at the school where children were repeated. At St. Christopher’s College, a ‘Transition type’ arrangement was employed:

*Well our classes (Prep) are ... three days a week so it's Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. And the Transition type, well the other type, it's not really Transition but we've got ... five days a week* (Interview with Sarah, Prep teacher, St. Christopher’s College: 12).

The returned children at this school attended Pre-school three full days per week and on the remaining two school days, Monday and Friday; they joined a small class for children who had particular learning needs. In this way, the returned children were given an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and individual tutoring to ensure they would have the school-ready skills to successfully commence Year 1 the following year. Table 5.4 shows a summary of the different Transition class models.

*Table 5.4 Summary of Transition Programs*

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Children spent 5 full days in Year 1 and 5 full days at Pre-school per fortnight
Children spent each morning at Pre-school and each afternoon in Year 1
Children spent 3 full days at Pre-school and 2 full days in a Learning Support class and were given an Individual Education Plan (IEP)

---

Transition programs were considered a relatively innovative practice and were open to continual modification and change. Teachers generally used a trial and error approach, continually critiquing their practice to determine the most suitable model for the children, the school and the school community. A trial and error approach was employed as there were few available models on which such practices could be guided:

*R: Had you heard of any other Transition programs before this?*

*G: Ah ... not before, when we first started, we hadn't. Many teachers had talked about the benefits of such a program but not many centres I knew were actually running anything. But I have since heard of a couple of places that run a Transition program but each program is quite unique. So I don't know exactly the ... how they fix them up (Interview with Gwen, Pre-school teacher, Windamere State Preschool: 26).*

### **How parents and teachers saw the Transition programs**

The full-time component of Transition programs enhanced their attraction with parents. Transition programs for the parents of the repeated or returned children were underpinned by a discourse of hope and optimism, or the good news that unready children could be positioned as 'ready' if they were given more time and/or suitable programs through which they could acquire the necessary skills and behaviours. The offer of a Transition program presented in this way often followed the sometimes distressing news that the child was not ready for Year 1 or needed to be returned to Pre-school from Year 1:

*S: We sat down with them (the returned child and the mother) and said (to the child), "Can you write this sentence?" ... you know ... "Can you write a sentence about this picture?" And they're saying she couldn't do it. So mum was ... you know ... was, right, there it was (evidence child was not ready for Year 1). She was very clear that she was not up to Grade 1, that there was no way.*

R: *And mum was fine with that?*

S: *Mum was fine once we said to her that there is a five-day program. That mum was tickled pink to put her in there (the Transition program for returned children)*  
(Interview with Sarah, Pre-school teacher, St. Christopher's College: 37).

Both teachers and parents saw that the Transition programs met all needs; the children's, the parents' and the Year 1 teachers' needs. In the teachers' and parents' views, the Transition programs enabled unready children to develop the necessary cultural resources to successfully participate in Year 1 the following year. Drawing on a discourse of hope and optimism, teachers employed the practice to provide a way for the 'unready' children to acquire the same desirable attributes as the 'ready' children and thus be positioned in a more positive way. According to both teachers and parents, the Transition programs were effective in achieving this desired goal:

*Rebecca has made big leaps and bounds in social and emotional (areas of development)*  
(Interview with Gwen, Pre-school teacher, Woolamaloo State Preschool: 32).

*She's just soaring ...* (Interview with Sarah, Pre-school teacher, St. Christopher's College: 30).

*She really wasn't ready for it all (Year 1). Seeing her now, I think it's the best thing I've ever done for her* (Interview with Sharon, parent, St. Christopher's College: 44).

*I was really pleased that that (the Transition program) was able to be offered to me ... you know, the teachers, everything, they try to help as much as they can* (Interview with Georgia, parent, Woolamaloo State Preschool: 28, 44).

While most parents believed that the offer of a Transition program was the best way to prepare children for school the following year, one parent, had some reservations about the program by the end of the year:

*Thinking back on it now, I probably think he should have probably just done the Pre-school ... (repeating Pre-school). I think it's been very confusing for him throughout the year*  
(Interview with Jodie, parent, Windamere State School: 15, 17).

One Year 1 teacher appeared to agree:

*Well, I can say I don't think it's really worked because he wasn't part of the class because we would have started things that he didn't know anything about. So when I would refer to something he wasn't really part of it because he'd come out of the group (at Pre-school) because he hadn't been there when we started doing the activities in the first place. He felt left out because he really didn't know what we were talking about or what had been going on. And he really didn't belong anywhere, I felt. (Interview with Rachael, Year 1 teacher, Crestleigh State School: 67, 69).*

According to one parent, Transition programs had other drawbacks. She recalled overhearing a couple of the child's Year 1 classmates teasing him about the fact that he still attended Pre-school as well as Year 1:

*You still go to Pre-school and we don't (Interview with Jodie, parent, Woolamaloo State Preschool: 17).*

While the practice was seen as aspirational in that it enabled children, who did not have the required cultural resources, the opportunity to acquire it, children were nevertheless positioned within the dominant school-ready discourse as 'unready' and as 'other to' the desired position of 'ready'. Even Year 1 children appeared to see one child's positioning as 'unready' in a deficit way and an attribute about which a classmate could be teased. The parent further noted that some parents resisted teachers' suggestions to repeat their children at Pre-school, preferring to progress the children to Year 1 instead. According to the parent, the children appeared to succeed in Year 1 in all areas of their development, particularly their social behaviour:

*Most of them (children recommended to be repeated at Pre-school) ended up here at school in Grade 1 and they're different kids. None of them were in Jason's class but I know a few of them are in the other classes. And just in the behaviour themselves, you know, it really improved, so... (Interview with Jodie, parent, Woolamaloo State Preschool: 41, 43).*

This observation would appear to seriously contest the dominant school-ready discourse whose storyline suggests that success in Year 1 is achievable through the acquisition of particular skills and behaviours valued by the dominant discourse. Although one parent and one teacher raised some

concerns about the Transition programs, most teachers and parents in the study appeared to see Transition programs as a better way to prepare children for school other than by simply repeating them at Pre-school. Teachers appeared to have few available models to guide their practices and predominantly used a ‘trial and error approach’ and what appeared to work to critique their practices. Similar to some Transition classes in the United States (Cain, 2005), children in the study had completed one year of Pre-school before they were offered a Transition program. Unlike the Transition classes in the United States, the Transition programs in the study were provided for children in addition to repeating them at Pre-school or returning them to Pre-school from Year 1.

#### ***5.3.4 Pre-school retention practices: Delayed school entry***

As the only research in Australia which referred to delayed school entry was conducted in 1990 (Routley & de Lemos, 1993), current trends towards delayed school entry in Australia are unknown. The Director of Willow Park Kindergarten, however, revealed a practice associated with her centre whereby a large number of parents delayed their children’s entry into school:

*R: Can you tell me ... why so many parents have chosen for their children to do two years of Pre-school?*

*F: I think they are really concerned about their children’s education and how their children are going to fit into the school system. Is it going to be appropriate for them? So I think they’re, rather than rushing their children into school they’re quite happy to let them have another extra year of um, a Pre-school sort of program, before they go to this more structured learning situation (Interview with Fiona, Director, Willow Park Kindergarten, 6-7).*

According to the Director, parents at her centre appeared to understand that their children needed to ‘fit in’ with the dominant discourses and practices of schooling to be successful at school. Because such parents perceived the school system to work in a particular way, that is, the more congruent children’s skills and behaviours were with the school system the more likely their children would ‘fit in’ and become successful at school, they attempted to guarantee that success by giving them an ‘extra year’ of Pre-school. Although the parents understood that the practice of an ‘extra year’ enabled their children to gain ‘extra’ skills to ensure their success at school, they similarly understood that others may perceive the practice in a negative way. Thus, while the parents appeared to understand how the dominant discourses of schooling ‘worked’, they were also well aware of how the practice could be perceived by others. In an attempt to address this concern,

children's first year of Pre-school was spent at Willow Park Kindergarten where the Director provided a "similar sort of (Pre-school) program to [...] a state Pre-school" (Interview with Fiona, Director, Willow Park Kindergarten, 2). According to the Director, following their first year of Pre-school at Willow Park Kindergarten, children spent their second year of Pre-school at a different centre:

*... a lot of them (children) move on to a state Pre-school where they will spend their time at that school. They choose the Pre-school on the basis of the school they'll be going to* (Interview with Fiona, Director, Willow Park Kindergarten, 19).

One parent explained why she and other parents chose to give their children an 'extra' year of Pre-school at a different location and how the practice might be perceived by others if her child spent two consecutive years of Pre-school at the one location:

*And I wouldn't consider it, doing it in a state um, state system because, yes, it would be repeating Pre-school and ... I know it's not really the done thing, I suppose ... Yes, and because really, once they started in the state system, that was looked on then as, as repeating and really our thing is, that it's not worth repeating ... Yeah, so in other words, um, I suppose the way we explained it to Fraser was he was either having two fun Kindy years, or he was doing a Pre-school year, but then doing his real Pre-school year. And I suppose we hadn't had any hassles with him understanding, that a lot of his friends were in Year 1 this year, but then he knows from his Willow Park year last year, you know, that all his good mates and friends there are doing a (another) Pre-school year just like him, yeah* (Interview with Chris, parent, Willow Park Kindergarten: 29, 31, 35).

Because there was some risk that those who drew on school-ready discourse might position the child in the same way as repeated children, that is, 'unready' and possibly in a negative way, careful consideration was given to how the practice was employed. While the parent understood that the school system was underpinned by, and was operationalised through, school-ready discourse, she was clear that she had not taken up this discourse nor had she positioned her child through it. Because the parent had taken up an aspirational discourse, she created a positive category for her child who had an 'extra' year of Pre-school as opposed to children who had the normal one year. It was through this aspirational discourse that the parent was able to position her child as 'ready' to start his 'real' Pre-school year after two 'fun years of kindy'.

Care was taken that the appropriate discourse was used and the child was positioned in a positive way. Within an aspirational discourse, the practice of having two years of Pre-school was described as ‘two fun Kindy years’ or ‘doing a Pre-school year, but then doing (a) real Pre-school year’. Finally, the practice was ‘normalised’ to the child through the parent’s explanation that ‘all his good mates and friends there are doing a (another) Pre-school year just like him’. Thus, by drawing on an aspirational discourse and repositioning her child in the ascendant category within that discourse, renaming the practice, normalising it to the child and organising the child’s Pre-schooling years at two different locations, the parent believed she was able to provide her child with an advantage in schooling.

When questioned later about how many ‘a lot’ of children who spent a second year at another centre might be, the Director estimated that approximately three quarters of the centre’s Pre-school group went from Willow Park Kindergarten to a second Pre-school centre each year (Field notes: Willow Park Kindergarten, 28-11-01). Although ‘repeating’ children was almost never practised at her centre, the Director estimated that approximately fifteen of the twenty Pre-school children had an ‘extra’ year of Pre-school (Field notes: Willow Park Kindergarten, 28-11-01). While it is unknown what percentage of children is delayed in Australia each year, the Director’s estimation represents a high number of children whose entry to school is delayed each year at one location. In the United States, it has been estimated that ten percent of children have delayed school entry each year (Morrison, 2007).

Delayed entry into school has been considered, by some researchers in the United States, to be similar to repeating Pre-school in that it provides an extra year of Pre-school, particularly to young children who are believed to be ‘at risk’ of being ‘unready’ for school (NAECSSDE, 2000; Shepard & Smith, 1989). However, the parents and teachers in the study argued that the practice was underpinned by a different set of assumptions about the children and, as such, children were positioned in a more positive way within the aspirational discourse taken up by the parents.

#### **5.4 Groups of Children Repeated at Pre-school**

As discussed in Section 5.2, through binary categories of school ready discourse, some children appeared to be associated with the ‘unready’ category and more often the target of different Pre-school retention practices. Table 5.5 provides an overview of the children who were repeated at Pre-school, returned to Pre-school from Year 1, offered a Transition program or delayed. Categories in Table 5.5 identify the Pre-schools children attended, the socio-economic rating of the school, the

child's pseudonym, gender, birth date and identity as Indigenous or non-Indigenous. Each category used to describe the children will be discussed in turn.

**Table 5.5 Children by School with SES Rating, Gender, Birthdates, Indigenous/Non-Indigenous, Disability**

School	School according to SES rating	Child	Gender	Late Birthday	Indigenous/ Non-Indigenous
Willow Park Kindergarten (Delayed)	IRSED <sup>23</sup> rating not available: Fee paying school	Fraser#	M	Yes	Non-Indigenous
		Bradley#	M	Yes	Non-Indigenous
Maroochee State Preschool (Repeated)	Mid to High	Jaiden	M	Yes	Non-Indigenous
		Martin	M	Yes	Non-Indigenous
Windamere State Preschool (Repeated/ with Transition)	Mid to High	Jason+	M	No	Non-Indigenous
		Brian	M	Yes	Non-Indigenous
		Fintan*+	M	No	Non-Indigenous
		Rebecca+	F	No	Non-Indigenous
		Caitlin+	F	Yes	Non-Indigenous
St. Christopher's College (Returned with Transition)	IRSED rating not available: Fee paying school	Daniel+	M	No	Non-Indigenous
		Hannah+	F	Yes	Non-Indigenous
		Esther+	F	No	Non-Indigenous
Crestleigh State School (Returned/ with Transition)	Mid to high	Nicholas	M	Yes	Non-Indigenous
		Grant+	M	No	Indigenous
		James+	M	Yes	Non-Indigenous
Raintree State School (Returned/ with Transition)	Mid to low	Julian	M	No	Non-Indigenous
		Jacob+	M	Yes	Non-Indigenous
		Tanya*+	F	No	Non-Indigenous

\* Children with a mild disability

+ Children who were provided with a Transition program as well as being repeated or returned.

# Two of the children who spent the first year of Pre-school at Willow Park Kindergarten spent their second year of Pre-school at Crestleigh State School (the year data collection commenced).

#### 5.4.1 Children according to their schools' relative socio-economic advantage

As each child's socio-economic status (SES), based on parents' occupation, income and educational status, could not be retrieved for all children at all schools during the data collection stage as schools do not have or reveal such information, the SES of the schools' catchment areas was used instead to investigate the possible association with Pre-school retention practices. The estimate is

<sup>23</sup> IRSED is the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage Indicator used by the ABS (2003) to provide an indicator of a school's relative dis/advantage in terms of SES. How it is used in Queensland schools will be explained in Section 5.4.1.

based on each school's Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSED) rating for the school's catchment area.

The IRSED indicator provides an estimate of a school's relative dis/advantage in terms of SES (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007b). Schools' IRSED ratings were developed from the Socio-Economic Index for Australia (SEIFA) which provides an Index of Disadvantage drawn from the 2001 Census of Population and Housing (ABS, 2003). The variables used to measure IRSED include income, educational attainment, unemployment, dwellings and vehicles (ABS, 2003). IRSED scores range from 500, being relatively low SES advantage, to 1200, being relatively high SES advantage. Threshold scores were used to group Queensland state schools into four categories seen in Table 5.6 below.

*Table 5.6 IRSED Threshold Scores*

<b>Group</b>	<b>2001 Rating</b>
Low	<=930
Mid-Low	<=975
Mid-High	<=1020
High	>1020

Schools with an IRSED score of less than 930 were rated as having a low level of social and economic advantage, whereas schools with an IRSED score of more than 1020 were rated as having a high level of social and economic advantage. IRSED scores were available only for state schools into which state Pre-schools were incorporated. While scores were not available for private schools, it is reasonable to assume that because both private schools in the study were fee-paying schools, children who attend these schools are more likely to be from socio-economically advantaged families. Table 5.7 shows schools in the study with their IRSED index scores for 2001, the year the data for the case studies was collected, and Education Queensland's rating in terms of socio-economic advantage.

**Table 5.7 Schools by IRSED Index Scores and Education Queensland's Rating of Socio-Economic Advantage**

School and practice provided	IRSED Index Score	Education Queensland's rating of socio-economic advantage
Willow Park Kindergarten (Delayed)	Not available	Fee-paying school
Maroochee State Preschool (Repeated)	997	Middle to High
Windamere State Preschool (Repeated with Transition)	986	Middle to High
St. Christopher's College (Returned with Transition)	Not available	Fee-paying school
Crestleigh State School (Returned with Transition)	1000	Middle to High
Raintree State School (Returned with Transition)	966	Middle to Low

Generally speaking, the eighteen children who were repeated, returned, delayed or given a Transition program were more likely to be from schools drawing from socially and economically advantaged catchment areas. As discussed in Chapter 4, schools that were both available for the study and had higher numbers of repeated or returned, had middle to high IRSED index scores of socio-economic advantage. However, within these schools, there was a likely variation of family socio-economic status.

When looking at children individually, however, a different pattern emerges in Table 5.8. As mentioned previously, the usual indicators of socio-economic status in Australia, that is, education, occupation and income, was not available for each child's parents. As parental occupation was available through the schools/Pre-schools, it was used to define two broad categories of income levels for families, Income Support and Non-Income Support families. Families who received Income Support were seen as being on a low-income<sup>24</sup> as assessed by the Australian Government Family Assistance Office (2008). Non-Income Support families were characterised by parents, either or both of whom worked in the service industries, who had skilled trades, professional occupations or were in business. Non-Income Support families were more advantaged economically and more likely to be middle-income families. However, to differentiate between children from families of the two income levels, children were considered as being from Income Support families,

<sup>24</sup> The current rate for families who receive income support is \$552 per fortnight or \$14,352 per year (Australian Government Family Assistance Office., 2008). The Medicare low-income threshold is \$16,284 (Parliament of Australia, Parliamentary Library, 2006).

which were representative of low-income families, or from Non-Income support families which are more likely to represent middle-income families. Thus, in Table 5.8, where children are grouped according to their school, their parent/s' occupation and income support or non-income support families, a different pattern emerges. To highlight the emerging patterns, the delayed, repeated, returned, income support and non-income support children have been identified by different colours. The delayed, repeated and returned children will be discussed in turn, according to Tables 5.7 and 5.8.

**Table 5.8 Children by School, Parent/s' Occupation, Income Support/Non-Income Support**

School	Child	Parent/s Occupation	Income Support/ Non-Income Support
Willow Park Kindergarten (Delayed)	Fraser (previous year)	Teacher (mother) Security Officer (father)	Non-Income Support
	Bradley (previous year)	Landscape business (mother/father)	Non-Income Support
Maroochee State Preschool (Repeated)	Jaiden	Skilled work (father)	Non-Income Support
	Martin	Skilled work (father)	Non-Income Support
Windamere State Preschool (Repeated/ with Transition)	Jason	Skilled work (father)	Non-Income Support
	Caitlin	Army - Skilled work (mother/father)	Non-Income Support
	Brian	Income support (mother)	Income Support
	Fintan	Skilled work (father)	Non-Income Support
St. Christopher's College (Returned with Transition)	Rebecca	Skilled work (mother/father)	Non-Income Support
	Daniel	Teacher (father)	Non-Income Support
	Hannah	Skilled work (father)	Non-Income Support
Crestleigh State School (Returned/ with Transition)	Esther	Skilled work (father)	Non-Income Support
	Nicholas	Income support (mother)	Income Support
	Grant	Income support (mother)	Income Support
Raintree State School (Returned/ with Transition)	James	Income support (mother)	Income Support
	Julian	Income support (mother)	Income Support
	Jacob	Age Pension (grandparents)	Income Support
	Tanya	Computer business (father) Nurse (mother)	Non-Income Support

### The delayed children

The delayed children, Fraser and Bradley, spent their first year of Pre-school at Willow Park Kindergarten, a fee paying Pre-school, and their second year of Pre-school at Crestleigh State School. Both groups of parents were employed. Bradley's parents owned a landscape business. Fraser's mother was a teacher while his father was a security officer at the local hospital. The parents of both children not only believed that it was important for children to be 'ready' or even 'really-ready' for school as Fraser's mother suggested, but they appeared to have the financial

capacity to provide an extra year of Pre-school at two different Pre-school locations. In this way, such parents were able to largely shield their children from the ‘risk’ of being unready for school because of their young age, and the possible negative affects that might come from having two years of Pre-school at the one centre. Fraser’s and Bradley’s parents, like most parents who gave their children two years of Pre-school for similar reasons, were considered by the Director to be from “middle to upper” income level families (Interview with Fiona, Director, Willow Park Kindergarten: 21). The finding in this study, that parents from higher income levels are more likely than parents from lower income levels to delay their children’s entry to school, is similar to findings in Australia (Routley & de Lemos, 1993) and overseas (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Katz, 2000). It would appear that the capacity for parents to employ this practice is related to income level.

### **The repeated children**

The repeated children were from two schools, Maroochee and Windamere State Schools, both of which had middle to high IRSED index scores of socio-economic advantage, although Windermere was in the lower range of this threshold (986 in a threshold range of 1020 to 975). As noted earlier in Chapter 4, it was difficult to locate schools which had middle to low IRSED index scores of socio-economic advantage where several children were repeated or returned. On many occasions throughout the study, including the survey, teachers reported that parents often refused to repeat their children at Pre-school. In some instances, parents were concerned about the possible stigma of repeating Pre-school (Interview with Melanie, Pre-school teacher, Crestleigh State School: 28). However, by far the greatest concern for many parents in repeating their children at Pre-school was the issue of part-time schooling as opposed to full-time schooling (Interview with Gwen, Pre-school teacher, Windamere State School: 18). As previously noted, the Transition program was employed at Windamere school for ‘unready’ children whose parents “couldn’t sustain two years of part-time education with their jobs and things” (Interview with Gwen, Pre-school teacher, Windamere State School: 18). While parents’ willingness to repeat their children at part-time Pre-school may have been related to the cost of extra childcare or the loss of income from paid work if the child repeated part-time Pre-school, it may have also have been related to a level of convenience for parents with paid work. For such reasons, Transition programs, which gave repeated and returned children full-time schooling status, were employed at four of the five schools in the study where children progressed from Pre-school to Year 1. Of these five schools, the only Pre-school that did not employ a Transition program was geographical disconnected from the school and at least five minutes drive away. In this instance, a Transition program might have been difficult to implement.

Thus where schools did not employ Transition programs, parents may have been less willing to repeat their children at Pre-school, particularly if it meant the cost of extra childcare or the loss of income from paid work.

In considering individual children, six of the seven repeated children were from Non-Income Support families and one child was from a family who received Income-Support. Children who repeated Pre-school were less likely to be from low-income families. This finding contrasts with research in the United States (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Reynolds, 1992) and New Zealand (McDonald, 1988) which shows that children from low-income families are more likely to be repeated at Pre-school. This finding may also be related to the belief by some parents from more advantaged social and economic backgrounds, and similar to the belief held by parents who delay their children's entry to school, that an extra year of Pre-school is educationally beneficial. As the teacher at Windamere State School suggested, some parents who were unsure of their child's readiness status and were unwilling to risk their child being unready for year 1, had been attracted to the Pre-school because of the Transition Program employed at the centre. As it was a state school, the extra year was also cost-free.

### **The returned children**

Of the nine returned children, three children were from Crestleigh State School which had middle to high IRSED index scores of socio-economic advantage, three children were from Raintree State School which had middle to low IRSED index scores of socio-economic advantage, and three children were from St. Christopher's College which was a fee-paying, non-government school. On average, the returned children were from schools whose catchment areas were marked by socio-economically advantaged families.

However, when the returned children were considered individually, a different pattern emerged. Although the returned children attended schools whose catchment areas were generally marked by socio-economically advantaged families, five of the nine children (55.5%) were from families who received Income Support. When the two state schools, Crestleigh and Raintree State Schools were considered, five of the six children (83.3%) were from Income Support families.

This finding, that 55.5% (five of nine) of the returned children were from Income Support families, contrasts with the repeated children, where 14.3% (one of seven) of the repeated children was from a family who received Income Support. Most teachers who participated in the survey initially saw

the repeated and returned children as children who repeated Pre-school. If repeated and returned children are considered together in this way, 37.5% of children who effectively 'repeated' Pre-school were from Income Support families. This still contrasts with other countries such as the United States (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Reynolds, 1992) and New Zealand (McDonald, 1988) where children who are repeated at Pre-school are more likely to be from low-income families.

The study found that repeated children were more likely to be from Non-income Support families and returned children were more likely to be from Income Support families. There appears to be little available research on either returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 or Transition programs to compare these findings.

#### **5.4.2 Gender**

Of the eighteen children who were repeated, delayed or returned, five were girls, which represent 3.4% of the total numbers of girls (147) in the classes where Pre-school retention was practised. However, thirteen boys were repeated, delayed or returned, which represent 8.6% of the total numbers of boys (151) in the classes where Pre-school retention was practised. Boys were more likely to be repeated, delayed, returned or offered Transition programs than girls. Individual retention practices revealed a similar pattern.

#### **The delayed children**

Boys were more likely to be delayed than girls. The two delayed children who attended Crestleigh State School were boys who attended Willow Park Kindergarten the year before. The Pre-school teacher, who was also the Director of Willow Park Kindergarten where a large number of children had delayed school entry, noted it was more often boys whose entry into school was delayed:

*R: Are they generally girls, boys (who are delayed)?*

*F: Usually um, um it's usually the boys, however there are girls there ... but generally the boys (Interview with Fiona, Director, Willow Park Kindergarten: 17).*

This finding, that boys' entry into school is more often delayed than girls, is similar to research in Australia (Routley & de Lemos, 1993) and in the United States (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; NCES, 2000).

### **The repeated children**

Of the seven children who were repeated at Pre-school, five were boys (7.3% of the total number of boys) and two were girls (3.2% of the total number of girls). One teacher's remark typified what other studies (Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005) and data from Education Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003) have shown, that boys are more often repeated at Pre-school than girls:

*Well, I found in recent ... in the kids that I have repeated; it's generally the boys with late birthdays. Actually, I can't even think of a girl that I've had repeat. Oh, one girl a long ... when I was at Melton (State Preschool) (Interview with Janice, teacher, Maroochee State Preschool: 150).*

### **The returned children**

Of the nine children who were returned to Pre-school from Year 1, six were boys which represent 7.2% of the total numbers of boys (83) in the classes where children were returned to Pre-school from Year 1. The three returned girls represent 3.5% of the total number of girls in the classes where children were returned to Pre-school from Year 1. More than twice as many boys as girls were thus returned to Pre-school from Year 1.

Parents as well as teachers appeared to draw on anecdotes from their own experiences as well as the experiences of others to explain why boys were more likely than girls to need a second year of Pre-school:

*I remembered a few years that I've taught Year 1, at the start of the year it was always very obvious that the girls were more mature than the boys (Interview with Chris, parent, Willow Park Kindergarten: 8).*

*Yeah, she's (mother-in-law) taught for thirty or more years in a primary school and she said to me, yeah, that boys are often a bit better to go a bit older ... Often they (boys) start too young (Interview with Felecia, parent, Maroochee State Preschool: 146)*

*The boys are like that though (immature). In fact, boys can be a bit less mature than girls. The girls can catch up quicker* (Interview with Thel, parent, Crestleigh State School, parent: 66).

Central to many explanations about why boys needed a second year of Pre-school was the belief that boys were generally 'less mature' than girls. One of the available storylines within school-ready discourse into which the practice of giving boys a second year of Pre-school appeared to fit was that boys are less mature than girls and therefore boys need more time than girls to become school-ready. Boys, along with younger and immature children, were often placed in the binary category of 'unready'. Because these characteristics were linked together in the chain of unready attributes, they also appeared to become linked with each other in parents' and teachers' thinking. In this way, such perceptions about boys' immaturity and lower levels of readiness for school appeared to be held intact and perpetuated. The literature similarly shows that there is a widely held perception that boys are less ready for school than girls (Crnic & Lamberty, 1994; McGrath, 2006; NSWCP, 2003) often because of boys' perceived 'immaturity' (Griffin & Harvey, 1995). This view is underpinned by a maturationist view of school readiness where it is believed that some children need more time to mature to become 'school-ready', many of whom, according to many teachers and parents, are boys.

While both parents and teachers generally believed that boys were less mature than girls, teachers reported that the returned boys' in particular were 'immature', as evidenced by their poor disposition towards school and their inappropriate classroom behaviours. From a maturationist perspective which many teachers wholly or partially took up, the returned boys' inappropriate behaviours were seen as the result of their 'immaturity'. From this perspective, the recommended intervention strategy of 'more time' was employed to address boys' problems of 'maturity'. However, an extra year of Pre-school, as one teacher admitted, did not help in maturing one boy's behaviours in the Year 1 classroom (Interview with Ewan, Pre-school teacher, Raintree State School: 48).

An alternative explanation for the returned boys' 'immature' behaviours might be related to the dominant forms of masculinity which the returned boys appeared to take up and which conflicted with the discursive practices of schooling. It is likely that all boys took up the dominant forms of masculinity favouring aggression, violence, domination and control to some degree, particularly as these forms of masculinity are not only dominant in society but also dominate the media, toys and

electronic games (Alloway, 1995). However, the returned boys appeared far more likely than the repeated or delayed boys to take up the dominant forms of masculinity at school. Because teachers wholly or partially drew on maturationist discourse, they saw the returned boys' inappropriate behaviours not as attributes favoured by the dominant discourses of masculinity but as 'immaturity'. Maturationist school-ready beliefs may therefore mask what are likely to be gender-based behaviours.

#### **5.4.3 Birth dates**

Of the eighteen repeated, returned and delayed children, ten children possessed what many teachers and parents described as 'late' birthdays. Until 2007 in Queensland, children who turned five between January 1 and December 31 were legally entitled to commence Pre-school that year (The State of Queensland, Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2002a). Children born in the second half of the year and particularly the last quarter of the year were described by some teachers and parents as having 'late' birthdays.

Within a maturationist version of school ready-discourse, children's age was strongly equated with readiness for school. When parents and teachers drew on a maturationist version of school-readiness, younger children were more likely to be positioned as, or considered 'at risk' of being, unready for school. Younger children were delayed, repeated and returned because the subject position offered to them within a maturationist version of school-ready discourse positioned them as at 'risk of being', or being, 'unready' for school:

*It's not usually, it's not usually that they have an inability in all areas or are developmentally delayed in all areas either. No, no. They're just concerned that they'd be very ... they usually have a late birthday and so they're more concerned that ... are they going to be ready for school? So they're a little bit younger and the parents are concerned ... (Interview with Fiona, Director, Willow Park Kindergarten: 8).*

*We'd always been thinking about Bradley doing two years of Pre-school because of this birthday (December) (Interview with Shelley, parent of delayed child, Willow Park Kindergarten: 2).*

*R: Ok Marion, could you just tell me how it was that Jaiden (child) came to be repeating Pre-school this year?*

*M: We found that he was ah ... because he's a young child and a December baby, he was always a very small boy ... ah, young, he just didn't pick up like everybody else was picking up because let's face it he was more or less 12 months behind everyone else (in age) (Interview with Marion, parent, Maroochee State Preschool: 7-8).*

*R: What were the main reasons for his being returned to Pre-school (from Year 1)?*

*C: His teachers felt that he was not at the same level as the other kids. He was still at a younger age of development. After all, he was only 5 in December. He was also disruptive in class. Just wanted to play (Interview with Clarrie, parent, Raintree State School: 11-12).*

*Also, the other factor that came into it (the child being returned to Pre-school) was his age. He was a September birthday, towards the end of the year... (Interview with Jack, Guidance Officer, Crestleigh State School, 26).*

Because a maturationist version of school readiness placed younger children in the category of 'unready', one teacher who drew on this version of school readiness, discouraged parents from enrolling their 'younger' children at school and Pre-school, simply on the basis of the child's (young) age:

*Well, when Martin's mother rang up to book him in ... (we) noticed his birth date (December). And so we were sort of talking about if he was ... um ... if he was ready because, um ... he might need another year of Pre-school (Interview with Janice, teacher, Maroochee State Preschool: 2, 10).*

When one Year 1 teacher attempted to return a child to Pre-school from Year 1, some of the child's characteristics did not fit as neatly into the category of 'unready', nor did they fit into one of the storylines available within a maturationist school-ready discourse, that is, younger children are less ready for, and are thus less likely to, experience success at, school. The teacher consequently drew on other attributes the child held, such as his 'immaturity', possibly due to his 'background', to justify his being placed in the category of 'unready' and returned to Pre-school from Year 1:

*R: So how did he come to go back to Pre-school?*

*T: Um, a lot of lobbying. I straight away um, in the first week, I approached the Principal and Ewan (the Pre-school teacher) and you know, because I already knew*

*this little boy, I knew things, the background, the behaviour. He's, even though he's a middle ... he's a July, June or July baby, um which can, usually later on in the year, which can just make the difference. Even though he was probably the 'right age', maturity wise, he wasn't ready ...* (Interview with Tammy, Year 1 teacher, Raintree State School: 16).

One parent who hadn't understood the dynamic of school-ready discourse, and in particular, the maturationist version of school-readiness when her younger child commenced school, lamented the fact that if she had 'known' about the dominant ways and practices of schooling, that is, "how it (schooling) worked", then she might have been able to possibly intervene. Because she did not have access to this discourse to intervene or even understand 'how it worked', her child was positioned as unready for school and returned to Pre-school from Year 1, resulting in some distress for both the parent and the child:

*Ah, because Hannah – she's a December baby – she's the 20<sup>th</sup> of December. If I would have known ... because she was my first child to go to school, I had no idea how it worked. I, I really felt that she um ... I didn't realise until the end of Pre-school when she was going in to Year 1 that she was too young* (Interview with Lydia, parent, St. Christopher's College: 20, 21).

Teachers and parents who drew on a maturationist version of school readiness were more likely to position younger children as unready or at risk of being unready for school. Some older studies in the United States have also noted similar relationships (Shepard & Smith, 1986).

#### **5.4.4 Disability**

Two children were identified as having mild disabilities for which they received low levels of support at Pre-school. One child, Tanya, had been born with a mild hearing impairment and a recent operation had improved her ability to hear, identify sounds and her speech. Fintan was identified as having autism. A number of children received support from a speech pathologist to rectify minor speech problems which was not unusual among this age group.

#### **5.4.5 Indigenous/non-Indigenous**

Of the eighteen children who were repeated, delayed or returned, seventeen children were non-Indigenous which represents 6.1% of the total number (276) of non-Indigenous children in the

classes where Pre-school retention was practised. Only one of the eighteen children who were repeated, delayed or returned was Indigenous, which represents 4.5% of the total number (22) of Indigenous children in these classes. These findings, which concur with data drawn from Education Queensland (2007), showed that Indigenous children were less likely to be repeated at Pre-school than non-Indigenous children. This finding was different to the assumptions made at the beginning of the study, that Indigenous children were more often repeated at Pre-school.

### **5.5 Conclusion and Summary of Pre-school Retention Practices**

The study considered a range of Pre-school retention practices used by teachers and parents. To understand why teachers and parents employed particular practices, their talk about these practices was examined. Teachers drew predominantly on school-ready discourse, which created binary categories of ready and unready groups of children. Unready children were believed to lack the necessary cultural resources through which success at school could be achieved. To enable the unready children to have the same cultural resources as the ready children so that they might similarly succeed at school, a range of Pre-school retention practices were employed. During their second year of Pre-school, children were given a further opportunity to acquire the necessary cultural resources which included pre-literacy, pre-numeracy and pre-writing skills and an understanding of the cultural practices of the Year 1 classroom, to successfully participate in schooling.

Because the predominant focus was on the unready child to change and adapt to the needs of school rather than the school changing and adapting to the needs of the child, a range of Pre-school retention practices were employed by teachers and parents. Teachers and some parents, who drew on school-ready discourse, devised a range of Pre-school retention practices which included repeating children at Pre-school, returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 and delaying children's entry to school. Because some parents drew on the more powerful age-ready discourse, Transition programs which combined school-ready and age-ready discourse were employed for repeated and returned children. Some parents' investment in 'really-ready' discourse resulted in children's entry to school being 'delayed an extra year'.

The range of Pre-school retention practices appeared to be employed for particular groups of children. Although these children were more often boys and younger children, they were mainly non-Indigenous children and children from schools whose catchment areas had middle to high SES families. However, when children were considered in terms of their individual family backgrounds,

a different pattern emerged. Children who were repeated or delayed were more likely to be from Non-Income Support families (88.9%) than Income Support families (11.1%) while children who were returned to Pre-school from year 1 were more likely to be from Income Support families (55.5%) than Non-Income Support families (44.5%). Further, six of the nine returned children were boys who were reported by the teachers as having inappropriate behaviours at school or at home. While teachers believed the boys' inappropriate behaviours reflected their (im)maturity, it is also likely that this group of boys drew on the dominant forms of masculinity such as violence, aggression and non-compliance confrontation which are contrary to the expected behaviours of the year 1 classroom.

Teachers saw the provision of Pre-school retention practices as an aspirational means through which to provide the 'unready' children with the same advantages, and, in the case of the delayed children, more advantage in schooling as the 'ready' children. Where teachers perceived children's social emotional well-being to be 'at risk', they drew on a welfare discourse privileging children's social and emotional well-being over school-ready needs. In other cases, where alternative intervention strategies, such as Reading Recovery, were considered to afford children greater benefits than Pre-school retention practices, school-ready needs were considered a lesser priority.

The next chapter will consider the findings from the cases studies at the three schools where alternatives to Pre-school retention practices were employed.

## CHAPTER 6

# ALTERNATIVES TO PRE-SCHOOL RETENTION: THE FINDINGS

### 6.1 Introduction

Chapter 6 discusses the findings from case studies at three schools; Riverview State School, Woodrow State School and Gardenia State School, where alternatives to Pre-school retention practices were provided. There were a number of contradictory discourses organised around the concept of school readiness and children's success at school. While both maturationist and empiricist/environmentalist versions of school-ready discourse were dominant in schools where Pre-school retention practices were employed, two of the three schools which employed alternatives to Pre-school retention drew on constructivist/interactionist discourse, either wholly or partially, to inform their practices. These findings became apparent in addressing the second set of research questions which asked:

- *Are there alternatives to repeating children at Pre-school?*
- *If there are alternatives, what practices are associated with the alternatives?*
- *Are particular groups of children more likely to be provided with these alternatives?*
- *Why are these children more likely to be provided with these alternatives?*

The first research question asked whether or not alternatives to Pre-school retention were available. As the study confirmed that alternatives to Pre-school retention were employed at three schools, the following research questions were answered on that basis. In looking at alternative practices, the study considered the possibility that particular groups of children might be targeted for particular practices. In considering this possibility, the chapter examines teachers' explanations for these practices and considers, in particular, the discourses which underpin them in Section 6.2. Section 6.3 considers each alternative practice employed at three schools while Section 6.4 looks at whether retention was practised for particular groups of children. Again, similar to Chapter 5, findings will be presented in the words of the participants as much as possible to privilege their perspectives and

to understand why alternatives to Pre-school retention practices were employed. Further theorising of the findings presented in Chapter 6 will be elaborated in Chapter 7.

## **6.2 Why Alternatives to Pre-school Retention Were Employed for Children**

Within the discursive field of education, there were a number of available discourses in relation to achieving success at school. Because Riverview, Woodrow and Gardenia State Schools drew on different discourses to ensure success for children, different practices were employed at each school. Although each school adopted different practices, teachers saw each of these practices in an aspirational way, that is, each way was considered the best way to ensure children's success at school. Riverview State School drew largely on school-ready discourse, but in some aspects of programming, drew on constructivist/interactionist discourse. Woodrow State School, while drawing on school-ready discourse and positioning children as 'unready' for a regular Year 1 class, simultaneously drew on constructivist/interactionist discourse in programming. Gardenia State School, embraced a 'ready for the children' approach which was largely underpinned by constructivist/interactionist discourse. Although school-ready discourse was dominant in schooling, school personnel at Gardenia State School attempted to avoid practices that were underpinned by school-ready philosophies. Such practices, staff believed, could adversely affect children's self esteem if children were positioned as 'unready' for school in a negative way. The school adopted, instead, an approach which accepted all children's 'readiness' status and provided in-class support for the learning needs of all children. Driving concerns about the need for children to be school-ready were discourses of accountability.

### ***6.2.1 Look, we've got to be teaching stuff: Pressure of accountability***

Accountability appeared to underpin concerns relating to the newly formed Transition class at Woodrow State School. Although the Transition class was formed for children who were considered to not have the necessary school-ready skills to participate in a regular Year 1 class, teachers planning the Transition program attempted to plan it in exactly the same way as the other Year 1 classes, that is, on the assumption that children possessed the necessary cultural resources to successfully commence Year 1 and progress through school:

*The teachers came up with ... they were very concerned because they said, "Look, we've got to be teaching stuff." There's this burning concern about content, which is a thing unfortunately, and that's my personal opinion when I say, "Unfortunately", that teachers get*

*concerned about. Nobody tells them that they've got to be flogging content all the time*  
(Interview with Kurt, Principal, Woodrow State School: 6).

The teachers' concern about teaching 'content' or particular forms of content may have been related to their concern that children had the necessary cultural resources with which to pass through the first official accountability gate in Queensland schools, the Year Two Net. However, the Principal recommended to teachers:

*Use whatever means you can to diagnose them (Transition class children). Then say, "Right, here they are now, what do they need now to take the next step in their education?" Well, if those kids can't ... do all those things we assumed are developed, well that's where we start. Now teachers still have trouble with that unfortunately. Some don't, but others do. Because they say, "I won't get as far as the others by the time I get them to the end of Grade 1 and then I've got to hand them on to Grade 2, and what's the Grade 2 teacher going to think of me?" Now this is a real concern* (Interview with Kurt, Principal, Woodrow State School: 6).

It was apparent that the Year 1 teachers saw their task as devising a Transition program, which was to ensure that the Transition children had the necessary cultural resources at the end of Year 1 to successfully commence Year 2. Lack of the necessary cultural resources might not only result in failure for the Transition children at the end of Year 1, but also in the professional humiliation for Year 1 teachers who had not ensured children were ready for Year 2. Particular cultural resources were evidence, in the eyes of both colleagues and employer (Education Queensland), that teachers had met accountability requirements and accomplished their desired goals. Within school-ready thinking, it may have made sense to the Year 1 teachers to begin a Transition program with Year 1 curriculum content so that the children were ready for Year 2 at the end of the year. The teachers' focus on achieving measurable evidence-based learning, pressured by accountability requirements, is associated with an empiricist/environmentalist view of school readiness.

The problem with this approach was that the Transition class children did not have the required cultural resources with which to successfully participate in the Year 1 program, which was why they were placed in the Transition class in the first place. Drawing on constructivist/interactionist discourse rather than school-ready discourse, the Principal suggested instead that the Transition program be constructed from the skills and behaviours the children already had and support their learning at school based on their existing cultural resources. Thus when a

constructivist/interactionist view of school readiness was taken up by the Principal, children's prior-to-school skills and knowledge were valued and used as a starting point in children's learning at school.

An awareness of accountability requirements appeared to permeate all levels of schooling. The pressure to have children 'ready' for each year level before Year 2, where the first official 'accountability gate', the Year 2 Net, was located, appeared to impact on Pre-school, Transition and Year 1 teachers as well. The pressure to have children 'ready' for each year level appeared to be an informally understood requirement within 'school-ready' discourse which was translated down through each year level of schooling:

*I would say that pressures come down all the way (to Pre-school) (Interview with Kurt, Principal, Woodrow State School: 8, 12).*

Thus pressured by accountability requirements and the need to have children ready for each year level, some teachers at Woodrow State School wanted children to begin the Transition program with particular cultural resources that they believed children 'should' have as opposed to the cultural resources the children 'did' have. These findings are similar to the schools in the study where children were repeated and returned, and also in the United States (NAECSSDE, 2000). The NAECSSDE argue that, because of increasing accountability, teachers often commence learning at school with what they believe children should know rather than what children do know (2000).

Concerns about school accountability, as evidenced through a concern over learning outcomes and assessment, was also noted at Riverview State School:

*They've been through the (Transition class) program and to see the outcomes in their achievement. I mean, these children would not have been performing at a Year 2 level as well as they are at a Year 1 level if we hadn't done something like this. And we've monitored them through the Year 2 net and through our own assessments (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 76).*

Similar to the teachers at Woodrow State School, teachers at Riverview State School focused on learning outcomes associated with increases in school accountability. Although the Acting Principal

at Gardenia State School was aware of school accountability requirements, children were able to similarly achieve success at school through an alternative approach.

**6.2.2 *There was a group of children who were really not ready for school: School ready discourse***

At Riverview school, staff spoke in terms of children being school-ready. At Woodrow State School, while most of the school staff focused on children's need to be school-ready, the Transition class teacher and Principal drew on school-ready discourse. While the Principal spoke of children being 'ready', he appeared to understand that it was a contested term. Where teachers drew on school-ready discourse, children were positioned as 'unready' for school because it was believed that they did not have the 'school-ready' attributes needed for success in a regular Year 1 classroom. Transition classes were considered the best way to support large groups of unready children's transition into school and enable them to acquire the cultural resources necessary for success through schooling:

*R: Jade, do you remember why the Transition year was established?*

*J: One of the reasons that the Transition year was established was that our learning support teachers and guidance officer had identified, through visits to the Pre-school, that there was a group of children at the Pre-school who were really not ready for Year 1. As well as that, we get a number of students enrolled in Year 1 at the beginning of each school year who have not had Pre-school so we were looking at the Transition program catering for both these groups of children (Interview with Jade, Deputy Principal, Woodrow State School: 2).*

*And see a lot of these children at that point in time didn't go to Pre-school and that was another reason for us wanting to develop the (Transition) program ... so they had none of that preparation (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 12).*

At Riverview and Woodrow State Schools, children were positioned as 'unready' for a regular Year 1 class because they lacked the cultural resources which were believed to be gained particularly through Pre-school experience. While Pre-school attendance was not compulsory in Queensland schools (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a) teachers who drew on school-ready discourse positioned children without this form of prior-to-school experience as 'unready' for school. It was likely that teachers believed that particular cultural resources, such as an understanding of the cultural practices of schools as well as a range of pre-reading, pre-

writing and pre-numeracy skills necessary for school success, were largely acquired through Pre-school experience.

To be school-ready, children needed some knowledge of the cultural practices of schools:

*They needed much more development in just the simple social skills of sharing, taking turns, lining up, standing still, and going to the toilet. ... In a lot of those things they were way behind the eight ball* (Interview with Kurt, Principal, Woodrow State School: 6).

Children required an understanding of the cultural practices of schools such as ‘lining up, standing still’. Such school-ready practices as ‘lining up’ and ‘standing still’ are more often associated with the dominant discourses of schooling and are also practices with which Indigenous children, most of whom were in the Transition classes, may be less familiar (Kale, 1995; MCEETYA, 2000; Nakata, 1993).

Other cultural resources that ‘unready’ children also appeared to ‘lack’ were ‘fine motor’ and ‘language skills’. The Transition class children at both schools were described in terms of particular school-ready skills they did not appear to have, most of which were related to language and fine motor skills:

*They were identified in Pre-school as needing a little bit more before they went into a straight Year 1 ... A lot of them have language problems and can't explain things they're doing ... They were children with fine motor, language (concerns) ...* (Interview with Meg, Transition teacher, Riverview State School: 2, 24).

*(W)e saw that there was a group of kiddies there that had very low verbal skills* (Interview with Kurt, Principal, Woodrow State School: 2).

*A lot of the children's English was really bad, their oral skills ... They had very poor gross motor and fine motor skills* (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 20).

The school-ready talk of teachers and Principals positioned children in the oppositional categories of ‘ready’ and ‘unready’. Children placed in the ‘unready’ category were positioned as ‘lacking’ in relation to the ‘ready’ children because they did not have the more desirable attributes of the ‘ready’

group. Thus, teachers' descriptions of unready children were largely in terms of the skills and behaviours they did not have in relation to the ready group. Children positioned in the binary category of 'unready' were thus positioned as 'other' to and 'lacking' in relation to the ready children and therefore positioned in a negative way. The binary categories, based on ready and unready groups of children, highlighted the perceived deficits of the unready children, as seen in Table 6.1.

**Table 6.1 Binary Categories of Ready and Unready Attributes of Children in Transition Classes**

<b>Ready children</b>	<b>Unready children</b>
Pre-school experience	Little or no Pre-school experience
Good fine motor skills	Poor fine motor skills
Can sit still	Can't sit still
Can explain	Can't explain
Can listen	Can't listen
Children with English as a first language	Children with English as a second language

As can be seen from Table 6.1, children's subjectivity was organised in relation to the school-ready attributes they did or did not have. Thus, school-ready discourse was underpinned by deficit discourse, highlighting the perceived deficits of unready children and positioning them in a negative way.

At Riverview and Woodrow State Schools children's language development was a concern. One Principal explained why:

*And they had the Australian Aboriginal English way of speaking which is very different to our way of speaking and there were a whole lot of issues tied up with that as well, getting ready for reading (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 12).*

At the schools where Pre-school retention practices were provided and where only one child was Indigenous, children's language development was not considered to be one of the main readiness concerns. However, at Riverview Woodrow and Gardenia State Schools, where alternatives to Pre-school retention practices were provided and where there were larger numbers of Indigenous children, English was more likely to be a second language. While all schools sought different ways

to support children's language development, the Principal, particularly at Riverview State School, appeared to see children's use of 'Australian Aboriginal English' as a barrier to learning to read. Added to this barrier was children's 'lack' of preparation for learning to read at school:

*They'd had none of that (Pre-school) preparation and they came from pretty deprived home lives where there were no books, they didn't get read to ... (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 12).*

The Principal not only believed that it was the parents' responsibility to ensure children were 'school ready' but she held particular beliefs about how children should be prepared for learning to read at school. Although literacy learning may take place in Indigenous homes (Kale, 1995), it may be done differently to ways it is done in non-Indigenous homes and to ways with which many teachers are familiar. Although oral language and communication may be valued in Indigenous homes (Kale, 1995), the Principal believed that children's pre-literacy experiences needed to be valued in a particular way, which included 'books' and 'reading' to children. Because the Principal drew on school-ready discourse, children who commenced school without the cultural resources valued in schools were not only positioned as being unready for Year 1, but parents were positioned as negligent for failing to provide the correct cultural resources through which she believed pre-literacy experiences should be provided. Because the Principal drew on school-ready discourse, both parents and children were positioned in a negative way and their ways and practices held less value. Although others (Kale, 1995; MCEETYA, 2000) have noted that literacy learning in Indigenous homes may be different to literacy practices valued in schools, it often exists in a different form. Because the children's experiences were not the same as those valued at school, she believed that those in the Transition class had had 'no' pre-literacy experiences.

The Principal further explained why she believed the Transition class children were unready for school:

*Well the need was ... the very, very limited life experiences of these children before coming to school ... not knowing what to do, not hearing people read, not listening to talk going on, not interacting with other people. All those very basic early childhood things that children get to do with mothers, these are totally people who still haven't had those experiences and we expected them from them ... because there was just no interaction, no basic oral communication. They were in day-care twenty-four hours or got dropped off at a*

*grandmother's who watched TV all day* (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 34-36).

Although the Transition children were likely to have a range of life experiences before commencing school, if their 'prior-to-school' learning experiences did not include those valued at the school, they held less value, regardless of what these experiences might have been. Through a school-ready lens, the Principal could only see that particular cultural resources and practices could lead to school success while others did not. Because the Principal of Riverview State School drew on school-ready discourse, she positioned the cultural practices of the ready and unready children and their families in oppositional categories. Even normal life experiences for young children such as being in day-care or spending time with grandparents became associated with the 'negative' practices of unready children which contributed to their 'lack of readiness' for school. Although the same Principal was aspirational about the children, the employment of a Transition class and the children's outcomes as a result of the class, because she drew on school-ready discourse she was unable to see children's prior-to-school experiences as having value when they did not include the ways and practices which enabled them to gain particular cultural resources valued in schools.

### ***6.2.3 An alternative approach: Ready for the children***

Because the Transition classes at Woodrow and Riverview State Schools were wholly or partially underpinned by school-ready discourse, children were required to have particular cultural resources before they could successfully participate in a regular Year 1 class. In an education system where 'school-ready' beliefs were dominant (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a), teachers' talk at Woodrow and Riverview State Schools was more often focused on the need for children to be 'ready for school'.

However, at Gardenia State School, the focus of concern was not on the children's need to be 'ready for school' but on the school's need to be 'ready for the children'. Because the school adopted a philosophical approach to preparing children for school that was different to most of the schools in the study, their resulting practice was different to the other schools as well. While all teachers in the study were generally eclectic and combined a range of school readiness beliefs, including at times constructivist/interactionist beliefs, Gardenia State School was the only school in the study to draw predominantly on constructivist/interactionist discourse.

By taking up constructivist/interactionist discourse, all children who commenced school at Gardenia State School were positioned by teachers as ‘ready for school’. Thus *all* children’s prior-to-school learning experiences were valued, *all* children’s perspectives were respected, *all* children were considered ‘ready’ to begin learning at school and *all* children commenced Year 1 with their same age cohorts. All children were welcomed, valued and supported in their learning at the school. The Acting Principal explained, on behalf of staff, the approach taken when a child enrolled at the school:

*We look at finding out as much as possible (about the children); visiting the parents, finding out, understanding where they’re coming from ... Can I mention here ... the young boy who only spoke Creole? We got a Torres Strait Islander person in who spoke Creole and that child’s language developed ... But he can succeed in the classroom by (us) finding those special needs to answer those questions (Interview 1 with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 7).*

With this approach to school readiness, the emphasis was on finding out as much as possible about the children and their background so that their learning at school could be supported. This approach was underpinned by Vygotskian theories of scaffolded learning (cited in Morrison, 2007), supported by current understandings of child development which emphasise the influence of the child’s social context on development and learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) and supported by current early childhood curriculum departments (QSA, 1998, 2005, 2007).

As mentioned previously, despite the school’s mobility rate of 83% and many children with English as a second language (Gardenia State School, 2002a), such characteristics were not seen as a barrier to children’s learning at school. Children’s characteristics were simply recognised and used as a starting point to support and continue the child’s learning at school. By contrast, teachers at Riverview and Woodrow State Schools, who wholly or partly drew on school-ready discourse, saw attributes other than those that positioned children as being ‘ready for school’ as being a barrier to learning at school. Children’s mobility, language development and use of ‘Australian Aboriginal English’ were considered a barrier to learning at both Riverview and Woodrow State Schools.

By drawing on constructivist/interactionist discourse, teachers at Gardenia State School not only valued, but also accepted, that children’s prior-to-school learning experiences were different for each child. This understanding of school readiness accepts all children’s prior-to-school learning

experiences, attributes of cultural background, without regarding them as a deficit. All cultural resources were valued and used as a starting point in children's learning at school. Thus the child's cultural resources, along with the cultural resources valued at school and the school community, were combined to assess the child's learning needs. Information about children's needs was collated to support them in the classroom, through eleven, federally-funded, in-class, Indigenous Teacher-aides or tutors (Field notes: Gardenia State School, 11-10-02) if they required further support:

*R: So when they (children) get into the classrooms, what sort of support mechanisms do you provide?*

*L: Until the child comes along and presents you with problems, then we address them. So there's support ... And the person is there (in-class tutor) ... and they have a list of about five students they're specifically working with and a list of outcomes they're trying to achieve ... but they're also working with the whole class (Interview 1 with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 8-9).*

It should be noted that while children were given support for specific learning needs at school, care was taken not to single children out for special attention. Although some children had specific learning needs, teachers attempted not to highlight children's specific learning needs as deficits nor were children singled out for special attention. While there was recognition that there were some things children did not know, support was provided through in-class tutoring to link children's prior learning experiences with the Year 1 teacher's goals and the goals of the school curriculum.

Others might argue, however, that children who are provided with in-class support may be seen by teachers as having deficits or perceived gaps either in their prior-to school or school learning experience. This may be similar to the views held by teachers at Riverview and Woodrow State Schools, or even teachers from the six schools where a range of Pre-school retention practices were employed, that when gaps in children's readiness to learn are identified, intervention strategies are employed. Although all teachers in the study were clearly aspirational in their employment of these practices and the children for whom they were employed, it is possible that these practices were underpinned by empiricist/environmentalist beliefs as well. Alternatively, it is also possible that all teachers' practices were underpinned to varying degrees by constructivist/interactionist beliefs.

Besides having in-class support, children's learning at school was supported by a range of community volunteers. Parents and community volunteers assisted with literacy, numeracy, religious education, craft and a range of extra-curricular school activities:

*R: You were saying that you have a lot of elders who support the school through ... informal learning activities as well*

*L: Yes.*

*R: So they're a support system within the school and links with the community?*

*L: Yes. After School Care has important links with the school environment via Torres Strait Islander Kerry Kinder. And they run an After School Care (program) and a Vacation Care (program) that runs from the school. And its Indigenous based but we get a lot of European ... my kids (Interview 1 with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 32-35).*

Drawing largely on constructivist/interactionist discourse, teachers at Gardenia State School incorporated children's cultural and linguistic resources into the school program, as much as possible, to provide the means through which children's successful learning at school could be made possible. Because teachers at the school held this view, community participation was encouraged. Community life around the school was encouraged and school facilities were used to sustain community life and activities (Rubin, 2002). Community partnerships and participation were valued and contributed to the social infrastructure that supported children's learning at school.

The school employed several proactive strategies to not only encourage community participation but also to incorporate community's perspectives into the school program. Firstly, the school employed a full-time Indigenous 'cultural teacher' to incorporate the children's perspectives and ways of learning into all aspects of the school curriculum. Secondly, the school used two parent liaison officers to visit parents and caregivers to discuss children's school-related concerns and ensure children's perspectives were understood, valued and used to support their learning at school. One parent liaison officer had worked at the school for eleven years and the other for twenty-five years. Ella, one of the parent liaison officers and a full-time Teacher-aide in the Year 1 classroom, was also a highly regarded elder in the community. Thirdly, children were further supported in-class by eleven, federally-funded Indigenous Teacher-aides (Field notes: Gardenia State School, 11-10-02). The Acting Principal explained how the cultural teacher supported the classroom teachers:

- R: You were saying that Sophie would be supporting the teachers if you were rewriting the SOSE curriculum ... and making it so that it incorporates all the perspectives of all the children in the school.*
- L: When Sophie does her job as cultural teacher there's no point in just doing a cultural program that the children go down for half an hour for culture, they get dipped in culture then go back to the classroom. There has to be some sort of co-operative planning, informally that goes on between Sophie and the classroom teachers ... It's a two way thing. So what Sophie does goes to the classroom and what goes on in the classroom interacts with Sophie. And that's far more, that's far better than a quick dip for half an hour then gone ... The other person would be Ella Kane, our Year 1 Teacher-aide. Twenty-five years here and she's mixed with a lot of Indigenous community groups ... She's on a board here, she's on something else over there ... She's mixed up with all these groups. She's a very important person as an elder and the community widely respects her.*
- R: And she's a Teacher-aide in Year 1?*
- L: That's right.*
- R: And she supports these children ... and she supports the parents?*
- L: And she has knowledge and understanding of where the parents are coming from. And if there is an issue with a parent, she knows about it. Because if a person comes into the community from anywhere in the community ... she'll find out about it ... she knows. She has such a positive relationship with the parents (Interview 1 with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 18-21).*

Thus the school valued and proactively sought ways to incorporate the community's particular forms of cultural and linguistic resources into children's further learning at school through an Indigenous cultural teacher, an Indigenous Teacher-aide and eleven Indigenous in-class tutors. This approach contrasts with approaches underpinned by school-ready discourse, taken up to varying degrees by other schools in the study, where particular cultural resources were valued and needed to be taken up by children before they could successfully participate in schooling. Drawing on constructivist/interactionist discourse, however, Gardenia State School valued all children's cultural resources and used it as a starting point in their learning at school. By contrast, schools which drew largely on school-ready discourse valued the ways and practices of the dominant groups in school, that is teachers, and positioned alternative ways and practices as 'other to' those valued in schooling and thus in a negative way.

Staff at Gardenia State School appeared to invest in a discourse of ‘support’ embedded within constructivist/interactionist discourse. Support was not only given to children but was also extended to parents so that they could better support their children at school:

*We support the parents. If there’s an issue about something we’ll go and talk to the parents. If the parent wasn’t bringing their children to school we’d go and visit the parents ... We’re not going over ... if at the last resort we would then go with the police, as an extreme last resort because ... and the local police officer is a friendly person, she would also come with a supportive attitude but she would be very firm about what the rules are. We tell people the rules; we do it for their sakes. The aim is to support them to get their kids to school. Sometimes there are issues at home that are going on around children ... Another thing is it’s a good opportunity to talk to parents to find out what the issues are to try and work out ways of supporting them (Interview 1 with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 4).*

By supporting both children and parents in children’s schooling, each aspect of children’s lives, including their social and emotional well-being, was valued and supported. It was previously noted in Chapter 5 that when teachers drew on a welfare discourse, they were similarly concerned with aspects of children’s lives other than academic ones. It was also noted that when taking up a welfare discourse in such instances, teachers put aside school-ready discourse which valued academic needs over social/emotional needs. Thus, within school-ready discourse, academic needs and social/emotional needs appeared to exist as binary opposite categories, with social/emotional needs generally having less value and little cultural purchase within school-ready discourse. Only when teachers drew on welfare or constructivist/interactionist discourse, which was underpinned by a discourse of support, were children’s social and emotional needs privileged in schooling. Despite the view that social and emotional development is considered be connected to, and impacts on, other areas of children’s development and learning at school by early childhood education (NAECSSDE, 2000; NAYEC, 1995, 1997) and curriculum development bodies (QSA, 1998, 2005, 2007), when teachers drew on school-ready discourse, they generally saw social and emotional needs as having less value than academic needs.

Gardenia State School’s constructivist/interactionist approach, which particularly incorporated a holistic approach to children’s learning, was also more congruent with the philosophical and pedagogical approach recommended for early childhood learning (QSA, 2007). The Acting Principal appeared to understand that there was a relationship between other aspects of a child’s

well-being, such as their social and emotional development and needs at school. Support for the child at school was focused as much on other aspects of the child's well-being as it was on the child's learning needs at school:

*If the child has deep problems those problems are always handled here at school, but we deal with them. ... We like to work through a problem. We also like to know the child very well, if all the problems that start to arise are behaviour, so we can step in earlier to realise that there is a problem and support a child who is in some sort of need. And there's always positive encouragement because if we're given a child first coming into school and there is a bit of a problem, people will go out of their way to say, "good morning" to them as they come into the school. And it happens everywhere. So that positive reinforcement keeps coming at them so when they're in class and they're struggling with some of their work, that's a concern, making sure they feel comfortable and supported (Interview 2 with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 2).*

Because Gardenia State School appeared to understand that each area of children's learning and development was linked, its discursive practices attempted to avoid positioning children in a negative way. This included Pre-school retention and its related practices which were underpinned by school-ready discourse and which were believed to impact negatively on children. One of the reasons given for not repeating children at Pre-school, or at any other level of schooling, was that the practices of school and Pre-school retention positioned children in a negative way and, thus, considered harmful to children's emotional well-being:

*L: We prefer not to (repeat) ... I know in the majority, in the huge majority of cases they prefer not to repeat ...*

*R: Because it will ... ?*

*L: Affect their self esteem ... Self-esteem would struggle and they would be questioning themselves. So I'm not saying I know what goes on in a child's head, but if I was to repeat, but if I was in that situation, I would be questioning my own self and a child would be doing the same thing (Interview 2 with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 2-4, 22).*

As children's social and emotional development was privileged at Gardenia State School, and as Pre-school retention practices were considered to impact negatively on children's social and

emotional development, alternatives to repeating children at any year level were preferred. The Acting Principal believed that the social and emotional cost to children if they were repeated at school would not make up for any possible academic gains. Such beliefs were the result of experience gained by the Acting Principal and others at the school:

- L: That's what I've ... the experience at the school ... we have a lot of experienced people at the school who've been here a long time, particularly the (Indigenous) Teacher-aides, learning from them and from others here at the school, we've come to this understanding that that's the best way to do it (not repeat children) and that's supporting this understanding. It's not a hard and set policy; it's a strategy.*
- R: It's a strategy that developed out of your experience.*
- L: It's a strategy that says, "Well this is going to make a better outcome for the child than doing this (repeating)." It's something that's been weighed up. There are always negatives and positives. But the positives outweigh the negatives (Interview 1 with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 14-16).*

Through their experience over the years, staff at the school had weighed up the positives and negatives of Pre-school retention. The experience and perspectives of school staff, which also included Indigenous Teacher-aides, revealed that there were more 'negatives' than 'positives' associated with retention practices. Ella, an Indigenous Teacher-aide at the school, believed that parents as a whole were not in favour of repeating children at school either:

*If they were going to repeat my child I'd be up here. Parents might feel a bit down about that. A lot of parents don't really know what to make of it. We've never had to deal with repeating (at the school). They don't do it much in the school. In this school, supports are put in line rather than repeating, like the Year Two Reading Recovery. I had two that repeated and I wasn't told until the end of the year. I was upset. That was twenty-five years ago (Interview with Ella, Teacher-aide, Gardenia State School: 4).*

Ella noted that Indigenous parents did not know what to make of repeating children at school. She indicated that many parents, although they did not really understand it, did not like children being repeated at school. Schools, which provided 'support' for children, rather than repeating them, were considered to be 'approachable' schools. Ella believed that the Indigenous parents at that school

saw the support systems that Gardenia State School currently had in place were preferable to children repeating a year level.

Staff at the school, particularly the Acting Principal, believed that the children's, the parents' and the community's contentment with the school was a good indication that the discursive practice adopted at the school valued children, families and community perspectives, which were incorporated into children's learning through a network of school and community partnerships. The Acting Principal believed a 'ready for the children approach', which was underpinned by a constructivist/interactionist discourse, contributed to a range of positive benefits for the children, parents and the school community:

- R: Lance, you said there was a positive nature in the children in this school.*
- L: There is a lack of violence or those problems in the playground with other children. Parents feel comfortable coming up to the school. We have a good relationship with people in the community and we feel from the people in the community that people say this is a good school. And that attitude ... and the reason is because I believe that we support the children and we're willing to listen and the children do know we do care but we do have firm rules but they know that the place is a safe and friendly place (Interview 1 with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 1-2).*

One of the long-term Indigenous Teacher-aides at the school, and an elder in the community, also confirmed the support given to children and their parents by the teachers at the school. She attributed the positive network of support and partnerships between the school staff, the community and the children's parents to the school staff:

*The school staff is very supportive of the children because we have liaison with the parents (Interview with Ella, Teacher-aide, Gardenia State School: 2).*

Because school staff were 'ready for the children', children not only benefited, but according to the Acting Principal and Ella, a community elder, the school and the teachers' subject position was reciprocated by the support and positive feedback from the community.

#### **6.2.4 Summary**

While there were a number of dominant and contradictory discourses available for teachers to take up in the discursive field of education, such as accountability and maturationist and empiricist/environmentalist school-ready discourses, few teachers drew upon alternative and less widely used constructivist/interactionist discourses despite the fact that such discourses underpinned the recommended pedagogical practices of the curriculum development body in Queensland schools (QSA, 1998, 2005, 2007). Within a constructivist/interactionist discourse, all children's cultural and linguistic resources are to be valued and used as a tool to support children's learning at school, positioning children as competent learners and 'ready' for learning at school. Practices adopted at each school were thus related to the discourses taken up by each school's teaching staff.

### **6.3 Alternatives to Pre-school Retention Practices**

Of the three schools where alternatives to Pre-school retention practices were employed, Riverview and Woodrow State Schools developed *Transition classes*. The *Transition classes* were different to the *Transition programs* at the four schools where children were repeated and returned, discussed in the previous chapter. Unlike children in the *Transition programs*, children in the *Transition classes* were not repeated at Pre-school in any way; they simply commenced formal schooling. However, because they were considered 'unready' for a regular Year 1 class, *Transition classes*, modified to suit the learning needs of 'unready' children, were employed.

The *Transition classes*, underpinned by school-ready discourse to varying degrees, were developed for 'unready' children so that they might acquire the necessary cultural resources with which to successfully participate in schooling. By contrast, Gardenia State School drew largely on constructivist/interactionist discourse which positions all children as 'ready' to commence learning at school and values all children's prior-to-school learning and cultural resources. The resources with which children commenced school were used as tools through which they could achieve success at school. Woodrow State School, while emphasising the need for children to have particular cultural resources to successfully commence school, adopted a similar constructivist/interactionist approach to programming. To a much lesser extent than Woodrow State School, Riverview State School did the same.

#### **6.3.1 The *Transition classes***

Although alternatives to Pre-school retention practices were initially difficult to find for inclusion in the study, *Transition classes* at two schools were eventually found when one school showcased its

Transition class at a local early childhood conference. *Transition classes*, similar to the *Transition programs*, were considered an ‘innovative’ practice and a better way to ensure that children were ‘school-ready’ rather than simply repeating them at Pre-school.

Although considered as an innovative practice in the schools in the study, Transition classes have been used in the United States for several decades to ensure children are school-ready (Meisels, 1999). Known also as developmental classes in the United States (Meisels, 1999), Transition classes generally refer to a range of practices, other than Pre-school retention, that add an extra year to schooling (Cain, 2005; Carlson & Galle, 2000; CCS, 2000). The Transition class at Riverview State School, similar to some in the United States, was identified as a ‘new grade’ between Pre-school and Year 1 (Ostrowski, 1994). Children in the Transition class at Woodrow State School, however, were progressed to Year 2 following their ‘Transition’ year. Unlike the Transition class at Riverview State School, the Transition class at Woodrow State School did not add an extra year to children’s schooling. At Woodrow and Riverview State Schools, the Transition classes were employed, similar to some Transition classes in the United States (Cain, 2005), as an alternative to Preschool retention.

#### ***Riverview State School Transition class***

According to the Principal, the Transition class at Riverview State School was employed for children considered “not ready for Year 1” (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 20). Some Transition class children were considered ‘unready’ because they had no Pre-school experience:

*R: Ok Josie, would you like to first of all tell me why the Transition year (class) was established at Riverview School?*

*J: Well it was decided upon because a lot of young children entering school had virtually never been to Pre-school at all. They just went to the Year 1 class. So we were finding when they got to the end of Year 1 there were a whole lot of issues about whether the child should repeat or when we went to enrol them, should they go back to do Pre-school and that created a lot of tensions and concerns with the parents (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 1-2).*

Similar to teachers who drew on school-ready discourse to retain Pre-school children, the assumption appeared to be that, without particular cultural resources, children would be unable to

successfully participate in schooling. Because the usual intervention strategy of repeating children at Pre-school 'created a lot of tensions and concerns with the parents', a full-time Transition class was devised for the unready children instead. The Principal elaborated on the parents' 'tensions and concerns':

*R: What were the concerns of the parents?*

*J: Well, they wanted their children in school. They didn't want them to repeat (Pre-school). And I think, quite frankly, they had to deal with the fact that the children were gone from 9 to 3 as opposed to half a day (at Pre-school) and all those kinds of things. And they'd reached the age where they were eligible to be at school and the parents saw it as important that they went at that time and often the fact that it would cost them a lot in childcare if the children were to repeat Pre-school.*

*R: So you think the issue with the parents was mainly the fact that that it was the time the issue, the 9 to 3 issue rather than ... it would be more advantageous to go to Pre-school?*

*J: Well you know, I'm generalising, so there were parents who were very supportive ... but generally speaking, the big issue often was, "Well, I've just got myself a job: I can't afford to pay for my child to be in childcare for half the day. I'm not prepared for my child to do Pre-school" (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 4-7).*

Similar to some parents whose children were repeated and returned, some parents of children at Riverview State School were opposed to repeating their children at half-time Pre-school when their children were legally entitled to be in full-time schooling. In such cases, parents appeared to be concerned with the more pragmatic need for employment and the extra cost of childcare. By drawing on the more powerful age-ready discourse, such parents were able to challenge school-ready discourse taken up by teachers. When children 'reached the age' when they were 'eligible to be at school', parents saw it as 'important' that children commenced school at this time, not simply to be with the same age cohort but also because it provided a level of convenience for parents who were required to find paid work. Teachers at Riverview State School who drew on school-ready discourse saw the need for children to commence Year 1 with particular cultural resources while some parents who drew on age-ready discourse saw the need for children to be in full-time schooling because they could not 'afford to pay for childcare for half the day' if they repeated Pre-school. A Transition class which incorporated both discourses was therefore the resulting

compromise. Through this practice, teachers could ensure that the unready children were given the opportunity to gain the same cultural resources as the ready children so that they might be better prepared for school and parents could have their children in full-time schooling.

Initially, the Transition class had progressed from a part-time class for children who were “identified in Pre-school as needing a little bit more” (Interview with Meg, Transition teacher, Riverview State School: 2) to a full-time Transition class:

*R: Meg, would you like to tell me a little bit about your method of Transition here at Raintree?*

*M: Right. Well this is the first year that we started a full-time Transition (class) ... um, previously we had part-time ones where the children were in Transition class from 9.30am to 12.30pm and then the children went to a regular Year 1 class (Interview with Meg, Transition teacher, Riverview State School: 2).*

The Principal explained why the earlier, part-time models were less successful:

*It was using the Continua<sup>25</sup> data for literacy to work in-depth on those children, basically moving them out of Phase A (approximately Pre-school level) on the continua so they would be ready to begin Phase B (approximately Year 1). But that didn't work because they were too far behind. They weren't even ready for Phase A (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 10).*

The Transition teacher also explained why she believed the full-time Transition class was preferable:

*When the children were in part-time Transition, you lost touch and you didn't know where your children were at, and it was difficult to do any sort of catch-up and see what they were doing ... um this is easier for the one person that's taking care of the whole class (Interview with Meg, Transition teacher, Riverview State School: 20).*

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<sup>25</sup> The Continua referred to an assessment process that commenced at pre-school, used in Queensland Education at that time to map children's progress through school.

Thus the full-time Transition class (9:00am – 3:00pm) enabled children, through a more intensive program designed to develop their cultural resources, to become ‘school-ready’. Although children were identified as being unready for a regular Year 1 class because they had not attended Pre-school, there were also some children identified at Pre-school through a ‘screener’ as needing “a bit more” (school-ready skills and behaviours) (Interview with Meg, Transition teacher, Riverview State School: 2, 9-10).

Numbers in the Transition class were kept “low”<sup>26</sup> (Interview with Meg, Transition teacher, Riverview State School: 22) and operated in a similar way to other Year 1 classes, but with more support:

*I always have an Indigenous aide with me all day, every day and I also have a teacher from SEU (Special Education Unit) or an aide from SEU with me too. We have three rotation groups, so in our language time, say from 9.30 to 11.00 ... we have rotating groups. So I take the same lesson three times in a row, the SEU teacher or aide take what they’ve planned ... I do the planning for the Indigenous aide. Then after 20 minutes you ring the bell and the children change so that they’re always involved in conversations because a lot of them have language problems and can’t explain things that they’re doing. And so ... we move around like that (Interview with Meg, Transition teacher, Riverview State School: 24).*

### **Woodrow State School Transition class**

At Woodrow State School, a Transition class was provided for children who were “not ready [...] to pick up on formal learning” (Interview with Kurt, Principal, Woodrow State School: 6). The administrative staff at the school had been advised by the Pre-school teachers that there was a large number of Pre-school children about to commence Year 1 who might not be ‘ready’ for school. The Transition class was formed for this reason:

*R: Could you tell me a little bit about this method of Transition that you chose and how you came to choose this method?*

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<sup>26</sup> At the time of the interview, the number was 19, which included 4 children from the Special Education Unit. It continued to fluctuate throughout the year because of children’s mobility but reached 22, which included 7 children from the Special Education Unit, by the end of the year.

*K: The need for a Transition class came about first ... mostly in response to a group of kiddies coming through the Pre-school who were much wider than usual in their perceived capacities from our point of view and a real lumping and clumping of weaker kiddies, less socially developed, less academically developed, cognitively developed and what we might see in the classroom as down from the bottom end ... When we saw the range of kids and because the school is structured in that way, and we don't have multi-age classes, we said, we've got to do something a little bit different ... these kids are not ready, and I say "ready" in inverted commas*  
(Interview with Kurt, Principal, Woodrow State School: 2, 6).

Because a large group of 'unready' children were commencing school, the school administration sought an alternative way to cater for such a large group. While using the usual terms of 'ready' and 'unready' associated with school-ready discourse, the Principal used them in a way that signalled that he understood these were contested terms. Although the Principal positioned children as 'unready' for a regular Year 1 class, he simultaneously, along with the Transition teacher, drew on constructivist/interactionist discourse in devising the Transition program.

Unlike the Transition class at Riverview State School, the Transition class at Woodrow State School was not a class in between Pre-school and Year 1, nor did the children repeat a year level. Instead, the Transition class at Woodrow State School, similar to the Year 1 class at Gardenia State School, enabled 'unready' children to reach Year 2 with 'extra support':

*R: What was the main reason the Transition program was chosen instead of repeating them?*

*Ruth: I think the general feeling was that most of the children could reach the Year 2 level if they were given the extra support through the Grade 1 year. Then basically it was an administrative decision to put them in one class group* (Interview with Ruth, Transition teacher, Woodrow State School: 4, 6).

Thus, while a full-time Transition class was provided for a group of children who were considered as being 'not ready' for a regular Year 1 class, it was also believed that with 'extra support' the Transition children could reach Year 2 in the same way as children considered 'ready' for Year 1. The discourse of 'support' that the Transition teacher drew on was congruent with a constructivist/interactionist discourse which she similarly drew on in devising the Transition

program. A discourse of 'support' similarly underpinned the practices at Gardenia State School, although at Woodrow State School, it appeared to be limited to the program and children in the Transition class and not extended to the parents or community in an observable way.

Although the Transition class did not have the support of a Teacher-aide initially, it became apparent after the third day that to run a play-based program based on constructivist/interactionist discourse, that a Teacher-aide was necessary (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02). Within a short time, the Transition class received the support of a full-time Indigenous Teacher - aide (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02).

It was believed that because the children required more intense support to reach Year 2, the class was kept to a maximum of fifteen children:

*Ruth: There's smaller numbers so that they get more individualised attention, focusing on their own needs.*

*R: So it was a program designed to their individual needs as well?*

*Ruth: Yes ... at their own level (Interview with Ruth, Transition teacher, Woodrow State School: 8).*

Given the liberty of programming, the Transition teacher drew on constructivist/interactionist discourse, basing the program on what children were familiar with and able to do. The program thus commenced with the Pre-school Curriculum Guidelines and progressed to the Year 1 curriculum:

*R: So how was this program chosen Ruth?*

*Ruth: That was really left up to me, and I chose a program based on what the children knew, based on their prior knowledge and centred it from there. Sometimes we based the program around something the children were already doing or had done at home or their areas of interest. It was also based on the Grade 1 curriculum.*

*R: So it was partly based on the Grade 1 curriculum and their needs and interests.*

*Ruth: At the beginning of the year we probably spent first term basing it around the Preschool Curriculum Guidelines (Interview with Ruth, Transition teacher, Woodrow State School: 11-14).*

As Transition classes were a relatively unique form of educational delivery in Queensland schools, there were no recognised models on which to base the class program. The Transition teacher appeared to devise a program that was suited to the needs of the particular group of children, based on her experience and general knowledge of early childhood education. Her approach to programming appeared to be based on a constructivist/interactionist approach to school readiness (Meisels, 1999) where children's prior skills and experiences were taken into consideration and were used as a starting point in children's learning at school. The children's prior learning skills were incorporated into the program along with the goals of schooling. This pedagogical approach to children's learning was also endorsed in the Preschool Curriculum Guidelines (QSA, 1998), which the teacher also used as a curriculum guide, and by early childhood education bodies in the United States (NAYEC, 1995, 1997).

Although a Pre-school classroom was available for the Transition class, and might have been suited to the philosophical and pedagogical approach adopted by the teacher, the Transition class was set up in a spare demountable<sup>27</sup> which was shared with a Year 1 class (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02). The Transition class was geographically positioned with the Year 1 classes rather than the Pre-school classes to generate a perception that it was a modified Year 1 class and not a Pre-school class (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02). By placing the Transition class at Pre-school, it may have also created the perception that children were being repeated at Pre-school. Essentially, the Transition teacher and school administration saw the Transition class as being a Year 1 class, which offered children extra in-class support, through a full-time Teacher-aide, to enable them to reach Year 2.

Although the Pre-school teachers and some administrative staff spoke of the children in terms of their being 'unready' for school, the Transition teacher did not appear to draw upon school-ready discourse. Instead, she saw and accepted the children as they were in terms of their current skills and behaviours and provided a program to take each child to the next level of their learning and development. The Principal appeared to hold similar views. While he did speak in terms of the children as being 'not ready' for school, he appeared to understand that it was a contested term, placing 'not ready' in "inverted commas". The Principal discussed his approach to programming:

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<sup>27</sup> A demountable in Queensland schools is a temporary classroom that can be constructed or removed at short notice.

*This is what we say to them (teachers), “this is where the kids are at ... find out where the kids are at, that is, diagnose them through whatever means possible, whether it’s simple testing, observation, selection of samples and analysis, discussions with previous teachers, discussion with parents ... Use whatever means you can to diagnose them, then say, right, here they are now, what do they need now to take the next step in their education? Well, if those kids can’t sit still, can’t listen, can’t do all those early things we assumed are developed, well that’s where we start ...”* (Interview with Kurt, Principal, Woodrow State School: 6).

The view of the Transition teacher and the Principal from Woodrow State School contrasted with the view of the Principal from Riverview State School and the approach taken by teachers who practised Pre-school retention. Thus programming in the Transition class at Woodrow State School was based on constructivist/interactionist discourse where children’s ‘prior learning’ was valued and used to take children to the next level of their learning and development. By contrast, programming at Riverview State School and at the schools where Pre-school retention practices were employed, was based largely on school-ready discourse which focused on the need for children to have particular cultural resources to successfully participate in, and succeed at, school. However, the Transition teacher at Riverview State School did employ a program which took into account what the children were able to do, thus drawing on constructivist/interactionist discourse to some extent.

### ***6.3.2 How teachers and parents saw the Transition classes***

Although Riverview and Woodrow State Schools both employed Transition classes, each class was underpinned by different school readiness beliefs and had different goals. The goal of Riverview State School was to ensure children had the necessary cultural resources with which to successfully commence Year 1 the following year. The goal at Woodrow State School, for its Transition class, was to provide extra support to a group of children through Year 1 so that they could reach Year 2 where they would be eligible for Reading Recovery. This practice, though underpinned to some extent by school-ready discourse, was largely underpinned in its operation by constructivist/interactionist discourse. The different perceptions of what constituted success at each school was related to the different goals for each Transition class.

### **Riverview State School Transition Class**

Underpinned largely by school-ready discourse, the Transition class at Riverview State School was formed to ensure all children commenced Year 1 with the necessary cultural resources valued at the school and through which success in Year 1 might be achieved. As learning outcomes had dramatically improved since the introduction of the Transition class, as evidenced by the Year 2 Net results, the Principal saw the Transition classes as successful:

*R: So do you have any data on these children from the Year 2 Net?*

*J: Yes. I can't comment on last year for this year because I haven't seen the data but the 2000 data for example, we had in the Year 2 Net ... it was something like 20% less kids caught in the Year 2 Net.*

*R: Oh, is that right?*

*J: Yes. It was quite a substantial ... I think the 2000 data ... I can't remember which ... it may have been the 2001 data, we only had 15% of kids caught in writing. It's one of the best we've ever had. We had 22% (caught) in reading and we had 23% (caught) in number. Well, typically (previously), it had been around the 45% across the board.*

*R: Really. That's quite a reduction.*

*J: Yes. The other thing that happened was absenteeism. We went from 23% absenteeism when I got there in 1999 to 5.8% last year (2001) ... and the other thing that happened ... and I've done it as a whole school thing ... on the first day of school this year, 2002, 99% of the Indigenous kids were there on the first day, in uniforms, with their brand new lunch boxes, books. Now that sounds like pretty basic stuff to you but for us it's a hell of a miracle. So we've actually got a wave of parents coming through now that are starting to value education and seeing it as important (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 75-80).*

The goal of the Transition class was to enable children to acquire the cultural resources through which they could successfully participate in schooling, according to the dominant school-ready storyline. It would appear that this goal was largely achieved as indicated by a significant reduction in absenteeism and improved learning outcomes as indicated by the Year 2 Net results. These outcomes confirmed the program's success in relation to the program's goal; it enabled 'unready' children to gain the same cultural resources as the 'ready' children so that they might similarly succeed at school. Although school-ready discourse positioned children in a negative way, the

Principal and Transition class teacher saw the practice in an aspirational way, not only because it was believed to enable the ‘unready’ children to have the same opportunities at school as the ‘ready’ children, but also because a program generated further positive outcomes as indicated by the Year 2 Net results and the general reduction in absenteeism. The Principal attributed the general reduction in absenteeism partly to the Transition class which provided a program suited to the needs of the Transition children. The Transition teacher also attributed the general reduction in absenteeism to the introduction of the Transition class:

*The other Year 1 teachers have said we have children that weren't regular attendees ... because in a regular classroom they would be feeling that they were left behind and not succeeding and so they wouldn't turn up. They wouldn't want to come to school (Interview with Meg, Transition teacher, Raintree State School: 42, 44).*

Similar to some returned children, when children were not succeeding at school it appeared that they did not want to attend school. Because the Transition class at Raintree State School provided children with a program suited to their learning needs and through which they experienced success, it appeared that children were more likely to attend school. In this way, the program employed for the Transition class was based on constructivist/interactionist beliefs.

Although parents were not interviewed at any of the schools where alternatives to Pre-school retention were provided, the Principal of Riverview State School did offer some insight into how parents saw the Transition class at her school. Despite the offer of full-time schooling for children in the Transition class, some parents preferred their children to remain with the same age cohort and progress to Year 2. Although some parents may have accepted their children being in a ‘modified’ Year 1 class, when they were separated from their same age cohort and not progressed to Year 2, it may have taken on the appearance of ‘repeating Year 1’ which the Principal believed some parents regarded as a stigma:

*R: You were saying before that the parents had some issues with repeating (the) year ... after the Transition year.*

*J: Some parent ... I don't know why, um, I guess they felt that socially their kids should be with the same age cohort. I don't know ... we would start talking to that parent really, really early and we could usually win him around ... you know, there was the odd one ...*

*R: Why do you think the parent could not be won around?*

*J: I think it was the perception that they were thinking that either we weren't doing our job properly or that the child is not very bright ... You know, it (being held back a year level) was like a stigma (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 63-66).*

Although teachers' intentions were clearly aspirational and although the teachers saw the practice as an opportunity for children who did not have the necessary cultural resources to acquire them, some parents saw the practice as being a stigma. As the Transition class at Riverview State School was underpinned by school-ready discourse and because school-ready discourse creates oppositional categories of 'ready' and 'unready' groups of children, 'unready' children were positioned in a negative way and as needing particular forms of intervention to address their perceived deficits which may be made more apparent through 'repeating Year 1'. This more visible subject position was refused by some parents on behalf of their children. While this negative positioning of their children was more apparent to some parents, from their dominant and more privileged position, it appeared to be less apparent to school staff who seemed unable to see the effects of this negative positioning.

### **Woodrow State School Transition Class**

As mentioned previously, the aim of the Transition class at Woodrow State School was to support children through their first year of formal schooling so that they could reach Year 2 where they would be eligible for Reading Recovery if they required it. In relation to the goal for this Transition class, the aim was realised:

*(T) he majority of those children went into Year 2 mainly because of their age and there's Reading Recovery in Year 2 (Interview with Jade, Deputy Principal, Woodrow State School: 8).*

The Principal reported that because a number of the Transition children were caught in the Year 2 Net, the first formal accountability gate, they became eligible for government-funded learning support (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02). Although having large numbers of children caught in the Year 2 Net might reflect badly on the school (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02), this possibility appeared to be less of a concern than children's possible need of reading support.

In relation to the goal for the Transition class at Woodrow State School, the Transition class teacher saw the class as being successful and as achieving its goal of supporting children though Year 1 to reach Year 2:

*R: And you felt it was very successful?*

*Ruth: Definitely.*

*R: And definitely worth continuing?*

*Ruth: I think all schools should have it. It should be available to everybody* (Interview with Ruth, Transition teacher, Woodrow State School: 33-34, 37-38).

As mentioned previously, the parents of the Transition class children were not interviewed. The teacher indicated, however, that parents were generally satisfied with the Transition class (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02) and were particularly pleased with the choice of teacher:

*R: And the parents ... Were they happy with this as well?*

*Ruth: Each parent was consulted before the child was placed in the Transition group. And they were all very supportive of me as the Transition teacher of the Transition class* (Interview with Ruth, Transition teacher, Woodrow State School: 23-24).

Both schools found different ways to prepare children for, and support them at, school. Success at each school was told in terms of the particular goals devised at that school for the children from each Transition class. Although each school had different goals and different pathways for achieving success, both schools sought the best possible way to support the transition into and through school for children considered unprepared for a regular Year 1 class. Although each school chose different ways to ensure children's successful transition into school, in terms of the goals of each school for their Transition class, both schools reported realising their goals.

While the practices employed at both schools were underpinned by school-ready discourse to varying degrees, the Transition teacher and Principal at Woodrow State School drew largely on constructivist/interactionist discourse particularly in relation to devising the program. To a lesser extent, the Transition teacher at Riverview State School also drew on constructivist/interactionist discourse to construct the program. On the whole, teachers and school administration at both schools saw the Transition classes as innovative practices and a better way to ensure children were prepared for school other than by simply repeating them at Pre-school. Teachers and Principals at

the two schools where Transition classes were provided were not only optimistic about the practices provided for the children, but they were also aspirational about the children, and their achievements, as a result of these practices.

### **6.3.3 Gardenia State School: Ready for the children**

Gardenia State School provided a school readiness approach that was different to most schools in the study and which resulted in a different practice. Its whole-school philosophy was underpinned by constructivist/interactionist discourse which resulted in a school practice that was ‘ready for all children’. Rather than requiring children to have particular cultural resources before they could successfully participate in schooling, all children’s prior-to-school learning experiences and cultural resources were valued and used as a starting point in children’s learning at school:

*Some children, like may have spent more time fishing, doing other things in the community, but in those homes school wasn’t as important or reading wasn’t as important. When those children come along to school ... now we’re not saying that they are dumber than the other kids, it’s just that their prior experiences aren’t the same as in homes where they may have books and other things that are valued. So we try to find out as much as possible about the child to support the child in the classroom (Interview 1 with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 7).*

Children commenced Year 1 with a range of prior-to-school learning experiences and continued to be supported in their learning at school. In contrast to most schools in the study whose practices were underpinned by school-ready discourse, the constructivist/interactionist discourse that underpinned the practice at Gardenia State School, positioned all children as ‘ready’ and competent learners and thus in a positive way. This approach was also underpinned by a discourse of support for children and their parents:

*(O)ur attitude is, “What can we do to support the parents and children together at school?” (Interview 1 with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 4).*

Parents were supported so that they might better support their children’s learning at school. An adult literacy and life skills course was one of the school initiatives offered, cost free, to parents and community members so they would be able to support children at school (Rubin, 2002).

The school supported children's learning at school in a range of ways, one of which was small classes:

*One of our biggest supports is small class sizes ... The Department (Education Queensland) does support us by giving us an extra teacher because of our high Indigenous population (Interview 1 with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 5, 7).*

Further in-class supports were provided through a full-time Indigenous Year 1 Teacher-aide who was also an elder in the community (Field notes: Gardenia State School, 11-10-02). A team of eleven <sup>28</sup>DETYA-funded Indigenous Teacher-aides or tutors were also used to provide in-class tutoring through the school's Whole School Literacy Plan in lieu of an after school homework program (Fieldnotes: Gardenia State School, 11-10-02). The eleven Indigenous Teacher-aides were used throughout the school, including the Year 1 classroom:

*(W)e don't do their homework program after school. It's done as they're (Teacher-aides) working in school time to work with those classes ... (Interview 1 with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 9).*

Although the Teacher-aides provided in-class support for children, attempts were made not to highlight the learning needs of individual children for special attention. In-class support was provided for the whole group but with a focus on children with particular learning needs. While there was recognition that there were skills and behaviours children may not have yet acquired, support was provided usually in class to take each child to the next level of their learning and development:

*If all the problems that start to rise are behaviour so we can step in earlier and help the child who is in some sort of need ... Not repeating children as they go through the classes and if they don't feel that they're keeping up with the rest of the class, there's support for that child in that class to help them (Interview 2 with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 2).*

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<sup>28</sup> DETYA is the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, a section of the Australian Government.

Staff recognised the impact of children's environment and culture on their lives and thus on their learning at school. For this reason, the cultural resources children had acquired through their prior-to-school learning environments provided the tools through which children continued their learning at school. This approach has been recommended by other research (MCEETYA, 2001).

#### ***6.3.4 How the teachers and parents saw the school***

In assessing the effectiveness of this practice, the Acting Principal included children's disposition towards school in his assessment of the practice. At Gardenia State School, children's social and emotional development was privileged and was valued along with children's academic achievement at school. The Acting Principal was very positive about the school's philosophy and its resulting practice as evidenced by children's positive attitude towards school and others:

*There's a positive nature in the children in the school and their relationships with each other (Interview with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 2).*

Again, although parents were not interviewed, the Year 1 Teacher-aide was interviewed. For many years she had had children and grandchildren at the school and was a long-time elder in the community. As such, she was chosen as one of two Indigenous liaison officers employed at the school to build communication between the parents and the school. She spoke optimistically about the school and its practices, which improved openness and accessibility between teachers and parents, and which, by implication, promoted community support for the school:

*Schools are much more approachable now. This school is anyway. This school has a lot of community support (Interview with Ella, Teacher-aide, Community Elder and School Liaison Officer, Gardenia State School: 2, 4).*

It appeared that support at the school was reciprocal; the school supported the parents and community to support children's learning at school which was reciprocated by the parents' and community's support for the school.

Because the constructivist/interactionist approach taken by Gardenia State School was underpinned by discourses of support, assistance for children's social and emotional needs as well as academic needs were taken into account. During the data collection stage, 2000 – 2002, the school showed considerable improvement in literacy through Gardenia's Literacy Improvement Program (Rubin,

2002). The school “demonstrated improvements in student outcomes” and “was the Queensland 1999 National Literacy Award major winner” (Rubin, 2002, p. 3). Gardenia State School not only gained first place in state literacy awards in 1999 but also continued to win national literacy awards that were based on overall school improvements in literacy standards in 2000 and 2001 (Gardenia State School, 2004). On national benchmark tests, the school is above the state average for Indigenous students, while school reports have recorded “significant academic improvement in all areas of literacy and numeracy” over the last 4 years (Rubin, 2002, p. 7).

Rather than drawing on school-ready discourse to inform their practice, teachers at the school drew on constructivist/interactionist discourse through which all children were positioned as ‘ready for school’. Instead of requiring children to have particular cultural resources to be ‘ready for school’, the school accepted all children’s cultural and linguistic resources and thus positioned itself as ‘ready for the children’. The school’s holistic philosophy catered for children’s prior learning experiences and cultural backgrounds which were valued and used as a starting point to support children’s learning at school. This approach is further supported by research which shows that there is a link between the physical, emotional, social and intellectual aspects of a child’s development as each area of development and social life supports and influences other areas (Cook, Tessier & Klein, 1996; Lambert & Clyde, 2000; MacNaughton & Williams, 1998; Raver, 2002).

Because the school invested in a discourse of support, it focused on supporting individual children, the children’s families and the community resulting in a strong partnership between families, the community and the school. Such partnerships have been acknowledged as being educationally beneficial for the child (CCS, 2007; Janus & Offord, 2000; Meisels, 1999; QSA, 2007). Thorpe et al. (2004) found that, where school programs engaged with the community, children adjusted to school more readily and, where school morale and collegiality were high, children were more likely to be socially and emotionally adjusted to school. The Acting Principal’s comment that, “people say that this is a good school”, would appear to reflect a high level of morale at the school. Thus, by engaging with and supporting the community, valuing and incorporating their cultural and linguistic resources into the school program, a positive and productive learning environment was created for the children at the school.

#### **6.4 Groups of Children for Whom Alternatives to Pre-school Retention were Provided**

In some instances, it appeared that particular groups of children were targeted for the Transition classes at Woodrow and Riverview State Schools. These included children who had not attended

Pre-school and mobile children. While children from each of the three schools where alternatives to Pre-school retention were employed were more often from Indigenous family backgrounds, spoke English as a second language or were considered to have poor language skills and were from schools whose catchment areas were marked by families of low or middle to low socio-economic status, these groups of children did not appear to be specifically targeted for these practices. At Riverview State School, children from the Special Education Unit (SEU) were attached to the Transition class.

Unlike many of the children who were repeated, returned or delayed, there was no identifiable pattern associated with gender or birthdates among the children for whom alternatives to Pre-school retention practices were employed. While some teachers spoke in terms of children being school-ready, teachers at the schools that employed alternatives did not appear to draw on maturationist understandings of school readiness as some teachers who drew on Pre-school retention practices did. Teachers who drew on maturationist school-ready discourse generally saw boys and younger children as being less 'mature' and therefore less ready for school. By contrast, teachers who employed alternatives to Pre-school retention practices did not mention children's age or maturity as being a factor in assessing school readiness or as being a 'cause' of children being unready for school. Instead, teachers who employed alternatives were more likely to focus on children having particular school-ready skills and behaviours.

#### ***6.4.1 Children according to gender***

As can be seen from Table 6.2<sup>29</sup>, there were no identifiable patterns associated with gender at the schools where alternatives to Pre-school retention practices were employed.

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<sup>29</sup> The total number of children in the Transition class at Riverview State School was based on the original Transition group of 15 children and did not include the children from the SEU Unit.

**Table 6.2 Children by gender, Indigenous/Non-Indigenous - Schools with alternatives**

	<b>Riverview State School</b>	<b>Woodrow State School</b>	<b>Gardenia State School</b>
Indigenous boys	6	5	4
Indigenous girls	4	6	8
Non-Indigenous boys	0	4	4
Non-Indigenous girls	5	0	1
Total Number	15	15	17
All boys	6	9	8
All boys/All schools	23		
All girls	9	6	9
All girls/All schools	24		

The total number of boys at the three schools where alternatives to Pre-school retention practices were employed was 23 and the total number of girls at the three schools where alternatives to Pre-school retention practices were employed was 24. Thus 48.9 % of boys and 51.1 % of girls were given alternatives to Pre-school retention practices. By contrast, of the children who spent a second year at Pre-school in the six schools where Pre-school retention was practised, 72 percent were boys and 28 percent were girls. In relation to the two schools with Transition classes, other studies similarly show there are no identifiable patterns relating to gender among children placed in these classes (Berger, 1988; Carlson & Galle, 2000).

#### **6.4.2 Children according to their schools' relative socio-economic advantage**

As discussed in the previous chapter, Education Queensland employed IRSED<sup>30</sup> indicators used by the ABS (2003) to rate schools according to their relative socio-economic advantage. Education Queensland rated schools from high to low in terms of the number of families in the schools' catchment areas that were socio-economically advantaged (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007b). As can be seen from Table 6.2, the children were from schools which were rated by Education Queensland as having families in the schools' catchment areas as being less socio-economically advantaged.

<sup>30</sup> For an explanation of Education Queensland's use of IRSED and the IRSED group thresholds, please refer to section 5.4

**Table 6.3 Schools by IRSED Index Score and Education Queensland's Rating of Socio-economic Advantage**

School and practice provided	IRSED Index Score	Education Queensland's rating of socio-economic advantage
Riverview State School (Transition class)	909	Low
Woodrow State School (Transition class)	953	Middle to Low
Gardenia State School (Ready for the children)	864	Low

Two schools were rated as low and one school was rated as middle to low in terms of having children from families in the school catchment area that were socio-economically advantaged. Thus, many of the children for whom alternatives to Pre-school retention were employed were more likely to be from families who were less socially and economically advantaged. These included children for whom Transition classes were employed, Woodrow State School and Riverview State School, as well as Gardenia State School which did not provide any Pre-school retention practices but provided in-class support for children who required it.

#### **6.4.2 Indigenous children**

Unlike many of the children who were repeated, returned or delayed, many children who attended schools where alternatives to Pre-school retention were employed were Indigenous children. At Riverview State School, when calculated according to the original group selected for the Transition class of fifteen, a total of ten children were Indigenous, giving a total of 67 percent of Indigenous children in the Transition class. Of the Indigenous children, six were boys and four were girls. Thus, of the original Transition class group, 40 percent of the Transition class group were Indigenous boys and 27 percent were Indigenous girls.

The findings were similar for the Transition class at Woodrow State School. Of the fifteen children in the class, eleven were Indigenous, giving a total of 73 percent of children in the Transition class who were Indigenous. Of these eleven children, five were boys and six were girls giving a total of 33 percent of children in the Transition class who were Indigenous boys and 40 percent who were Indigenous girls.

At Gardenia State School, twelve of the seventeen children in the Year 1 class were Indigenous, giving a total of 70 percent of Indigenous children in the class. Of the Indigenous children, four

were boys and eight were girls giving a total of 23 Percent Indigenous boys and 47 percent Indigenous girls in the Year 1 class. These findings are detailed in Figure 6.1 below:



**Figure 6.4 Indigenous Boys/Girls/Children at Schools with Alternatives to Pre-School Retention**

On average, approximately 70.2% of the children (33) in each of the three classes where alternatives to Pre-school retention practices were employed were Indigenous. Of the Indigenous children, 54.5% (18) were girls and 45.5% (15) were boys. This was different to the findings of Pre-school retention practices where boys were more likely to be retained than girls. As discussed previously in the section, this finding may be related to the different school readiness discourses which underpin each of these practices.

Although there appears to be no comparable research in Australia, a study conducted in the United States by Berger several decades ago noted that “more than 70 percent” of children placed in “kindergarten Transition classes” were from “minority groups” which included Black, American Indian, Asian and Hispanic groups of children (1988, p. 1). Although not all the children in the Transition class at Woodrow State School were Indigenous, some parents thought it was a class provided especially for Indigenous children:

*Some of the parents actually thought it was a class for Indigenous children because we had such a high number of Indigenous children (Interview with Ruth, Transition teacher, Woodrow State School: 32).*

At Riverview State School most of the ‘unready children’ were Indigenous:

*R: Could you tell me a little bit about the program; what it was like and who it catered for?*

*J: Well, initial status was Indigenous, because when I went there (as Principal) I talked to the teachers about, “Why is this school not achieving?” It was always about Indigenous kids and absenteeism (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 32).*

Thus at Riverview and Woodrow State Schools, although the Transition classes were provided for all ‘unready children’, most of the children positioned as ‘unready’ were Indigenous children. As others have noted, although Indigenous children do commence schooling with different cultural and linguistic resources, they may be cultural resources that have less value within some school practices in which only particular cultural resources are valued (Kale, 1995; Malin, 1990; MCEETYA, 2000; Nakata, 1993).

#### ***6.4.3 Children with limited or no Pre-school experience***

Many of the children in the Transition classes had limited or no Pre-school experience. At Gardenia State School, children’s Pre-school experience was not mentioned. This may have been because they drew on constructivist/interaction discourse through which all children were positioned as ready for Year 1 regardless of their prior-to-school experiences and was not an issue. As teachers at Riverview and Woodrow State Schools drew to varying extents on school-ready discourse, the focus was on children having particular school-ready skills with which to successfully commence schooling and which were presumably gained through Pre-school experience. At Riverview and Woodrow State Schools, the Transition class was provided for children who had not attended Pre-school and were thus considered unready for Year 1:

*A lot of these children at that point in time didn’t go to Pre-school and that was another reason for wanting to develop the (Transition) program ... so they’d done none of that preparation (for school) (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 12).*

*(T)here were a group of children at the Pre-school who were really not ready for (a regular) Year 1 (class). As well as that, we get a number of students enrolled in Year 1 at the beginning of each school year who have not had Pre-school so we were looking at the*

*Transition program catering for both these groups of students* (Interview with Jade, Deputy Principal, Woodrow State School: 2-4).

Because the children at both schools had had little or no Pre-school experience, it was assumed that such children would not have the necessary cultural resources to successfully participate in a regular Year 1 class. Although Pre-school was non-compulsory in Queensland and was not an official requirement for entry into Year 1 (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a), it appeared to be an unofficial 'requirement' that children have 'school-ready' skills before they were deemed ready for Year 1, particularly at Riverview State School. There were no school readiness standards formally required in Queensland schools, nor was a compulsory attendance at Pre-school required before children commenced school. Year 1 programming appeared to commence on the assumption that children had attended Pre-school. As Pre-school experience appeared to provide the necessary resources for successful entry to school, children who had not attended Pre-school were more likely to be considered by teachers to be 'unready for school'. The necessary cultural resources with which to successfully commence school were considered to be best taught in a Transition class.

#### ***6.4.4 Mobile children***

At the two schools where Transition classes were provided, children's mobility was linked to their being unready for school. Rhodes refers to student mobility as "changes in school enrolment at times other than those prompted by school or program design" (2005, p. 1). At Woodrow State School, mobile children were referred to as being 'itinerant' while at Riverview State School they were referred to as being 'transient'. At Gardenia State School children were referred to in terms of their 'mobility'. Both 'transient' and 'itinerant' children appeared to be children who moved location frequently, usually in the one town at Riverview and Woodrow State Schools. At Gardenia State School, children also moved between different regions in Queensland, usually between Gardenia State School and Palm Island, or between Cape York and the Torres Strait islands (Gardenia State School, 2002a).

At Riverview State School, the Transition class catered for the needs of transient children, whose perceived lack of Pre-school experience as a result of their transience was considered to be a 'barrier' to their successfully commencing Year 1. The Principal believed that such children required a 'Transition program':

*And you know transients were the other issue (related to children not being ready for school). So we identified all the barriers and they sort of formed the basis of the (Transition) program (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 32)*

The Principal at Woodrow State School included itinerant children among those who were unready for school:

*K: Some of the kiddies (unready) were itinerant ... well itinerant in (town in the study).*

*R: Itinerant ... so they came sometimes?*

*K: Well ... they moved around a lot in (town in the study) ... They were just people who moved from one housing commission to another. You know, just disruption. They'd been to a couple of Pre-schools. And their older brothers and sisters had arrived at school and in some cases had been at X, Y and Z schools over the last couple of years. So we said, 'These kids are not ready' (Interview with Kurt, Principal, Woodrow State School: 2-4, 6).*

Because children's mobility had presumably 'disrupted' their Pre-school experiences, it was believed that such children would most likely not have the necessary cultural resources 'ready' to successfully participate in Year 1. For this reason, children's mobility was considered an attribute by which teachers who drew on school-ready discourse positioned children as 'unready' for school. On the other hand, staff at Gardenia State School, who drew on constructivist/interactionist discourse, saw children's mobility in a different way. While Gardenia State School "traditionally had a highly mobile and transitory population, with approximately 83% change in students in 2000-2001" (Rubin, 2002, p. 2), children's mobility was not mentioned as being an issue impacting on children's readiness for school. The school did not consider itinerant children as being 'unready' for school but provided itinerant children with support if they required it. The Acting Principal referred to instances of how itinerant children in the school were catered for:

*Depending on whether they've been on Palm Island or other places ... we try to provide, if there's a cultural link there, to provide some information about their culture to support them. Can I mention here that person Ella talked about and Sophie talked about ... the young boy who only spoke Creole and that child's language developed ... so that he could speak English. He's probably conversant in both very well (now). But he can succeed in a*

*classroom by finding those special needs to answer those questions* (Interview 1 with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 7).

At Woodrow and Riverview State Schools, children's mobility was believed to have limited their access to Pre-school where it was believed they could acquire the necessary cultural resources for school readiness. While there appears to be little research on itinerancy at the Pre-school level, some research conducted in Queensland with itinerant children at varying levels of schooling also found that mobility can be constructed by education personnel as problematic (Henderson, 2002, 2004; Wyer, Danaher, Kindt & Moriaty, 1997). Henderson suggests that teachers accept and value the skills children bring to school and build on these skills to cater for children's learning needs at school (2002, 2004). This view, associated with a constructivist/interactionist view of school readiness, was similar to the view held at Gardenia State School, where children's lifestyles were valued and used as a resource to further their learning at school.

#### ***6.4.5 Children with English as a second language***

At Raintree State School, it appeared that a number of children in the Transition class spoke 'Australian Aboriginal English', as discussed in Section 6.2.2, as their first language. The Principal raised children's use of 'Australian Aboriginal English' as a concern, particularly in regard to reading readiness (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 12). Although the Principal at Woodrow State School did not mention children as having English as a second language, he noted, along with the Principal from Riverview State School, children's limited verbal skills:

*(They) had low verbal skills* (Interview with Kurt, Principal, Woodrow State School: 2).

*A lot of the children's English was really bad, their oral skills* (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School: 20).

Because Standard Australian English may be a second language or dialect for some Indigenous children (Kale, 1995; MCEETYA, 2000), their proficiency in it may be limited. While children's verbal skills were rarely mentioned at the schools where Pre-school retention practices were employed, it was presented as a concern by both Principals of the schools where there were a high number of Indigenous children in the Transition classes.

At Gardenia State School, English was a second language for many students (Gardenia State School, 2002a). There was a conscious effort to not attribute blame for children's lower levels of literacy achievement to children or their families but, instead, promote the use of Standard Australian English as a means to children's successful participation in schooling and in society (Rubin, 2002). Rather than blaming children or their families for children's lower levels of language and literacy competencies, as teachers have sometimes done (Freebody et al., 1995), Gardenia State School found ways to assist children in gaining the necessary competencies in Standard Australian English. The Acting Principal explained how the school supported children who have minimal English to attain language and literacy competencies to successfully participate in school and society as was discussed in Section 6.2.2. The school's philosophy, underpinned by a constructivist/interactionist discourse, was in contrast to those schools which held school-ready beliefs and that employed Transition classes or a range of Pre-school retention practices. At Gardenia State School, through a constructivist/interactionist discourse, children's particular language skills were valued and used as a resource to continue their learning at school.

#### **6.4.6 SEU children**

At one school where there was a large Special Education Unit (SEU), four, which later rose to seven, SEU children, who would have been at the same age level as Year 1 children, were placed in the Transition class:

*(A)lso in the Transition class they have all the SEU children, all the ascertained children, and there are also two other children that they're looking at for ascertainment as well*  
(Interview with Meg, Transition teacher, Riverview State School: 2).

Because the Transition class program was moderated for children who were considered 'unready' for Year 1, the children with special needs were seen as being better able to fit into the Transition class rather than a Year 1 class. While both the SEU children and the Transition class children were likely to have different learning needs, both groups of children were seen as requiring extra support in their learning at school. Because the Transition class had relatively small numbers, and had the support of three teachers or Teacher-aides in the classroom at any given time, the program appeared to provide that support.

#### **6.4.7 Binary categories**

At both Woodrow and Riverview State Schools, teachers who drew on school-ready discourse appeared to see particular groups of children as not having the required cultural resources with which to commence school. These children included those with no Pre-school experience and mobile children. In the same category of unready children were Indigenous children, children who attended schools drawing from catchment areas marked by low or middle to low SES status and children who spoke English as a second language or had ‘low’ or ‘limited’ verbal skills. Table 6.3 shows the categories into which teachers placed these children.

Through school-ready discourse, teachers positioned particular groups of children in binary opposite categories of ‘ready’ and ‘unready’. On the right hand side of this binary category were groups of children positioned as unready for school, such as children who had no Pre-school experience or mobile children. Among these were Indigenous children, children who attended schools drawing from catchment areas marked by families of low or middle to low SES status, children with English as a second language and SEU children. Although not apparent in the study, the concern with binary categories is that, because characteristics of the ready and unready can be linked together in each category, once placed in a category, children can be associated with that category and with similar characteristics of children in that category even though they might not possess other attributes of that category.

*Table 6.4 Binary Categories of Ready and Unready Children in the Transition Classes*

<b>Ready children</b>	<b>Unready children</b>
Pre-school experience	Little or no Pre-school experience
Non-mobile	Mobile
Non-Indigenous children	Indigenous children
Children attended schools drawing from catchment areas marked by families of middle to high or middle to low SES status	Children attended schools drawing from catchment areas marked by families of low or middle to low SES status
Children with English as a first language	Children with English as a second language
Non-SEU children	SEU children

#### **6.5 Summary and Conclusion to Alternatives to Pre-school Retention Practices**

The staff at Riverview, Woodrow and Gardenia State Schools attempted to find different ways to support children’s learning at school without repeating them at Pre-school. While children were not

repeated at Pre-school, the *Transition class* at Riverview State School appeared similar to the *Transition programs* at Windamere, Raintree and Crestleigh State Schools and St. Christopher's College, in that it was based largely on school-ready discourse. Practices underpinned by school-ready discourse required children to have particular cultural resources and thus be 'ready' for school before they proceeded to the next level of schooling. Such practices added an extra year to children's schooling, which at Riverview, Windamere, Raintree and Crestleigh State Schools and St. Christopher's College, incorporated a full-time, pre-Year 1 program.

Woodrow and Gardenia State Schools employed practices which avoided giving children an extra year of schooling for different reasons. Staff at Gardenia State School avoided giving children an extra year of schooling as it was believed that such practices might negatively impact on children's self esteem. Staff at Woodrow State School avoided giving children an extra year of schooling before Year 2 as it rendered them ineligible for Reading Recovery in Year 2. The Transition classes at Riverview and Woodrow State Schools and the Year 1 class at Gardenia State School were generally better resourced than regular Year 1 classes, with smaller class numbers and a full-time Indigenous Teacher-aide. Gardenia State School also had a small year 1 class and a full-time Teacher-aide. However, it also had a team of eleven, DETYA-funded Teacher-aides which provided further in-class support for identified children. Gardenia State School was the only school in the study which drew on constructivist/interactionist understandings of school readiness as a whole school approach. The school's capacity to employ a practice, based on constructivist/interactionist discourse, may be related to the significant human resources and funding available to the school as compared with other schools in the study. It could be further argued that the need for such a high level of human resourcing to enable children to succeed at Gardenia State School may reflect a deficit view of the children by the staff at the school. The practice at Riverview State School was underpinned predominantly by school-ready discourse while Woodrow State School incorporated both constructivist/interactionist and school-ready beliefs into their practice.

Similar to teachers who employed Pre-school retention practices, teachers who employed alternatives to Pre-school retention were generally eclectic, although their practices generally reflected a predominant readiness view. What teachers could do to support children's readiness for school not only depended on the available discourses but also on the available resources. Although Gardenia State School adopted a constructivist/interactionist approach, allowing all children to

commence Year 1 regardless of their prior-to-school learning experiences, its significant level of human resources most likely assisted the school in employing such an approach.

Although teachers saw each practice in an aspirational way, the use of school-ready discourse positioned the Transition class children as ‘unready’ for school, as ‘lacking’ particular cultural resources valued at school, and thus in a negative way. Further, particular groups of children appeared to be targeted for these practices. They were children who had little or no Pre-school experience and mobile children and were seen as being unlikely to have the particular cultural resources to successfully participate in schooling. At each of the three schools where alternatives to Pre-school retention practices were provided, children were more often from Indigenous family backgrounds, spoke English as a second language or were considered to have poor language skills and were from schools whose catchment areas were marked by families of low or middle to low socio-economic status.

The next chapter, Chapter 7, provides an analysis of the study’s findings as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. Based on the analysis of the study’s findings, policy implications and recommendations for school practice have been provided.

# CHAPTER 7

## CONCLUSIONS

### **7.1 Introduction**

The study sought to understand what types of Pre-school retention practices and alternatives were employed in the locality where the study was conducted and whether particular groups of children were targeted for these practices. As Hong & Raudenbush (2005) and Shepard (1989, 2004) have warned that there are few benefits, and possible harm, to children given these practices, the study sought to understand why teachers and parents continue to employ these practices. In Chapter 2, as part of the findings of the study, I presented data confirming the existence of Pre-school retention in Queensland schools. I also presented research drawn mainly from the United States which warns against Pre-school and grade retention practices. Chapter 3 considered the ways in which children's success and failure at school, including children's readiness for school, has been theorised and understood in education. In Chapter 4, the research process and methods used to collect teachers' and parents' explanations for these practices were described. Their explanations were presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

The aim of this final chapter, Chapter 7, is to examine the explanations for these practices provided by teachers and parents in the light of research on Pre-school retention, data from Education Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003) and explanations from the literature. In this chapter, I will reflect on the process of conducting the research in terms of the study's strengths and weakness. This will be followed by a summary and conclusions of the findings before considering the key conclusions and implications for future policy and practice.

### **7.2 Reflecting on the Research Process**

Given the general dearth of research on Pre-school retention practices in Queensland, the research was conducted to fill the considerable knowledge gaps in this area. The research process is considered in terms of the strengths and limitations of the research endeavour.

### *7.2.1 Strengths of the study*

The study provides:

- statistical evidence of Pre-school retention trends in Queensland which, to date, has been largely inaccessible
- qualitative data from the case studies on a range of Pre-school retention practices in one North Queensland town.

In relation to the case studies, the qualitative data presents evidence of:

- returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 and Transition programs, both of which are rarely researched Pre-school retention practices
- current Pre-school retention practices in Queensland. The only known research related to any Pre-school retention practices in Australia was conducted nearly two decades ago by Routley and de Lemos (1993) on increasing school age entry rates in Victoria and was related to delayed school entry
- delayed school entry, a practice that is employed by parents of more socio-economically advantaged groups to give their children a perceived educational advantage
- retention practices for Indigenous children who are less likely to be repeated at Pre-school but more likely to be repeated in Year 1 (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a) or placed in a Transition class
- mobile children who are a relatively unresearched group of children in relation to Pre-school retention practices
- school-ready discourse, taken up by teachers and parents, and how it positions children in a negative way and perpetuates a range of school and Pre-school retention practices.

A multiple case study approach (Stake, 2005), incorporating nine school sites, revealed a range of Pre-school practices. Unstructured interviews (Holloway & Jefferson, 2002) enabled parents and teachers to foreground their understandings of the practices and issues that were important to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Fontana & Frey, 2000). An inductive approach grounded in the points of view of the participants provided some insight, from the parents' and teachers' perspectives, into why Pre-school retention practices and their alternatives were employed for different children. Overall, the methodological design and theoretical approach was suited to the purposes of the study and allowed me to understand, at least in this instance, why different school practices were employed for different groups of children by teachers and parents. It also

allowed for new understandings of rarely researched practices such as returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 and for Transition programs to emerge.

Studied in its natural context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Hird, 2003), the case study approach also allowed for some insight into the different ways teachers and parents negotiated the seemingly complex educational terrain, fraught by competing discourses and contradictory educational policies, to prepare children for school. Education Queensland's 'school-ready' emphasis appeared to be at odds with an 'age ready' policy, social justice policies and the recommended approaches to programming by the Queensland Studies Authority. To add to this complexity, what constituted being 'school-ready' was constructed differently by different people in different educational contexts. The competing discourses and contradictory educational policies will be further elaborated in Section 7.5.3 of the chapter.

My pre-existing professional relationship with many of the teachers who participated in the study was a considerable advantage, as it not only provided me with willing participants for the survey and the case studies but also allowed me to be readily accepted as a trustworthy and reliable recipient of information. I was not only able to use the information provided by the teachers for the study but I was also able to reciprocate the teachers' participatory favours by presenting particular findings of the study to the teachers at seminars and conferences.

The study found a wider range of Pre-school retention practices than was anticipated at the beginning of the study. The wide range of innovative practices emulated the generally eclectic approach taken by teachers in the study who drew on several readiness discourses to inform their practices. The wide variation of practices, particularly the Transition classes and Transition programs where children were enrolled at school rather than at Pre-school, may be reflective of the generally lower Pre-school retention rates in Queensland schools (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003) compared with schools in the United States (PRF, 2003).

### ***7.2.2 Limitations and challenges of the study***

One of the main limitations of the study, and of case studies generally, was that it focused on particular dynamics within particular settings and within a particular time frame (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). While the data for the case studies was collected between 2000 and 2002, the final empirical data from Education Queensland was collected in 2007, before the study's completion. As the thesis

was conducted on a part-time basis, some of the data from the case studies was collected more than five years ago. The length of the study, however, also provided the advantage of presenting persistent and increasing empirical data on Pre-school and early years (Pre-school to year 3) and retention rates in Queensland schools from 1997 to 2007 (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003).

Further, the case studies are not presented as being representative, or as providing comprehensive accounts, of all Pre-school retention practices or even of the individual cases in the study. Instead, the method focused on understanding why different groups of children appeared to be targeted for particular school and Pre-school practices. Stake has argued that by understanding a few cases, “better understanding, perhaps better theorizing” may lead to a better understanding of a “still larger collection of cases” (2005, p. 437).

The limitations of the study did not allow for the inclusion of a longitudinal component nor a comparative group for assessment of the practices. While the study was limited in that it lacked those components, longitudinal studies from the United States (Berger, 1988; Jimerson, 1999,) and comparative group studies (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Jimerson, 2001a, 2001b, 2004) were reviewed in the literature to demonstrate the efficacy of school and Pre-school retention practices. While some data was collected on children’s learning outcomes following their second year of Pre-school, it was generally based on teachers’ and parents’ observations and anecdotal evidence as formal testing at the Pre-school level was not required in Queensland Pre-schools. At schools that provided alternative practices, results of formal testing such as the Year 2 Net were available. Ideally, it would have been beneficial to track, with a comparison group, the long-term socio-emotional and academic outcomes of the children following their repeated year as some studies in the United States have done (Alexander et al. 2004; Jimerson, 1999).

I believe the study might have also benefited from interviews with children as some researchers, such as Dockett and Perry (2007), have successfully done. Although I initially interviewed a number of children, I decided to discontinue the interviews when children appeared to have difficulty recalling the details of their second year of Pre-school. Children’s inability to recall these details may have been related to their comparatively younger age (approximately 5 years) which limited their ability to articulate how they felt about being repeated, particularly with a person who was unfamiliar to them. It may also mean that younger children’s experiences of retention are less memorable and less damaging than they are for older children. Further, some parents were

concerned about their children being ‘interviewed’ over the sensitive issue of being repeated and, more particularly, returned. This had been a contentious issue and a less than happy experience, not only for some parents, but also, according to the parents, for their children as well. As such, I respected the views of the parents and did not pursue interviewing the children. Thus, the sensitivity of the research topic and the ethical concerns precluded me from continuing the interviews with children. However, including children’s views of Pre-school retention might offer another dimension of understanding to the issue of Pre-school retention, particularly as children are the ones most affected by these practices. This would have to be done with a great deal of sensitivity.

One of the challenges of the study is to report the findings, clearly and fairly, not only to the wider academic community but also to the participating teaching community and the teaching community in general. In this way, better school practices might be employed.

### **7.3 Summary and Conclusions of the Findings**

Table 7.1 provides an overview of the practices which included delayed school entry, Pre-school retention, returning to Pre-school from Year 1, Transition programs, Transition classes and a ‘Ready for the Children’ approach. A typical explanation for each type of practice is provided along with the predominant readiness discourse that guided the practices. The groups of children for whom these practices were more often employed are identified with each type of practice. From this table, a summary of the study’s findings were drawn. The major findings were:

- Teachers drew predominantly on school-ready discourse to inform their practices, particularly Pre-school retention practices
- School-ready discourse was underpinned by deficit discourse and created binary categories of ready and unready
- Different readiness discourses resulted in a range of discursive practices
- Particular groups of children were targeted for different practices
- Teachers and parents were generally aspirational for the children in employing retention practices
- Parents in particular were more likely than teachers to note the negative consequences of these practices

*Table 7.1 Summary and Comparison of the Case Study Findings*

	6 schools that provided Pre-school retention practices				3 schools that provided alternatives to Pre-school retention	
Practice	Delayed school entry	Pre-school retention	Returning to Pre-school from Year 1	Transition programs	Transition classes	Ready for the child
<b>Explanation for practice</b>	<i>They're (parents) just concerned ... usually they have a late birthday and so they're more concerned... are they going to be ready for school? (Interview with Fiona, teacher, Willow Park Kindergarten: 8).</i>	<i>Sometimes they're not quite ready ...it's better to start a year later (Interview with Janice, Pre-school teacher, Maroochee State Preschool: 2).</i>	<i>He didn't sit still...you know, he really wasn't ready for the classroom (Interview with Sue, Acting Principal, Raintree State School: 4).</i>	<i>If you wanted to look at one thing that was probably a common factor it's ... lack of maturity. You know, when a child's not ready for the next stage of development, he's not ready, and we've just got to wait and encourage (Interview with Ewan, Pre-school teacher, Raintree State School: 52).</i>	<i>The need for a Transition class came about ... mostly in response to a group ...of weaker kiddies, less socially developed, less academically developed, cognitively developed ... we said, we've got to do something a bit different ... these kids are not ready, and I say, "not ready" in inverted comas (Interview with Kurt, Principal, Woodrow State School: 2,6).</i>	<i>Some children may have spent more time fishing or doing other things in the community ... it's just their prior learning and prior experiences aren't the same as in homes where they may have books and other things. So that's why we try to find out as much about the child to support the child in the classroom (Interview 1 with Lance, Acting Principal, Gardenia State School: 1).</i>
<b>Predominant discourse supporting practice</b>	School-ready	School-ready	School-ready	School-ready	School-ready / Ready for the child	Ready for the child
<b>Dominant groups of children associated with each practice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ boys</li> <li>▪ late birthdays</li> <li>▪ schools with families middle to high SES</li> <li>▪ non-Indigenous</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ boys</li> <li>▪ schools with families middle to high SES</li> <li>▪ non-Indigenous</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ boys</li> <li>▪ schools with families middle to high SES</li> <li>▪ non-Indigenous</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ boys</li> <li>▪ schools with families middle to high SES</li> <li>▪ non-Indigenous</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ school with families in catchment area low and middle to low SES</li> <li>▪ Indigenous Mobile children</li> <li>▪ many ESL</li> <li>▪ little or no Pre-school</li> <li>▪ some SEU at one school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ school with families low SES</li> <li>▪ Indigenous Mobile children</li> <li>▪ many ESL</li> </ul>

Each of the findings will be elaborated in this section.

### ***7.3.1 Teachers drew primarily on school-ready discourse to inform their practices***

Although there were a number of available discourses through which success at school could be achieved, teachers from eight of the nine schools in the study wholly or partially drew on school-ready discourse to inform their practices. In an era of increasing accountability and an emphasis by Education Queensland to be ‘school-ready’ (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a), it was perhaps not surprising. While some parents also drew on, or were familiar with, school-ready discourse, many parents drew on ‘age-ready’ discourse through which children were positioned as (legally) ‘ready’ for school. Some parents took up a more aspirational discourse through which they positioned their children as ‘really ready’ for school. However, school-ready discourse dominated teaching practices in the study. School-ready discourse positioned children as ‘ready’ or ‘unready’ for school. Children were positioned as ‘ready’ when they possessed the necessary cultural resources or the ‘ready’ skills and behaviours that were constructed from the ideas, values and cultural practices of the dominant group, teachers.

A further discourse available to teachers through which school success could be achieved was a constructivist/interactionist discourse. Although a constructivist/interactionist discourse was not widely used by teachers at schools in the study, this approach underpins social justice policies in Education Queensland (Department of Education, Queensland, 1994a; Department of Education and the Arts, Queensland, 2005a) and is supported by curriculum development bodies (QSA, 1998, 2007). Through this discourse, all children were positioned as ‘ready’ for school and all children’s prior-to-school learning experiences, and thus their cultural resources, was valued and used as a tool through which they could succeed at school.

Few individual teachers in the study employed practices underpinned predominantly by constructivist/interactionist discourse. Although most teachers were likely to draw on different aspects of constructivist/interactionist discourse, as the Transition teacher at Riverview State School did in programming, only the staff at Gardenia State School and some staff at Woodrow State School drew predominantly on constructivist/interactionist discourse. Gardenia State School was the only school in the study to draw on constructivist/interactionist discourse as a whole school philosophy. It was also noted that the school, unlike many of the other schools in the study, received considerable funding for human resources, which may have enabled the school to employ a practice underpinned by this approach.

Teachers were generally eclectic, combining different readiness discourses to guide their practices. Although school-ready discourse embraced two theoretically different approaches, a maturationist and an empiricist/environmentalist approach, teachers typically combined both readiness approaches to develop their practices. For instance, while teachers gave ‘immature’ children more time at Pre-school to mature, which is generally associated with maturationist discourse, they also sought to identify and address gaps in children’s readiness for school during this time, which is more often associated with empiricist/environmentalist discourse. Less apparent was the use of constructivist/interactionist and school-ready or maturationist and empiricist/environmentalist discourse. However, the Principal at Woodrow State School, while encouraging teachers to provide a program based on children’s prior-to-school learning experiences, associated with a constructivist/interactionist view of school readiness, simultaneously identified ‘unready’ attributes held by children which precluded their successful participation in a regular Year 1 classroom. The Transition teacher at Riverview State School, who pre-dominantly drew on school-ready discourse, employed a Transition program based on children’s prior-to-school learning experiences, which is associated with a constructivist/interactionist view of school readiness. It could be said also, that while Gardenia State School employed a practice based predominantly on constructivist/interactionist discourse, the intensive human resource allocation employed at the school to enable children to succeed at school may indicate that the staff similarly believed children were unready for school as well.

Generally speaking, teachers’ and parents’ explanations for their practices fell into two paradigmatically opposing camps of school readiness, a ‘school-ready’ approach and a ‘ready for the children’ approach. A ‘school-ready’ approach, based on maturationist and empiricist/environmentalist views of school readiness, required children to have particular cultural resources to successfully participate in schooling while a ‘ready for the children’ approach based on constructionist/ interactionist understandings of school readiness positioned all children as ‘ready’ for school and valued all children’s cultural resources using them as a tool for children to succeed at school.

While it is likely that some parents and teachers who generally articulated school-ready beliefs may also have held constructivist/interactionist views of school readiness, and may have delayed their children’s entry to school to provide them with a further opportunity to construct their knowledge before they commenced formal schooling, such beliefs were not foregrounded in their talk. Because

the aim of the unstructured interviews was to allow teachers and parents to talk about issues that were significant to them, their predominant views were foregrounded and highlighted in the study.

While a 'ready for school' approach placed the emphasis on children to have particular skills and behaviours before being deemed 'ready' for school, a 'ready for the child' approach allowed children of varying readiness levels to commence school. Thus the philosophical divide that became apparent in parents' and teachers' talk was centred round the issue of who should be ready for whom.

### ***7.3.2 School-ready discourse was underpinned by deficit discourse and created binary categories of ready and unready***

School-ready discourse created binary opposite categories of 'ready' or 'unready' both in terms of readiness attributes and groups of children. Davies argues that binary thinking privileges one side of the binary order and downgrades the other (1994). In terms of attributes, the privileged and more desirable 'ready' attributes were constructed, through school-ready discourse, from the ideas and ideals of the dominant group, that is, teachers. Children who possessed 'ready' attributes and the necessary cultural resources with which to succeed at school were positioned as 'ready' for school and in a positive way. Children who did not have the 'ready' attributes were positioned as 'other' to the 'ready' group, 'lacking' the necessary cultural resources for success at school and thus in a negative way. Teachers' talk about 'unready' children was in terms of the cultural resources they 'lacked' in relation to the more desirable cultural resources of the 'ready' children. In Table 7.2, the particular cultural resources that positioned children as 'ready' can be seen on the left hand side while the particular cultural resources that positioned children as 'unready' can be seen on the right hand side. These ready and unready attributes were drawn from the talk of teachers in the study who drew on school-ready discourse to inform their teaching practices.

When teachers drew on school-ready discourse, they unwittingly highlighted the perceived deficits of the 'unready' children. 'Unready' children were described largely in terms of their perceived deficits such as, 'they can't sit', 'they can't explain', 'he didn't know any numbers', 'she couldn't write her name well', 'he didn't know colours', and 'he didn't have the language skills to sort the problem out'. Although these categories offer teachers and parents a recognisable set of behaviours and skills through which 'ready' and 'unready' children could be easily identified, 'unready' children were positioned through school-ready discourse as 'lacking' and in a deficit way. Thus, school-ready discourse was underpinned by deficit discourse.

**Table 7.2 Binary Categories of Ready and Unready Attributes**

Ready for school	Not ready for school
Mature	Immature
Good fine motor skills able to write name	Poor fine motor skills, unable to write name
Knowledge of numbers, shapes and colours	Limited knowledge of numbers, shapes and colours
Interest in writing, table and indoor activities	Interest in blocks, construction and outdoor activities
Regular attendance	Irregular attendance
Cooperative	Uncooperative
Follows teacher's directions	Resistant to teacher's directions
Remains seated	Moves about the classroom
Conforms to classroom rules	Resists classroom rules
Knowing where classroom, eating areas and playing areas were	Not knowing where classroom, eating areas and playing areas were
Pre-school experience	Little or no Pre-school experience
Can sit still	Can't sit still
Can explain	Can't explain

Moreover, particular groups of children were more often identified as being 'unready' for school. Table 7.3 shows the groups of children in the study who were more often identified as being 'ready' or 'unready' for school.

**Table 7.3 Binary Categories of Ready and Unready Children in the Study**

Ready children	Unready children
Girls	Boys
Early in the year birthdays	Late in the year birthdays
Children with Pre-school experience	Children with little or no Pre-school experience
Non-mobile children	Mobile children

In Table 7.3, groups of children more often positioned as 'ready' can be seen on the left hand side while groups of children more often positioned as 'unready' can be seen on the right hand side. Davies warns that not only does placing groups of children in binary categories position some children in a negative way but binary categories may lead to the unconscious association of particular groups of children with one category or another (1994). In the study, boys and younger children were more often linked together and mobile children were grouped with children who had little Pre-school experience.

These categories of unready children gave teachers and parents recognisable groups through which to identify 'ready' and 'unready' children. Some parents in the study admitted that they gave their

children, younger boys, a second year of Pre-school because they were among groups of children more often identified as 'unready' for school. Some teachers also placed children, such as mobile children, in the unready category simply because of their association with that category. A further concern of binary categories, Davies warns, is that because the characteristics of 'ready' and 'unready' children can be linked together in each category, once children are placed in a category, they can be associated with similar characteristics of children in that category even though they may not possess other attributes of that category (1994).

It is through the binary categories associated with school-ready discourse that deficit beliefs about particular groups of children can be held intact and perpetuated. If children's ways and practices were different or 'other to' the 'ready' group, they were deemed 'unready' for school and their access to schooling was restricted. Education systems generally favour certain types of cultural resources, which some (Bourdieu, 1984; Connolly, 2004) believe are also more congruent with the discourses and practices of particular social groups. The discursive practices of schools have been considered more congruent with feminine ways of being (Connolly, 2004; Davies, 1994), which may be why fewer girls than boys were retained at Pre-school. Bourdieu (1984) and Connolly (2004) argue that the ways and practices of schools are also more congruent with the ways and practices of middle-income families. For these reason, Income Support boys, who were more often returned to Pre-school from Year 1 than any other group of children, were the least likely group of children to have ways and practices congruent with schooling.

Having the necessary cultural resources to be 'school-ready' also appeared to be linked to the opportunity children had in their social context, to acquire the necessary school-ready resources. If children's mobility or limited access to Pre-school precluded them from gaining the necessary, school-ready cultural resources, their access to school was restricted.

Thus, when practices were underpinned by school-ready discourse, children could only experience success at school through one authorised way, that is, through particular cultural resources acquired through particular social experiences and in particular social contexts. Children who did not possess the authorised cultural resources were limited in their capacity to participate in schooling and thus succeed at school. Through school-ready discourse, the cultural resources of 'unready' children were not only devalued, but were seen as the 'cause' of children's inability to succeed at school. For that reason, the predominant focus was on the child to change, become 'school-ready' and adapt to

the needs of school, rather than on the school to change, be ‘ready for the child’ and adapt to the needs of the child.

To assist the plight of ‘unready’ children, who many teachers could only see through a school-ready lens, teachers employed a range of Pre-school retention practices and alternatives so that the ‘unready’ children might have the opportunity to acquire the same cultural resources as the ‘ready’ children and similarly succeed at school. In this way, although school-ready discourse highlighted children’s perceived deficits, teachers took up these practices in an aspirational way, that is, the practices were employed to afford ‘unready’ children the same learning opportunities at school as the ‘ready’ children. However, when some teachers in the study drew on constructivist/interactionist discourse, attributes on both sides of the binary order were valued and all children were positioned in a positive way, that is, as competent learners and ‘ready’ to succeed at school.

### ***7.3.3 Different readiness discourses resulted in a range of discursive practices***

The study found that particular school and Pre-school retention practices were underpinned by particular readiness discourses. Much of the research that challenges many of these practices will be discussed in Section 7.4.2. Each practice, outlined in Table 7.1, along with the particular readiness discourses that underpinned the practice, will be discussed in turn.

#### ***Are they going to be ready for school? Delaying children’s entry into school***

Parents’ concern over the need for children to be ‘school-ready’ resulted in approximately three quarters of the parents at one private Pre-school centre voluntarily delaying their children’s entry to school for an ‘extra year’. This intervention strategy was largely based on maturational school-ready discourse where ‘more time’ was equated with being ‘more ready’ for school. However, the two parents interviewed were also aware that giving their children ‘more time’ also enabled them to further construct their knowledge of the world so that they might ‘make worthwhile decisions and perhaps be a leader and not a follower’. This view is underpinned by constructivist discourse. ‘More time’ also allowed for identified gaps in their children’s readiness for school to be addressed, such as speech concerns, which is more often associated with an empiricist/environmentalist view of school readiness. Thus, this view of school readiness may not be solely underpinned by a maturational view of school readiness as some claim (NAECSSDE, 2000).

Further, although delayed school entry has been associated with Pre-school retention practices (NAECSSDE, 2000), which can be underpinned by deficit discourse and position children in a negative way, parents did not position their children as being ‘unready’ for school nor did they

describe them in terms of their perceived deficits. Parents' talk appeared to focus on the children becoming 'really ready' and gaining a perceived advantage at school and was therefore underpinned by an aspirational or 'really-ready' discourse. Because parents' were aware that school-ready discourse was dominant in schooling and that their children's characteristics, such as being a boy and having a 'late' birthday might place their children at risk of being 'unready' within the dominant school-ready discourse, they devised a practice to avert this possible outcome. The resulting practice was employed by both parents to ensure that their younger children might not be disadvantaged in a school-ready-dominated school system. By re-positioning their children within a more aspirational discourse, the parents believed that the children might not only be 'ready' for school but 'really ready' for school.

Research on delayed school entry is also mixed. Datar's findings show:

(While) there are sizeable benefits during the first 2 years in school to delaying Kindergarten entrance, it remains to be seen whether these benefits persist in the long run. It is possible that they diminish in later grades as children grow older and receive exposure to common instruction and environments (2003, p. 57).

In Scandinavia, children commence school at age 6 or 7 and, as PISA results have shown, countries such as Finland have among the highest educational outcomes in the world (OECD, 2003). While this practice would appear to have positive long-term benefits, in such countries where delayed school entry is the norm, there is also no possibility of a stigma being attached to the practice. However, in countries where commencing school at age 6 or 7 is not the norm, delayed school entry may be perceived as a deviation from the norm, opening the possibility of it being seen in a deficit way as it has been by some groups (NAECSSDE, 2000).

A number of studies have shown that although some younger children may have lower levels of readiness when they commence Pre-school, they can catch up with their older counterparts by mid-schooling (Kurdek & Sinclair, 2001; March, 2005; Stipek & Byler, 2001; West, Meek & Hurst, 2001). Further research has shown that younger children can perform equally well at Pre-school as their older peers both academically (Thorpe et al., 2004) and socially (Spitzer et al., 1995; Thorpe et al., 2004).

Two eminent educational bodies in the United States, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECSSDE) offer these position statements on delayed school entry. The NASP suggests that:

While delayed entry and readiness classes may not hurt children in the short run, there is no evidence of a positive effect on either long-term school achievement or adjustment. Furthermore, by adolescence, these early retention practices are predictive of numerous health and emotional risk factors, and associated deleterious outcomes (2003, p. 1).

The NAECSSDE similarly warns that:

Not only is there a preponderance of evidence that there is no academic benefit from retention in its many forms, but there also appear to be threats to the social-emotional development of the child subjected to such practices (2000, p. 2).

While parents in the study undoubtedly held a positive view of the practice, particular social factors and children's characteristics combined to influence parents' decisions to give their children 'more time' to become 'school-ready'. Social factors that influenced parents' decisions to delay their children's entry to school included the current educational emphasis for children to be 'school-ready' and their financial capacity to provide an extra year of Pre-school to ensure children were not only school-ready, but 'really ready'. Children's characteristics included their social and emotional maturity, gender and birth date. These interrelated factors influenced parents' decisions to avert the risk of their children being 'unready' for school.

Graue, Kroeger and Brown (2002) argue that "readiness is hierarchically organized" and that "readiness risks are relational and certain risk factors trump others" (2002, p. 349). The risk factors noted by parents included their children's gender (boys) but, more particularly, their late birthdates. In the parents' views, these two characteristics placed their children in the 'risk category' of being 'unready for school' in a schooling context that emphasizes the need to be 'school-ready'. The current emphasis on children being 'school-ready', the perceived advantage of having an extra year to be school-ready, anecdotes from their and others' experiences, and their financial capacity to provide an extra year of Pre-school for their children, influenced parents' decisions to delay their children's entry to school.

***They're not quite ready ... it's better to start a year later: Pre-school retention***

At Maroochee and Windamere State schools, teachers who drew on school-ready discourse positioned seven children as 'unready' or 'not quite ready' for school. Because teachers' tests and observations revealed that the seven children did not have the particular forms of cultural resources, which included particular pre-writing, pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills and the appropriate social and emotional behaviours to begin Year 1, they were repeated at Pre-school. Although children's different prior-to-school learning experiences and varying developmental levels meant that they brought different types of cultural resources to school, at both schools, particular cultural resources were valued at each school. When children were unable to display the cultural resources that were valued at each school, they were positioned as 'unready' and repeated at Pre-school.

While teachers saw Pre-school retention in an aspirational way, that is, it gave 'unready' children the opportunity to become 'school-ready' as the 'ready' children were, parents also saw the practice as beneficial as well, particularly after their repeated year. While same grade assessment may show improved learning outcomes, same-age research shows, instead, that low achieving students learn more when progressed to the next year level (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Shepard, 2004). In making their assessments, neither parents nor teachers appeared to have access to 'well-controlled studies' that provided comparative and long term 'evidence of their effectiveness'. Comparative studies show that children display greater cognitive growth if promoted to the next year level. For instance, Shepard and Smith show:

Kindergarten retention does nothing to boost subsequent academic achievement; and regardless of what the extra year may be called, there is a social stigma for children who attend an extra year (1989, p. 64).

Also from their study, Hong and Yu show:

(T)he empirical evidence from this study refutes the arguments that adopting a Kindergarten retention policy boosts achievement on average, that such a policy improves the learning of children who would in any case be promoted, or that grade retention helps children experiencing difficulty in Kindergarten (2005, p. 221).

Longitudinal studies showed that Kindergarten retention does nothing to benefit children's cognitive development later in their primary years; "(W)e find no evidence that Kindergarten retention brings benefits to the retainees' cognitive development during the elementary years" (Hong & Yu, 2006, p. 1).

Several major studies have included all year levels of schooling, including Pre-school. In a systematic review of grade retention, Jimerson's meta-analyses of 83 studies on grade retention between 1925 and 1999 have demonstrated the inefficacy of grade retention practices (2001b). Jimerson's meta-analyses further included twenty published studies between 1990 and 1999 which used a comparison group. These studies included Pre-school groups; "(M)ost studies included only students retained during Kindergarten, First, Second and Third Grades; however a few included students through Eighth Grade" (2004, p. 75).

In his meta-analyses of the twenty published studies, which included the Pre-school level and which compared retained and matched promoted students, consistent negative effects of grade retention were demonstrated on all areas of academic achievement and all areas of socio-emotional adjustment:

Studies examining the efficacy of early grade retention on academic achievement and socio-emotional adjustment that have been published during the past decade report results that are consistent with the converging evidence and conclusions of research from earlier in the century that fails to demonstrate that grade retention provides greater benefits to students with academic or adjustment difficulties than does promotion to the next grade (Jimerson, 2001a, p. 27).

To investigate the long term effects of grade retention, the Chicago Longitudinal Study (Temple, Reynolds & Ou, 2004) has tracked the educational outcomes of a cohort of 1539 children born in 1980 and who attended Kindergarten in 25 Chicago public schools. Based on their analysis of the findings of this study to date, Temple, Reynolds and Ou concluded:

Our findings indicate that grade retention – no matter when it occurs – is associated with significantly lower levels of school achievement and higher rates of school dropout. Even before dropping out, the students fell further and further behind their similarly low

achieving former classmates as early as Kindergarten [...] Retained students had a school dropout rate that was 25% higher than that of promoted students (2004, p. 61).

Such studies from the United States would suggest that there are there are not only few benefits to repeating children at Pre-school, but in the long term, they may also be harmful.

***He didn't sit still ... you know, he really wasn't ready for the classroom: Returning children to Pre-school from Year 1***

At Crestleigh and Raintree State Schools and St. Christopher's College, where teachers drew on school-ready discourse, nine children were identified as being 'unready' for Year 1 and returned to Pre-school. Children were positioned, through school-ready discourse, as being 'unready' for Year 1 because they did not have the particular cultural resources deemed necessary to successfully participate in a Year 1 classroom. While the necessary school-ready cultural resources included a range of academic skills, more particularly with the returned children, it also included knowledge of the cultural practices of the Year 1 classroom. Because the focus was on children to have the necessary cultural resources to be 'ready for school', 'unready' children were returned to Pre-school where it was believed they could better acquire the necessary cultural resources.

By highlighting the perceived deficits of 'unready' children who were both repeated and returned, attention was effectively deflected from the school's need to be 'ready for the child' to the child's need to be 'ready for school' (McLaren, 1989; Valencia, 1997a). I was unable to locate any research on this practice. However, the QSA argues that all children's prior-to-school learning should be valued and particular cultural practices of school that are unfamiliar to some children should be explicitly taught (2007).

***You know, when a child's not ready for the next stage of development, he's not ready:***

**Transition programs**

The *Transition programs* provided a compromise between teachers' and parents' understandings of school readiness. Because parents "could not sustain two years of part-time Pre-school with their jobs and things" (Interview with Gail, Pre-school teacher, Windamere State School, 18), such needs presented some anxiety for teachers, particularly when children did not have the necessary school-ready cultural resources to successfully participate in Year 1. Further, some parents who were unfamiliar with school-ready discourse and more familiar with 'age-ready' discourse, preferred to have their 'unready' children in full-time schooling when they were age-eligible. Thus

at four schools where children were repeated or returned, Transition programs were the aspirational solution of teachers to accommodate parents' need for paid work with minimal childcare costs and their need to have children commence Year 1, school-ready.

Transition programs successfully fused school-ready and age-ready discourses, enabling children to gain the necessary cultural resources for successful participation in Year 1 and to participate in full-time schooling. While Transition programs accommodated parents and children's needs, the child was also required to have particular cultural resources before being positioned as 'ready for school'. Similar to returning children to Pre-school from Year 1, I was unable to locate research on this practice. However, in regard to all Pre-school practices, the QSA recommend that they be underpinned by constructivist/interactionist discourse and value all children's prior to school experiences (2007).

***We said, we've got to do something a bit different ... these kids are not ready, and I say, "Not ready" in inverted comas: Transition classes***

*Transition classes* were employed at Riverview and Woodrow State Schools for large groups of children identified by teachers as being 'unready' for a regular Year 1 class. Children were considered 'unready' for school because it was believed they lacked the means or the necessary cultural resources to succeed a regular Year 1 class. Because parents at Riverview State School were generally resistant to repeating their children at part-time Pre-school because "it cost them a lot in childcare" (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School, 4), a full-time Transition class was devised for this group of children. As noted in the previous section, *Transition programs* were employed at four schools where children were repeated or returned for similar reasons. It appeared that for many parents repeating their children at Pre-school was related to their financial capacity to allow their children a second year of part-time Preschool and its (in)convenience. To support such parents, like the teachers who devised full-time *Transition program*, teachers at Riverview and Woodrow State Schools devised *Transition classes*.

At Riverview State School, the Transition class enabled children to acquire the necessary school-ready resources to successfully participate in a regular Year 1 class the following year. At Woodrow State School, a modified Year 1 program enabled 'unready' children to be supported through Year 1 to reach Year 2. While teachers generally drew on school-ready discourse, programming at both schools, although to a much greater degree at Woodrow State School, was underpinned by

constructivist/interactionist discourse. Much of the programming in both Transition classes was moderated to the learning needs of each group of children.

The Transition classes focused on enabling the children to acquire the necessary cultural resources to successfully participate in schooling. As many of the children were Indigenous and from families in the schools' catchment areas rated as low or middle to low SES advantage, they were children more often considered disadvantaged in schooling. Through the use of Transition programs, teachers attempted to provide such children the same privileges as children from more advantaged groups. While acknowledging their 'present perceived deficits', teachers nevertheless appeared to see the Transition programs, and the children to whom they were offered, in a positive way, believing that such children could achieve similar outcomes at school as children from more privileged groups if they were supported by similar experiences. In this sense, the Transition programs, similar to the Pre-school retention practices, were the aspirational attempts of teachers to support children and allow them to succeed at school and, as such, were underpinned by aspirational discourse.

At Woodrow State School, the Transition class enabled children to reach Year 2 with more support than a regular Year 1 class. At Riverview State School, the Transition class was essentially a pre-Year 1 class which added an additional year to children's schooling. While Transition classes were seen as a positive alternative to Pre-school retention, they were provided for 'unready' children and were thus, wholly or partly, based on an empiricist/environmentalist view of school readiness which can position children in a negative way. Further, Carlson and Galle (2000) argue that, based on a previous longitudinal study by Carlson (1995), Transition classes may be ineffective in addressing children's perceived learning or readiness difficulties. Their studies showed that "regardless of whether the Transition program occurs prior to regular Kindergarten or between Kindergarten and First Grade", Transition classes are, in the long term, "ineffective" (Carlson & Galle, 2000, p.1). This would appear to contradict, at least for the short term, the results of the Year 2 Net at Riverview State School.

***It's just their prior learning and prior experiences aren't the same as in homes where they may have books and other things. So that's why we try to find out as much about the child to support the child in the classroom: A 'ready for the children' approach***

Gardenia State School accepted all children's variability in development and valued their prior-to-school learning experiences without seeing them as a barrier to their learning at school. All

children were considered as 'ready for school' because the school was 'ready for all children'. Constructivist/interactionist discourse informed the school's philosophy and resulting practice. This approach has been acknowledged by researchers (CCS, 2007; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Janus & Offord, 2000; Pianta et al., 1999) and the QSA (1998, 2007) as providing both a positive and supportive approach to preparing children for school. Further, because the school's 'ready for the children' approach accepted all children's variability in development and all children's prior-to-school learning experiences, all children's cultural resources was valued and all children were positioned as competent learners and as 'ready for school'. At Gardenia State School, no child was identified as being 'unready' for school.

Although the school adopted an 'unwritten' policy of 'no repeating' because it was believed to negatively impact on children's self esteem, children progressed academically as well (Rubin, 2002). However, because a high number of Indigenous children attended the school, it also attracted considerable funding. A school decision was made to convert the available funding for an after school homework program, to a team of eleven Indigenous in-class tutors for children who required in-class support. Further funding was available, as it was for the Transition classes at Raintree and Woodrow State Schools, to have a full-time Indigenous Teacher-aide in the Year 1 class. Because of the considerable human resource funding, as well as small class sizes (seventeen children in Year 1), it may have better enabled the well-resourced school to employ pedagogical practices based on a constructivist/interactionist discourse and be 'ready for the children'.

As the Transition teacher at Woodrow State School who also adopted a constructivist/interactionist approach to programming noted, it became apparent after the first few days the Transition program commenced that to run such a program a full-time Teacher-aide was required. In their study, *Preparing for school: Report of the Queensland Preparing for School Trials 2003/4*, Thorpe et al. (2004) noted one particular concern of teachers. Teachers believed that to implement a program based on a constructivist/interactionist approach as recommended by the QSA guidelines (1998); more support was required, particularly regarding the allocation of Teacher-aide time. Further, the highly successful High Scope Perry Preschool Study employed a similar approach to programming in which the teacher/child ratio was one to five although it was believed that similar outcomes could be achieved with a teacher/child ratio of one to eight (Schweinhart & Weikhart, 1997). Thus while it is recommended by curriculum development bodies (QSA, 1998, 2005, 2007) that schools adopt programming based on a constructivist/interactionist discourse so they are 'ready for the

children', the capacity for teachers to provide such programming may also be related by the available resources.

In summary, this section considered the beliefs that underpinned school readiness approaches at nine schools in the study. The thinking that characterised school-ready discourse was apparent in such statements as, 'He was not adapting to Year 1' and 'He just could not fit in with the group'. Because the understanding that children needed to be 'ready for school' had become so naturalised in teachers' and parents' thinking, the focus was on children to have particular cultural resources so that they could adapt to the needs of school, rather than the school adapting to the needs of the child. Although teachers attempted to cater for children's learning needs with a range of school and Pre-school retention practices with the intended best interests of children, when practices were underpinned by school-ready discourse, children were positioned as 'lacking' the required cultural resources, as 'unready' for school and, thus, in need of some form of intervention program to correct their perceived deficits.

#### ***7.3.4 Particular groups of children were targeted for different practices***

What became apparent in the study was that when teachers or parents drew on school-ready discourse, particular groups of children were positioned as 'unready' for school. While 'unready' children included groups of children traditionally considered disadvantaged in education, such as Indigenous children and children from families with lower levels of socio-economic status (MCEETYA, 2000), it also included children from families with higher levels of socio-economic advantage which, in this study, also included boys. Each group of children will be discussed in turn.

##### **Children of varying socio-economic status**

Contrary to studies in the United States (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Meisels, 1992; Reynolds, 1992) which showed that children from low-income groups were more often repeated at Pre-school than children from higher income groups, this study showed a different trend. Children who attended schools whose catchment area was marked by socio-economically advantaged families were more often repeated, returned, delayed or provided with Transition programs at Pre-school. As previously discussed, schools with larger numbers of repeated or returned children that were available for the study were generally schools whose catchment areas were marked by socio-economically advantaged families. As the study found, some parents were concerned, in terms of their capacity to work and the cost of extra childcare, about the extra cost of a second year of part-time Pre-school. Alternatives to Pre-school retention practices such as Transition classes and in-

class support systems were employed for children who attended schools whose catchment area was marked by socio-economically disadvantaged families.

Although it is unknown what the previous trends in Australia might have been due to a lack of available data, this finding may indicate, in an era of academic competitiveness and an emphasis by Education Queensland to be 'school-ready' (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a), a willingness of some parents from more socio-economically advantaged groups to give their children an extra year of Pre-schooling to ensure they are 'school-ready'. Just as many middle-class parents delay their children's entry to school (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Katz, 2000; Routley & de Lemos, 1993), parents from more privileged socio-economic groups may be similarly anxious to equip their children with every perceived advantage in the education stakes, including an extra year of Pre-school to ensure they are adequately prepared for school. Data from Education Queensland may also confirm this trend. When parents were given the option, with the introduction of the new Prep year, to repeat their children at Pre-school in 2007 (Townsville North and West District Office, Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2006) Pre-school retention rates almost doubled from 1.71% in 2006 to 2.97% in 2007 (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a). However, it must be said that the school-entry age for Queensland, the youngest of any state at the time (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a) was being raised by six months which may also have signalled to parents, that the desirability of children entering the system later was a beneficial practice. The dramatic increase in the number of children repeated at Pre-school, when given the freely available option, may indicate that many parents perceive giving their children a second year of Pre-school is advantageous. Alternatively, it may have been a case of parents attempting to align their children's entry age with a six months older entry age as authorised by Education Queensland (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a, 2002b).

The children for whom Pre-school retention practices were employed were further grouped in terms of Income Support families and Non-Income support families. While 66.7% of children (twelve of eighteen) were from Non-Income support families, the 33.3% of children from Income Support families were in five of the six cases, returned children. Furthermore, the five returned children from Income Support families were all boys who were generally returned to Pre-school from Year 1 because of their 'inappropriate behaviours' in Year 1.

At Riverview and Woodrow State Schools where Transition classes were employed, large groups of 'unready' children were from schools whose catchment areas were marked by families of lower levels of SES advantage. Although I was unable to locate research on Transition classes in Australia, Meisels' research in the United States (1992) showed that children placed in Transition classes were more often from low-income groups.

### **Boys**

While many parents and teachers of the repeated, the returned, and the delayed children believed that boys were less mature and more likely to be 'unready' for school than girls, by contrast, children's gender was not noted in any way by teachers at the 3 schools where alternatives to Pre-school retention practices were employed. This was reflected in the data collected at each of the schools. Of the children for whom Pre-school retention practices were employed, boys were nearly three times more likely than girls to spend a second year at Pre-school; 72 percent of children were boys and 28 percent were girls. However, at schools that employed in-class support or Transition classes there were approximately equal numbers of boys and girls; 48.9 % of children in these classes were boys and 51.1 % were girls.

The tendency for more boys than girls to be retained at the Pre-school level concurs with the data from Education Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003) and the literature from overseas (Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). The data from Education Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003) showed that for almost every year between 1997 and 2007 in Queensland state Pre-schools, boys were repeated almost twice as often as girls (see Table 2.5 in Chapter 2).

Parents and teachers in the study believed that because boys were less mature than girls generally, boys were more likely to be 'unready' for school than girls. Children's immaturity, as discussed previously, has been associated with maturationist school-ready discourse. This perception is contrary to research (Datar, 2003; Stipek & Ryan, 1997) which shows that there is no difference in the readiness skills of boys and girls. Boys' perceived lack of 'maturity' may be related to the different cultural resources valued by some boys, which may be in contrast with the different cultural resources valued in schools. The returned boys in particular, were less likely to display the cultural practices valued at school which included; being quiet, remaining seated at a desk, completing 'work' set by the teacher, following the teachers' directions, being compliant and being

submissive to authority. The returned boys' behaviours, which included confrontation and aggression towards others, non-compliance and independence and failure to follow teachers' directions, generally reflected the more dominant forms of masculinity valued in society (Alloway, 1995). Such behaviours were at odds with the cultural practices of schooling (Connolly, 2004).

Such behaviours were generally more characteristic of the returned boys, five of the six who were from Income Support families, than for the repeated or delayed boys, six of the seven who were from Non-Income support families. The boys' behaviours according to teachers, most likely resulted from their inability to succeed or even participate in the Year 1 not only because they lacked the necessary skills but also because they did not display the necessary classroom behaviours. While the repeated boys also lacked specific cultural resources, they were more often related to school-ready skills than school-ready behaviours. The returned boys' behaviours, which reflected the more dominant forms of masculinity valued in society, may also be related to the ways of being valued in their particular social group. Connolly found in his study of working-class boys of a similar age group in Ireland that such boys were more likely to take up ways of being valued by the more dominant forms of masculinity valued in society than boys who were from middle-income families who were more likely to understand 'expected' behaviours and practices at school (2004). It was noted by the Year 1 teacher of the only returned boy from a Non-Income support family that the returned boy's inappropriate behaviours were confined to home.

Some studies show that boys may be repeated at Pre-school because of their behaviours (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). Most of the returned boys' inappropriate behaviours resulted in their being returned to Pre-school from Year 1. These inappropriate behaviours, which included an inability to remain seated, follow teachers' directions and aggression towards others, indicated to teachers that the boys were 'immature' and unready for Year 1. Teachers also noted that when the boys were returned to Pre-school from Year 1, their unacceptable behaviours decreased considerably. This may also indicate that boys' ways of being, particularly the returned boys, may be more compatible with Pre-school pedagogy which emphasises independence, hands-on activities and more autonomous learning (QSA, 2007). The restrictive practices of traditional Year 1 classrooms may have been less compatible with the boys' ways of being as other studies have similarly found (Connolly, 2004; Childs & McKay 1997; Cortis & Newmarch, 2000). While boys' negative reactions to not coping in the Year 1 classrooms may have been characteristic of the dominant forms of masculinity in society, girls' reaction to not coping in the Year 1 classrooms were also characteristic of feminine ways of being (Davies, 1994). Rather than being aggressive towards

others and challenging authority when unable to cope in the Year 1 classroom, two of the three returned girls became withdrawn and emotionally upset. Similar findings, related to girls' and boys' behaviours at school have been reported by Childs and McKay (1997).

Teachers placed a strong emphasis on indoor activities, developing fine motor skills, particularly writing skills, which some argue are associated with feminine ways of being (Connolly, 2004; Davies, 1989, 1994). In some instances, teachers equated boys' lack of interest in writing, drawing and table activities with their readiness for school, despite the fact that the same boys appeared to be socially and emotionally competent, had good language and communication skills and could create quite complex constructions. Thus, school-ready beliefs may result in teachers labelling boys' gender-based behaviours as 'immaturity'. If this is the case, boys in particular may be repeated at Pre-school or returned to Pre-school from Year 1 because of their gendered ways of being rather than their 'immaturity'.

### **Younger children**

Younger children or children with 'late' in the year birthdays were repeated, delayed or returned to Pre-school from Year 1. The belief that younger children were 'less ready' for school was largely underpinned by maturationist school-ready discourse where it was believed that children needed 'more time' to mature to be school-ready. This belief has been challenged by research in Australia (Thorpe et al., 2004) and overseas (Meisels, 1999; Mustard, 2006) which shows that children's readiness for school is related more to experiences gained in children's social contexts than it is to age. Cortis and Newmarch (2000) provided evidence in their research which showed that younger children attained similar learning outcomes to their older peers.

### **Mobile children and children with no Pre-school experience**

There appeared to be no comparable studies on children's mobility in relation to Pre-school retention practices. Mobile children were placed in Transition classes because it was considered that they were unlikely to have the necessary school-ready skills and behaviours to successfully participate in regular Year 1 classes. Some research on children's mobility (Wyer et al., 1997) found, similar to the teaching staff where Transition classes were employed, that some teachers may see children's mobility as a barrier to children's learning at school. Henderson's study (2004) similarly found that teachers may have lower academic expectations of mobile children than non-mobile children because of their lifestyle.

By contrast to teachers who took up school-ready discourse, teachers at Gardenia State School, which had a mobility rate of 83% (Gardenia State School, 2002a), did not discuss children's mobility in terms of it being a barrier to children's successful participation in schooling. Because the teaching staff at Gardenia State School adopted school practices that were underpinned by constructivist/interactionist discourse, children's prior learning experiences were valued and used as a starting point in their learning at school. Support, if children required it, was provided in-class. This view was similar to the suggestions of Henderson (2004) and Wyer et al. (1997), who argue that children's lifestyles should be valued, supported and used as a tool in their learning at school rather than being considered as a barrier.

Mobile children were seen as similar to children with no Pre-school experience, that is, they were less likely to have particular cultural resources valued in schooling and were thus deemed as unready for a regular Year 1 class. While Pre-school attendance was non-compulsory in Queensland and was not an official requirement for entry into Year 1 during the years of the study (2000 to 2007), Pre-school experience appeared to be an 'unofficial' Year 1 entry gate at Riverview, Woodrow and Windamere State Schools (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a).

### **Indigenous children**

Of the eighteen children who were provided with Pre-school retention practices, seventeen children were non-Indigenous, which represents 6.1% of the total number (276) of non-Indigenous children in the classes. One child was Indigenous which represents 4.5% of all Indigenous children in the classes (22). Thus, non-Indigenous children were more likely to be repeated at Pre-school than Indigenous children in the study; similar to data from Education Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003). By contrast, most of the children at the schools where alternatives to Pre-school retention were employed were Indigenous children. At Riverview State School, 67% of the children in the Transition class, not counting the SEU children, were Indigenous; at Woodrow State School, 73% of the children were Indigenous and at Gardenia State School, 70% of the children were Indigenous. The finding that Transition classes were comprised mainly of Indigenous children was similar to research in the United States which showed that more than 70% of children placed in Transition classes were from minority groups (Berger, 1988).

As children in the Transition class at Riverview State School progressed to a Year 1 class the following year, the whole class effectively repeated Year 1. Data from Education Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003) previously shown in Chapter 2 (Table 2.10), showed that, while Indigenous children are less likely to be repeated at Pre-school than non-Indigenous children, they are more likely to be repeated in Year 1. This may be because, generally, Indigenous children are less likely to attend Pre-school than non-Indigenous children (MCEETYA, 2000) particularly as it is non-compulsory in Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007c; The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a).

The children in the Transition classes, most of whom were Indigenous, were considered 'unready' for Year 1 because they did not have the school-ready cultural resources such as 'good' language, fine motor skills and were unfamiliar with the cultural practices of schooling such as 'lining up' and 'standing still'. Such practices are more often associated with the dominant discourses of schooling and may be practices with which Indigenous children are less familiar, as other research has shown (Malin, 1990; MCEETYA, 2000; Nakata, 1993). Rather than seeing a possible mismatch between the discourses and practices between children's homes and school (Alloway, 1997; Connolly, 2004; Heath, 1983), teachers who drew on school-ready discourse were more likely to see Indigenous children as 'lacking' cultural resources rather than having 'different' cultural resources.

The Principal from Riverview State School believed children's home backgrounds where they were not 'read to' or 'provided with books and basic oral communication' contributed to children not having the required 'school-ready' cultural resources and being 'unready' for school. Thus, when teachers drew on school-ready discourse, they valued particular cultural resources and de-valued others. MCEETYA (2000) suggests that teachers may need a better understanding of the diverse cultural resources that children, particularly Indigenous children, bring to school so that school practices might better reflect these understandings. Rather than de-valuing children's prior-to-school experiences, MCEETYA advises that teachers may need support in understanding how to build on children's prior-to-school experiences. This would allow Indigenous children to continue their learning at school and be supported in moving fluently between their beliefs, cultures, languages and lifestyles in affirming their identity (2001). To understand the literacy development of Indigenous children who may use English as a second language, or who may be from an oral rather than a print tradition, teachers may also need support (MCEETYA, 2000).

When teachers draw on school-ready discourse, Indigenous children who use English as a second language or Aboriginal Australian English can be at risk of being identified as children with ‘learning difficulties’ as some children in the Transition classes were. As MCEETYA suggests, where large groups of identifiable children fail to meet schooling requirements, “mainstream curriculum and schooling practices” might need to be examined rather than the children who do not meet school-ready requirements (2000). While children need proficiency in Standard Australian English for success at school, care needs to be taken against “cultural bias and deficit images” of Indigenous children’s languages so that they are valued and not assimilated (MCEETYA, 2000, p. 34). MCEETYA suggests that code switching strategies be explicitly taught (2000).

The perception by some teachers that parents did not value education, in this case because they did not adequately prepare their children for school, has also been noted by Freebody et al. (1995). It was possible that parents’ unfamiliarity with school-ready discourse was interpreted by teachers as parents’ indifference to, or not valuing, school as other studies have shown (Crozier, 2000; Toomey, 1989). When parents have specific cultural knowledge about schools’ discourses and practices, they are more likely to be able to support their children’s preparation for school. Despite the perception that some Indigenous parents are unsupportive of their children’s schooling, Dockett et al. (2006) noted that Indigenous families understand the need to be involved in their children’s schooling and that this involvement was linked to positive educational outcomes for their children.

Pre-school attendance of Indigenous children was an issue in the study at Riverview and Woodrow State Schools. Transition classes were formed partly because large numbers of children in these classes, most of whom were Indigenous, had no Pre-school experience. At Gardenia State School, absenteeism was noted as being an issue. International studies report that there is a strong relationship between high quality Pre-school education and later success at school, particularly when children are from lower income or disadvantaged backgrounds (OECD, 2003; Schweinhart et al., 2005). Indigenous children’s lower levels of attendance at Pre-school, which was and continues to be non-compulsory in Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007c), may partially account for Indigenous children’s lower literacy and numeracy achievement at primary school compared with non-Indigenous children (DEST, 2005). Thus, if attendance at Pre-school has a significant impact on educational outcomes at school and if Pre-school attendance is erratic or non-existent, Indigenous children may have less success in reaching the educational benchmarks at primary school.

Where schools made concerted efforts to connect with their communities, as Gardenia State School did, parents were more likely to be involved in their children's schooling, as Dockett et al. (2006) noted. Although it has been documented that partnerships between home and school increase learning outcomes for children (MCEETYA, 2000), the general level of communication between Indigenous communities and schools has been traditionally poor. As MCEETYA suggests:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of Education accord more with the approach of community development which encompasses the broader concept of well-being as it relates to the spiritual, cultural, emotional and social and physical well-being of the whole community (2000, p. 40).

Gardenia State School attempted to provide such a model that embraced all aspects of children's well-being.

### ***7.3.5 Teachers and parents generally saw the practices as aspirational***

All teachers, whether they drew on school-ready or constructivist/interactionist discourse to inform their practices, saw the practices as aspirational and as effective in ensuring children's success at school. Despite research warning of potentially harmful effects of grade retention at all levels of schooling (Anderson et al., 2002; Jimerson, 2001a, 2001b) including Pre-school (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Hong & Yu, 2006; Shepard & Smith, 1989), only the Principal from Gardenia State School noted that Pre-school retention practices could be possibly harmful to children. Although it was possible that teachers may have been aware of the possible negative side effects of each practice, apart from the Principal at Gardenia State School, this possibility was noted only by one other teacher.

Although most teachers drew on school-ready discourse which, as discussed previously, was underpinned by deficit discourse to inform their practices, teachers generally saw each practice in an aspirational way. Further, teachers not only saw the practices as aspirational but, operating almost solely within a school-ready paradigm, appeared to see few alternatives to ensuring success at school for 'unready' children other than through school and Pre-school retention practices. For this reason, teachers more often noted the potentially negative consequences of not repeating children. Both teachers and parents related stories of relatives, friends or students whose lives had been damaged because they were not repeated at school. Graue, Kroeger and Brown (2002) argue that parents' and teachers' life experiences can become a powerful logic in shaping people's

perceptions which might not be readily undermined by empirical research findings that contradict these beliefs.

The conviction that children would not experience success at school unless they commenced school with particular cultural resources may have given teachers, in some cases, the appearance of being coercive with some parents who did not want their children repeated at Pre-school but were eventually persuaded to do so by the teacher. As others have similarly found (Bowser, 1998), such teachers appeared to be convinced that the rest of the children's school lives might be a disaster if they were not repeated. One grandparent recounted the advice given to her by the school Guidance Officer regarding unready children who are not repeated:

*He (Guidance Officer) said the things parents do to their children. He said, there's one (child) here (at school) he knew, he's in Grade 4. They (parents) never kept him down and he's terrible. He's got that many problems, poor little fella, all because the parents didn't keep him down in Grade 1 ... I think he was trying to explain, you know, that if that happened to him it could happen to Nicholas (Interview with Grace, grandparent, Crestleigh State School: 413).*

In other cases, teachers' attempted to persuade parents to repeat children through the offer of a 'Transition program'. Parents who were hesitant to repeat their children at Pre-school generally agreed to repeat them when the offer included full-time schooling in the form of a Transition program:

*Mum was fine (with repeating Pre-school) once we said to her that there is a five-day program (Interview with Sarah, Pre-school teacher, St. Christopher's College: 37).*

Bourdieu has argued that dominant groups can often redefine or rename a practice to their perceived advantage (1977). Teachers, in this case, renamed 'Pre-school retention' as a Transition class. Although it might be perceived as being to their advantage, teachers appeared, in this study, to employ practices based on what they perceived as being the best possible way to ensure children's success at school.

### ***7.3.6 Some parents noted the negative consequences of these practices***

While teachers rarely noted any negative consequences to repeating children in the study, several parents did. Several parents raised concerns that, if their children were repeated, they would be a year behind their same age cohort, while other parents saw various Pre-school retention practices as being a stigma. Other research has similarly noted that repeating Pre-school can be perceived as a stigma (Graue et al., 2002; Shepard & Smith, 1989).

Almost all parents of the returned children were initially upset by teachers' recommendations that their children should be returned to Pre-school from Year 1. Parents' concerns related to their children missing friends, not being with the same age cohort, learning less among a younger group of children and, in one case, missing the Year 1 teacher. Some parents also reported that their children had also been upset by their return to Pre-school, complaining that it was like 'going back to the babies'. Both parents and children may have been more upset by the practice of returning children to Pre-school from Year 1 because it may have been a more visible demonstration of failure and more difficult to conceal than either the practices of delaying or repeating children at Pre-school.

Parents of the delayed children were similarly conscious of how spending a second year at Pre-school might look in the eyes of others but were able to take measures to protect their children such as placing them at a different Pre-school location for their second year at Pre-school, as did the parents of the repeated children. Hong and Raudenbush (2005), NASP (2003), Department of Education, Northern Region (1994) and Shepard (Shepard & Smith, 1989) have similarly noted that Pre-school retention practices can be perceived as being a stigma.

A group of parents at Willow Park Kindergarten went to considerable lengths to avoid the stigma often associated with Pre-school retention (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005) by giving their children two years of Pre-school in two different locations. It was clear, however, that although the parents saw Pre-school retention in a negative way, they did not see the practice of giving their children two years of Pre-school as being negative and did not want the practice of giving their children an extra year of Pre-school to be associated with repeating Pre-school. They saw the practice instead, as many parents of delayed children do, as providing their children with an extra year of Pre-school that may even give their children an educational advantage at school, rather than risking the children being 'unready' for school.

The attempts of teachers, school administrators and parents to find alternatives to repeating children at Pre-school would suggest that Pre-school retention may be seen as a less than ideal practice. In almost all cases, regardless of the Pre-school retention practice employed, teachers and parents were optimistic about each of the practices, and the capacity of each practice, to ensure children would be 'school-ready'. These beliefs were reinforced by the 'progress' the children made during their second year of Pre-school or during their Transition year. Although some parents, particularly the parents of the returned children, initially resisted teachers' suggestions, almost all parents on seeing the progress the children had made during their second year of Pre-school praised the program's success and, often, the teacher's efforts to ensure the children were school-ready. It is likely, through exposure to school-ready discourse, that parents came to desire the same readiness qualities or the same cultural resources for their children as the dominant groups. Perhaps also, they may have seen that it was only through their children having the particular school-ready resources, valued in schooling, that their children were able to succeed at school.

Parents, in particular, noted that Pre-school retention practices were characterised by negative side effects including its possible stigma, teasing by peers, being with a different age cohort, learning less from younger peers and missing friends. However, in weighing up the relative risk factors, such as characteristics of 'unready' children, the emphasis on children being 'school-ready', anecdotes from teachers and parents of experiences of children who improved with a second year at Pre-school and children whose school lives were damaged because they were not repeated, within school-ready thinking, parents and teachers often concluded that Pre-school retention was less of a risk than being 'unready' for school.

Teachers appeared to be unconscious of the way retention practices retained and perpetuated the practices of the dominant groups of which they were a part. They saw Pre-school retention practices as a way for children to become 'school-ready' and not as devaluing the cultural resources of some groups of children. This may be the case because, within binary thinking, the binary category 'unready' is 'marked' and that which is marked is more visible (Davies, 1994). Alternatively, the more privileged 'ready' category, constructed from teachers' ideas of what readiness meant, was 'unmarked' and 'less visible'. Davies illustrates how the invisibility of unmarked categories and the visibility of marked categories function. She cites an account by Kimmel who illustrates the concept of how visible and invisible, marked and unmarked categories, work through an encounter between a black woman and a white woman (1994, p. 16):

Their argument centered around the question of whether their similarities as women were greater than their racial differences. The white woman asserted that the fact that they were both women bonded them, despite racial differences. They shared a common oppression as women, and were both 'sisters under the skin'. The black woman disagreed.

'When you wake up in the morning and look in the mirror, what do you see?' she asked.

'I see a woman', replied the white woman hopefully.

'That's precisely the problem', replied the black woman. 'I see a black woman. For me race is visible every minute of the day, because it is how I am not privileged in this culture.

Race is invisible to you which is why our alliance will always be false and strained to me.'

When I heard this, I was startled. For when I looked in the mirror, I thought I saw a 'human being', a generic person, universally generalizable. What had been concealed - race, and gender, and class - was suddenly visible. As a middle-class white man, I was able to not think about the ways in which class and race and gender had shaped my existence.

Marginality is visible, and painfully visceral. Privilege is invisible, and painlessly pleasant (Davies, 1994, p. 16).

What was concealed through school-ready discourse was the way in which particular cultural resources were needed to position children as 'school-ready'. From their more privileged position, teachers may have seen school-ready resources as being 'generic' rather than being 'particular'. Thus, a range of practices were employed so that children could have what teachers appeared to see as 'generic' cultural resources rather than as 'particular' cultural resources. Parents, on the other hand, saw from the more visible or marked position of their 'unready' children, the effects of this positioning; how their children's attributes were positioned as less desirable than the 'ready' attributes and how these attributes were not privileged or even recognised through school-ready discourse. Through their less privileged position, parents were more likely to see the negative effects of their positioning and teachers, through their more privileged position, were less likely to see these negative effects.

#### **7.4 Policy Recommendations: Implications for Practice**

The purpose of the study was to provide evidence of Pre-school retention practices in Queensland schools and investigate from teachers' and parents' talk why these practices might be perpetuated in some Queensland schools. The study showed that teachers predominantly drew on school-ready discourse which positioned particular groups of children in a negative way and devalued their cultural resources. The negative positioning of 'unready for school' also resulted in teachers

employing a range of school and Pre-school retention practices. The limitations of the study did not allow for the inclusion of a longitudinal or comparative group component in the data collection and, while the study makes no claims about the efficacy of Pre-school retention practices from these perspectives, other studies do. The study has therefore drawn on longitudinal and comparative group studies in the United States to assess the value of school and Pre-school retention practices.

Data from Education Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003) showed that although Pre-school retention rates in Australia were much lower than in countries such as the United States, they have increased in the last decade in Queensland schools. As noted previously, the sudden increase between 2006 and 2007 was possibly due to the introduction of the Prep year in 2007 in Queensland where parents were given the option to repeat their children at Pre-school. In disregarding that year (2007), Pre-school retention rates more than doubled from 0.74% in 1997 to 1.71% in 2006. Thus in 2006, 665 children were repeated at Pre-school which some research argues offers few benefits for children (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Hong & Yu, 2006) and may be harmful (Shepard & Smith, 1989; Temple et al., 2004). In the light of such research and the finding of the study that Pre-school retention not only exists in Queensland schools but is increasing, this finding represents a concern. Based on these concerns and the overall findings of the study, several recommendations are provided.

#### ***7.4.1 Review school-ready beliefs and policies that result in Pre-school retention practices***

As Pre-school retention practices in the study were generally underpinned by school-ready discourse, 'school-ready' beliefs may need to be reviewed. A more positive approach to preparing children for school, such as the approach taken by Gardenia State School, was underpinned by a constructivist/interactionist view of school readiness. This approach is supported by curriculum development bodies (QSA, 1998, 2005, 2007) and current research (ARACY, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1999; CCS, 2007; Dockett & Perry, 2002, 2007; Janus & Offord, 2000; Meisels, 1999).

As the study showed, school-ready discourse resulted in 'unready' children's ways of being devalued, children being positioned in a negative way and retained at Pre-school. Alternative approaches, underpinned by a constructivist/interactionist discourse, values all children's prior-to-school learning and positions children in a positive way, and as 'ready', competent learners.

Dockett and Perry further emphasise that “this view accepts variability in children’s development without regarding it as a deficit” (2002, p. 71).

In the light of the study’s findings and the literature, it is recommended that Education Queensland’s emphasis on children being “school-ready” (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a, p. 1) be reviewed.

#### ***7.4.2 Examine the value of Pre-school retention practices***

School-ready discourse led to a range of Pre-school retention practices. Shepard, who has researched Pre-school retention practices extensively in the United States (Shepard, 1997, 2004; Shepard & Smith 1989) in conjunction with her colleague Smith (1990, 1989, 1988, 1986), argues that if grade retention practices were subject to the same controls required by the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) in the United States for safe and effective treatment of various disorders, it is unlikely that grade retention would pass either the test of effectiveness or safety (2004). She argues that Pre-school and school retention practices are generally employed to “cure (or at least improve)” underachievement at, or unreadiness for, school (2004, p. 199). Shepard argues that before a ‘cure’ is approved, the FDA asks two questions:

- Do the results of well-controlled studies provide substantial evidence of effectiveness?
- Do the results show the product is safe – which means the benefits of the drug appear to outweigh the risks? (2004, p. 199).

When children in the study were retained and compared with a younger cohort by teachers and parents, the logic of Pre-school retention resulted. Children appeared to be more competent and learned more after their repeated year. Shepard argues however that:

Focusing on same-grade rather than same-age comparisons is a large concession to the good intentions of retention policies, and it assumes this one-time strong medicine will provide a significant boost to students’ achievement in the following years (2004, p. 200).

However, as discussed in Section 7.3.3, same age comparison studies (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Jimerson, 2001a, 2001b, 2004; Shepard, 1989; 2004), along with longitudinal studies (Hong & Yu, 2006; Jimerson, 1999; Temple et al., 2004) reveal there is little ‘evidence of the effectiveness’ of Pre-school retention practices and ‘few benefits’. Thus “before it is routinely administered” to

particular groups of children, school and Pre-school should at least “be shown to be effective – beyond the most favourable comparison or most favourable outcome measure” (Shepard, 2004, pp. 200-201).

Responsive to such risk factors, countries such as Finland and Japan have adopted alternatives to grade retention practices and have students whose educational outcomes are among the highest in the world (OECD, 2003). The 2003 results from PISA demonstrated that Finnish students were among the top performers in the world in reading literacy, maths literacy and scientific literacy (OECD, 2003). The most recent PISA results show that Finnish students are still among the top performers in the world in maths literacy and scientific literacy, and second to Korea in reading literacy (2007). In *Inform Articles*, McGaw argues that the high performance of Finnish students might be attributable to several factors including the abolition of grade retention as an educational practice:

(I)n the mid 1980s they (Finland) introduced a major reform in which they abandoned grade repetition and introduced a fully comprehensive system at least up to the age of 15. They consciously got rid of all the means they could get rid of failures and pass off failures. Schools were told teachers were responsible for all of their students (2003, p.1).

Given the weight of empirical evidence that argues against grade retention at all levels of schooling (Jimerson, 2001b; Hong & Yu, 2006), and given that countries such as Finland do not practise grade retention and have student outcomes that are ranked among the highest in the world (OECD, 2003, 2007), it is recommended that Pre-school retention practices also be reviewed in Queensland schools and replaced by approaches to preparing children for school that benefit all children. Practices which are underpinned by constructivist/interactionist discourse or a ‘ready for the children’ approach to preparing children for school, meet both school accountability requirements, the learning needs of all children, and value all children’s prior-to school cultural and linguistic resources (CCS, 2007; Janus & Offord, 2000; Meisels, 1999; QSA, 2007). The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) suggests an ecological model which is “influenced by characteristics of, and relationships between, the child, the family and the broader social environment” (2007, p. 7).

Proactive strategies through the investment in early education programs have shown significant long term positive outcomes (ARACY, 2007). The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study (Schweinhart

et al., 2005; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997) demonstrated that children who participated in the program had fewer arrests, higher earnings and greater property wealth and higher educational outcomes at age 27 compared with children who did not participate in the program. Barnett showed that high quality early education programs not only produced a 31% reduction in grade retention rates at the primary level but also reduced high school non-completion by 32% (1995). Rather than requiring children to be 'ready for school', programs that focus on the families', the schools', the community's and community services' readiness status in preparing children for school are recommended (ARACY, 2007; CCS, 2007; Janus & Offord, 2000; Meisels, 1999; QSA, 2007).

### ***7.4.3 Review education policies***

In preparing children for school, teachers were required to consider a number of departmental policies which appeared to be inconsistent with a 'school-ready' emphasis. These included the policies of non-compulsory Pre-school (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a) and an 'age ready' policy whereby children were entitled to commence school the year they turned six (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a). To add to this seeming complexity, there appeared to be no uniform guidelines through which to determine children's readiness for school. Further, a 'school-ready' approach appeared to provide a barrier for some children's entrance to school which was in opposition to social justice policies employed to ensure equitable access to schooling for all children (Department of Education, Queensland, 1994a). Finally, a 'school-ready' emphasis was not supported by the philosophical and pedagogical approach recommended by the Queensland Studies Authority (1998, 2005, 2007) as a basis for programming and preparing children for school. Each of these policies will be discussed in turn.

#### **Legal school entry age**

An 'age ready' policy, which until 2008 in Queensland, entitled children to commence school full-time the year they turned six (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a), appeared to be in conflict with a 'school-ready' emphasis (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a). Although many parents sent their children to school when they were 'age ready', most teachers commenced the Year 1 program with the assumption that children would be 'school-ready' when they commenced school. Although legally entitled to be at school when they were 'age ready', some children were discouraged from commencing Year 1 because they were not 'school-ready' and provided with some form of Pre-school retention practice. It is thus recommended that a school-ready emphasis be reviewed.

### **Determining school readiness**

As many decisions regarding repeating children at Pre-school, returning children to Pre-school from Year 1, Transition programs and Transition classes were school-based (Education Queensland, 2000), teachers devised their own ways of assessing children's readiness which were drawn from their ideas and ideals about what constituted school readiness. As discussed in Chapter 5, in one instance, one child was 'ready' at one school and not at another.

It is recommended, as Queensland Studies Authority (2007) suggests, that teachers accept all children's 'school-ready' status, map children's ongoing progress through school and use the information to support children's continued learning and development at school. It is also recommended that readiness measurements, such as those used by the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI), be used to measure and support children's transition to school (CCCH, 2007a). The AEDI provides communities with a holistic picture of that community's children, in terms of their well-being and readiness for school, without labelling individual children or families. It provides a tool from which the community can develop and monitor community programs and draws on community support and resources to achieve better educational and life outcomes for children (CCCH, 2007a; Goldfeld, 2006; Stewart, 2006).

### **Social justice policies**

Generally speaking, a range of Pre-school retention practices was employed for children from schools whose families had higher levels of socio-economic advantage. When choosing particular schools for the study, it was found that higher numbers of repeated and returned children were from schools whose families had higher levels of socio-economic advantage. However, when children were considered individually and according to particular Pre-school retention practices, the study found that 55.5% of the returned children (five of nine) were from Income Support families. When state schools alone were considered, 83.3% of the returned children (five of six) were from Income Support families. Further, 72.3 % of the children who were delayed, repeated or returned were boys. Thus boys, particularly boys from Income Support families, were more likely than girls to be discouraged from commencing school until it was believed that they possessed particular 'school-ready' cultural resources.

Other groups of children for whom social justice policies were provided, such as children from Riverview State School whose catchment area was marked by families with low levels of socio-economic advantage, were also discouraged from commencing school until they possessed the

‘school-ready’ cultural resources. While social justice policies focused on ensuring equitable access to education for all children (Department of Education, Queensland, 1994a; Department of Education and the Arts, Queensland, 2005a), ‘school-ready’ policies and their resulting school and Pre-school retention practices appeared to constrain some children’s entry into formal schooling until they were considered ‘school-ready’. Although teachers employed these practices to support children’s successful entry to school, the practices simultaneously constrained children’s access to school and as such, it is recommended that school-ready policies be reviewed.

### **Early childhood programming**

School and Pre-school curriculum design in Queensland schools has been provided by Queensland Studies Authority (1998, 2005, 2007). The QSA, in its early childhood curriculum documents over the last decade (1998, 2005, 2007), has emphasised programming and assessment based on a constructivist/interactionist approach which emphasises the need for schools to build on children’s prior-to-school learning experiences and be ‘ready for the children’. QSA recommends that Pre-schools:

[...] establish links for children between their prior, current and future learning. In preparatory settings it is particularly important to recognise and build on children’s prior learning in other settings [...] Building continuity means providing an environment that supports children to gradually learn the ways of interacting and behaving in the school setting. These are often particular social and cultural practices that are new to children. Teachers may need to explicitly teach the social and cultural practices that are used in their classroom and school. This may involve:

- recognising that for some children, the school culture and the home culture may be very different
- recognising and valuing the children’s existing social and cultural understandings and practice
- clearly explaining the rules, expectations, and linguistic and cultural practices associated with being successful learners in the new setting (2007, p. 3, 5).

The approach recommended by QSA would appear to contradict Education Queensland’s ‘school-ready’ emphasis which focuses on the need for children to have particular cultural resources to commence school. While QSA recommends that schools be, ‘ready for the children’, Education Queensland emphasises the need for children to be ‘ready for school’:

(A)s parents know, if children are not 'school-ready' when they start Year 1, they can be behind from the start of their formal schooling (The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2002a, p. 1).

More than a decade ago, NAEYC, one of the more prominent early childhood educational bodies in the United States, argued that no child should have to be 'ready for school' (1995). Instead, NAEYC argued that schools should be 'ready' to meet the needs of all children:

The traditional construct of readiness unduly places the burden of proof on the child. Until the inequities of life experience are addressed, the use of readiness criteria for determining school entry or placement blames children for their lack of opportunity. Furthermore, many of the criteria now used to assess readiness are based on inappropriate expectations of children's abilities and fail to recognize normal variation in the rate and nature of individual development and learning. NAEYC believes it is the responsibility of schools to meet the needs of children as they enter school and to provide whatever services are needed in the least restrictive environment to help each child reach his or her fullest potential (1995, p. 1).

More recently, an ecological model emphasised by ARACY (2007) places the emphasis on the social and educational institutions and resources in the child's environment in preparing the child for school. Along with 'ready families', 'ready communities' and 'ready services', ARACY also includes the notion of 'ready schools' (2007). Rather than the focus for school readiness being solely on the child, the ARACY report asserts that:

(Q)uestions are now asked about the school's readiness for a child, thereby turning the old question, 'Is the child ready for school?' on its head (2007, p. 7).

When schools are ready for children, there remains no possibility that some children will be positioned as 'unready' for school and become subject to a range of practices that some research argues has few benefits (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Hong & Yu, 2006) and may be harmful (Jimerson, 2001a, 2001b, 2004; Shepard, 1989).

#### ***7.4.4 Ensure teachers have continued professional development***

The relatively low Pre-school retention rates in Queensland schools (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003) may indicate that teachers in other Queensland schools are finding different ways of preparing children for school other than by repeating them at Pre-school. Pre-school retention practices reflect the aspirational attempts of teachers and some parents in the study to prepare children for school in a context of increasing school accountability requirements, parental preferences, seemingly contradictory school policies and Education Queensland's emphasis on children being 'school-ready'.

The findings of the study showed that although teachers were optimistic about the practices and the children for whom they were provided, at eight of the nine schools, practices were wholly or partially underpinned by school-ready discourse. Although school-ready discourse positions children in a negative way and devalues cultural resources that some children might possess, practices underpinned by school-ready discourse did not appear to be intended acts of oppression by teachers. The negative aspects of these practices, as previously discussed, appeared to be invisible to teachers in the study and understood as 'the way teaching is done'. As Davies suggests:

(T)eachers' own discursive practices [...] are not usually subjected to critical scrutiny. They are understood simply as the way teaching is normally done, or the way in which a certain set of educational aims are achieved (1994, p. 81).

It was apparent that teachers in the study struggled to find better ways to support children in their learning at school and showed considerable enthusiasm for the different approaches they devised to prepare children for school. It would appear, however, in the light of current research about school-ready based retention practices, that teachers' attempts may be headed in the wrong direction. Although teachers need to be both accountable and to prepare children for school, they also need to be equipped with an understanding of practices that are informed by current research. In effect, teachers in the study were attempting to meet the needs of children and the requirements of the education system by using practices that research (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Hong & Yu, 2006; Jimerson, 2001a, 2001b; Shepard & Smith, 1989) and early childhood educational bodies (NAECSSDE, 2000; NAEYC, 1997) advise as being ineffective and possibly not in children's best interests. Few teachers in the study employed practices that are underpinned by more current theoretical approaches to school readiness (CCS, 2007; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Janus & Offord, 2000; Pianta et al., 1999). Most teachers in the study had taught for at least

twenty years and may have been less familiar with more current theoretical approaches to school readiness. The teacher from Woodrow State School who was a more recent graduate drew on constructivist/interactionist beliefs to inform her practice. Although two Year 1 teachers in the study were also more recent graduates, they appeared to adopt 'school-ready' beliefs and practices. However in both cases, both teachers appeared to accept, or may have been limited by, the established status quo at each school site.

Banicky & Foss (1999), Harris & Sass (2007) and Smith, Gordon, Colby & Wang (2005) argue that one of the most important predictors of success for children is investment in teacher education and professional development. In discussing the Finnish education system, whose students have the highest educational outcomes in the world (OECD, 2003), McGaw in *Inform Articles*, noted the qualifications of its teachers:

(It's worth pointing out that Finnish teachers are highly educated – they all have a masters degree at the point of entry. It's not an extremely well-paid profession but it is very high status. It is almost as hard to get into teacher education as it is to get into medicine (2003, p. 1).

Research shows that there is a significant correlation between student outcomes and teacher quality as seen in teacher qualifications and continued professional development (Harris & Sass, 2007; Smith et al., 2005). Banicky and Foss argue, "Teacher quality has a greater impact on student achievement than class size, school climate, ability grouping, or location of the school" (1999, p. 3). The study clearly indicated through teacher's beliefs about school readiness and their resulting practices that they were not familiar with current understandings of school readiness nor were they familiar with the current literature on grade retention at any level of schooling. In this area at least, it appeared that teachers were not supported through continued professional learning.

Until recently, there have been no requirements in Queensland education for teachers to update their qualifications. As part of their registration requirements, teachers are now required to have a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to be eligible for continued teacher registration (Queensland College of Teachers, 2007). It has been recommended by the Queensland College of Teachers that teachers keep a professional learning record (2007). It would seem reasonable also, to finally recommend that educational investment be (re)directed towards teacher preparation and

continued professional development to enable teachers to maximise their efforts in preparing children for school.

## **7.5 Recommendations for Further Research**

The limitations of the study did not allow for other concerns to be raised in the study and recommends that they be considered for further research.

### **Children's perspectives on Pre-school retention**

While the study initially included children's perspectives on Pre-school retention, the interviews were discontinued for reasons previously discussed. While the sensitivity of the topic and ethical issues may preclude a study of this nature involving children, researchers such as Dockett and Perry (2003) have successfully incorporated children's perspectives in their research. Because children's perspectives can be different to those of adults and because issues such as Pre-school retention directly affect children, Dockett and Perry argue that it is essential to include children's views (2007) as practices that are provided for children may also need to be assessed by children.

### **Indigenous children**

The study commenced with the assumption that Indigenous children were more likely to be repeated at Pre-school than non-Indigenous children. Data from Education Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Education Queensland, 2007a; Education Queensland, 2003) and the case studies showed that Indigenous children were more likely to be repeated in Years 1 to 3 than non-Indigenous children and less likely to be repeated at Pre-school than non-Indigenous children. Further study might reveal why this is the case.

### **Longitudinal and comparison group studies**

The study did not set out to assess Pre-school retention practices, particularly in relation to their long-term benefits, and in relation to comparison groups. Further research of these practices, particularly in Australian schools, might reveal the efficacy of such practices.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

The study found that while Queensland in Australia has lower Pre-school retention rates than North Carolina in the United States, Pre-school retention rates are increasing and have more than doubled in Queensland state schools over the last decade. This trend represents a concern for several reasons. Firstly, the study found that Pre-school retention practices were underpinned by school-

ready discourse which devalued the cultural and linguistic resources of some children and positioned them in a negative way. At eight of the nine schools in the study, school and Pre-school retention practices were wholly or partly underpinned by school-ready discourse which required children to have particular cultural resources to commence school and to successfully participate in schooling. Through school-ready discourse, particular groups of children were more often positioned as ‘unready’ for school if they did not have the ‘correct’ cultural resources. They were discouraged from commencing school and participating in regular Year 1 classes, their cultural resources were devalued and their perceived deficits were highlighted.

Secondly, practices underpinned by school-ready discourse contradicted social justice policies in that they constrained some children’s entry to school ( Department of Education, Queensland, 1994a; Department of Education and the Arts, Queensland, 2005a), opposed current learning theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; CCS, 2007; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Janus & Offord, 2000; Pianta et al., 1999), opposed the recommended approaches by curriculum development bodies (QSA, 1998, 2005, 2007) and opposed the philosophies, policies and practices of early childhood education groups (NAECSSDE, 2000, NAEYC, 1997).

Thirdly, school-ready discourse resulted in a range of school and Pre-school retention practices which research warns offers few benefits for children (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Hong & Yu, 2006; Jimerson, 2001a, 2001b) and may be harmful (Jimerson, 2001a, 2004; Shepard, 1989; Temple et al., 2004). Further, these practices targeted particular groups of children such as boys, younger children, mobile children and children with little or no Pre-school experience. Although some children were Indigenous, from schools whose catchment areas were marked by families of low SES status and from Income support families, they were also children who were non-Indigenous, children from schools whose catchment areas were marked by families of middle and high SES status and children from Non-Income support families. The former groups of children in particular, already encounter challenges in education.

While the range of Pre-school and school retention practices represent the aspirational attempts of teachers and parents in the study to negotiate an educational terrain fraught with increasing accountability, an emphasis on children being ‘school-ready’ and contradictory educational policies, findings of the study suggest that practices underpinned by school-ready discourse may need to be reviewed. To optimise all children’s readiness for tomorrow’s world, the study recommends that teachers’ commitment to preparing children for school be better maximised through continued

professional learning so that a more positive approach to preparing children for school can be employed.

When teachers in the study drew on constructivist/interactionist discourse to inform their practices, all children's cultural and linguistic resources were valued, all children were positioned as competent learners 'ready' to commence school and thus, in a positive way. Gardenia State School and the Transition class programs that drew predominantly on constructivist/interactionist discourse were 'ready for the children'. This broader conceptualisation of school readiness focuses on the shared responsibility of families, schools and communities to prepare children for school (ARACY, 2007). It is further supported by current research (ARACY, 2007; Meisles, 1999), early childhood education departments (NAEYC, 1997) and curriculum bodies (QSA, 2007). As research has shown (Schweinhart et al., 2005; Schweinhart & Weikhart, 1997), proactive strategies that invest in quality early childhood programs rather than in retention practices yield not only positive school outcomes, but also positive life-long outcomes for children. Let the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth have the final word:

(I)nvestment in programs and services in early childhood brings the most powerful, most enduring and most cost effective results. School readiness ensures children start school on the best possible trajectory for later life. Considerable investment is required in the strategies, services and programs that support school readiness, but this investment reaps multiple gains that more than compensate for the financial cost (2007, p. 19).

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Asterisk (\*) denotes pseudonym used for school participating in the study.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Assessment Requirements of Children Entering School in Australian States (DEST, 2002)

State Territory Sector	Name of first year of formal schooling	Continuous or single entry	Minimum age of entry and cut off month	Entry assessment	Mandated or Voluntary
NSW	Kindergarten	single entry	5 years by Jan 1	Starting with Assessment Package	Government schools are encouraged to use the materials
VIC	Preparatory	single entry	5 years by April 30	Prep Entry Assessment framework	Recommended in government schools
QLD	Year 1	single entry	5 years on or before 31 June in the year before enrolment (commencing 2008)		
WA	Year 1	single entry		Literacy Net, Numeracy Net	Schools encouraged to use
SA	Reception	continuous intake	On fifth birthday or as soon after as practical	School Entry Assessment – Planning for Learning	Mandated in government
TAS	Preparatory	single entry	5 years by January 1	Kindergarten Developmental Checklist	Mandatory in government Kindergartens

## Appendix B

### Queensland Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Framework (Department of Education and the Arts, Queensland, 2005b, pp. 16-17).

Year	Assessment	Schools	Reporting
Each year	School-devised assessment. Access to a bank of assessment tools to complement school-devised assessment in Years P–10	All	Schools use a common framework for student reports with a 5-point results scale for reporting student achievement. Reports provided twice a year.
Prep	Children’s learning progress is monitored using the Early Learning and Development Framework (ELADF).	All state schools and most non-state schools.	At the end of Prep, parents receive a report on their child’s progress, based on the ELADF.
Prep–3	The Year 2 Diagnostic Net is a standardised tool used to map children’s development in literacy and numeracy.	All state schools and most non-state schools.	In Years 1, 2 and 3, schools provide a standard report about each student’s development in reading, writing and numeracy. The summary results of Year 2 students are also reported to Queensland Parliament.
3	All students in Year 3 participate in national tests of literacy and numeracy skills	All	Queensland Studies Authority provides a report to parents that shows the individual’s achievement in comparison to national benchmarks and state averages. School-level data reported annually to the community. Summary results are also reported to Queensland Parliament and in national reports.
4	All students in Year 4 participate in comparable assessment of the essential learnings.	All	Schools report to parents using a 5-point results scale. Summary results reported to schools, education authorities, and Queensland Parliament.
5	All students in Year 5 participate in national tests of literacy and numeracy skills	All	The Queensland Studies Authority provides a report to parents that shows the individual’s achievement in comparison to national benchmarks and state averages. School-level data reported annually to the community. Summary results also reported to Queensland Parliament and in national reports.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Assessment</b>	<b>Schools</b>	<b>Reporting</b>
6	All students in Year 6 participate in comparable assessment of the essential learnings. Every year a sample of Year 6 Queensland students participates in a national test on either English, Maths, Science, Civics and Citizenship or Information and Communication Technologies (one subject area covered each year).	All A sample of students is drawn from all schools.	Schools report to parents using a 5-point results scale. Summary results reported to schools, education authorities, and Queensland Parliament. Summary results are reported in state and national reports. Parents do not receive reports about individual student achievements.
7	All students in Year 7 participate in national tests of literacy and numeracy skills.	All	The Queensland Studies Authority provides a report to parents that show the individual's achievement in comparison to national benchmarks and state averages. School-level data reported annually to the community. Summary results also reported to Queensland Parliament and in national reports.
9	All students in Year 9 participate in comparable assessment of the essential learnings. All students in Year 9 participate in national tests of literacy and numeracy skills from 2007†.	All	Schools report to parents using a 5-point results scale. Summary results reported to schools, education authorities, and Queensland Parliament. The Queensland Studies Authority provides a report to parents that show the individual's achievement in comparison to national benchmarks and state averages. School-level data reported annually to the community. Summary results also reported to Queensland Parliament and in national reports.
10	Every year a sample of Year 10 Queensland students participates in a national test on rotating topics — to date, Science (2003), Civics and Citizenship (2004) or Information and Communication Technologies (2005). Every three years, a sample of Queensland students (aged 15 years) participates in international tests covering Reading, Mathematical Literacy and Scientific Literacy	A sample of students is drawn from all schools.	

Year	Assessment	Schools	Reporting
11-12	Moderated school-based assessment and the Queensland Core Skills Test	All	<p>The Queensland Studies Authority issues a Senior Certificate to eligible students completing Year 12, which records results in senior subjects, vocational education and training and other recognised learning. The Certificate also records a result for those students who sit the Queensland Core Skills Test.</p> <p>Tertiary Entrance Statements are issued to eligible students.</p> <p>The Certificate of Post-compulsory School Education (CPCSE) reports the results of students who are on highly individualised learning programs.</p> <p>School-level data reported annually to the community.</p> <p>Queensland Certificate of Education issued from 2008.</p> <p>Annual state-wide publication of Year 12 data by school from 2006.</p> <p>Annual survey of study, employment and other destinations of Year 12 students in the year after leaving school.</p>

# Appendix C

## Permission to conduct research in Education Queensland schools, 2000



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650/5(1)

Townsville North and West  
District Office  
Education Queensland

25 August 2000

Ms Robyn Anderson  
58 Macarthur Drive  
ANNANDALE Q 4814

Dear Ms Anderson

Your application to conduct research in [redacted] State School, [redacted] State School and [redacted] State School has been approved.

Approval allows you to approach these schools and other units within Education Queensland and to seek their cooperation to participate in the research. Although approval is granted, there is no obligation on the part of school principals or other Education Queensland personnel to participate.

A copy of this signed approval should be provided to school principals and others when cooperation is requested.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "R. Kane" followed by "for".

Ross Woodger  
District Director

cnr Walker and Stanley Streets  
Townsville  
PO Box 5179, TMC Townsville Qld 4810  
Telephone +61 7 4726 3111  
Facsimile +61 7 4726 3111

# Appendix D

## Permission to update research in Education Queensland schools, 2007



15 August 2007

Mrs Robyn Anderson  
202 Pasir Panjang Road  
#04-02 Landridge Condominium  
SINGAPORE 118572

Dear Mrs Anderson

I refer to your email of 13 August 2007 relating to collecting further data for your doctoral research and note you have Departmental approval to approach specifically named schools and other units within Education Queensland to seek their cooperation to participate in the research.

Provided that you stay within the parameters of the Departmental approval provided to you, I foresee no difficulty with your updating your data as proposed.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Darryl Kane".

Darryl Kane  
Principal Advisor Regional Services  
North Queensland Region

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North Queensland Region  
Department of  
**Education, Training and the Arts**  
Education Queensland

# Appendix E

The process employed in presenting data from Education Queensland for years 1997-2007.

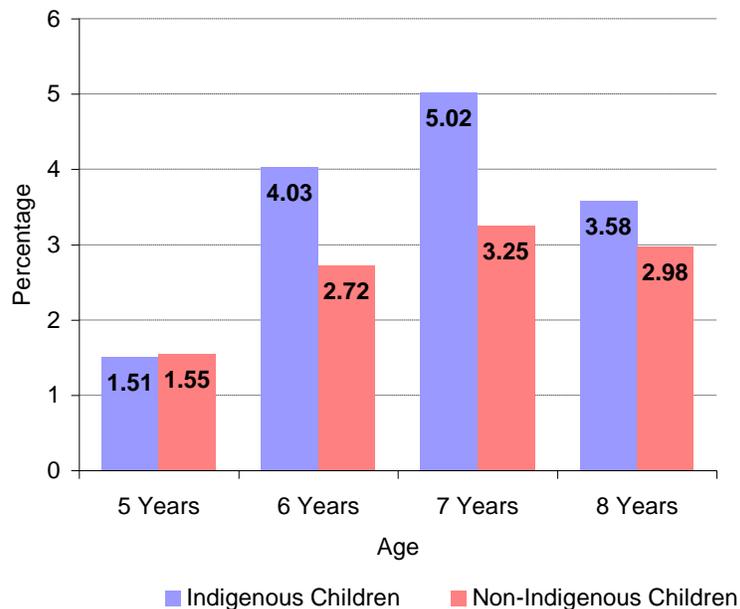
1. Example of data as downloaded from Education Queensland. The table shows that 528 male & female (All) Non-Indigenous students aged 5 years were repeated in Queensland state schools in February 2001.

Collection:	2001-Feb	
Sex:	Female & Male	
Repeats:	Repeating	
Age:	Age 5	
Attendance:	All attendance types	
Student Type:	Non-A&TSI	
	All Year levels Student Counts	Full-time Equivalent
All Locations [all]	528	273.4
Bayside District [BA]	27	13.5
Bundaberg District [BU]	2	1
Cairns and Cape District [CC]	15	8
Chinchilla District [CH]	1	0.5
Coopers Plains District [CP]	17	9.5
Corinda District [CR]	27	13.5
Darling Downs District [DA]	6	3
Emerald District [EM]	13	6.5
Fraser-Cooloola District [FC]	12	6.5
Geebung District [GE]	43	21.9
Gladstone District [GL]	17	8.5
Gold Coast North District [GN]	9	5.5
Gold Coast South District [GS]	13	7
Ipswich District [IP]	25	13
Isis Burnett District [IB]	15	7.5
Logan Beaudesert District [LB]	16	9
Longreach District [LO]		
Mackay Hinterland and North District [MY]	23	11.5
Mooloolaba District [MO]	21	11.6
Mt Gravatt District [MG]	20	10.9
Mt Isa District [MI]	11	5.5
Murrumba District [MD]	57	28.5
Nambour District [NA]	23	11.5
Rockhampton District [RH]	10	5.5
Roma District [RO]	7	3.5
South Burnett District [SB]	3	1.5
Stafford District [ST]	12	6
Tablelands-Johnstone District [TJ]	10	5.5
Toowoomba District [TO]	17	9
Torres Strait Islands District [TS]		
Townsville District [TV]	32	16
Warwick District [WA]	7	3.5
West Moreton District [WM]	17	9

2. When considered with the total number of Non-Indigenous male and female children aged 5 (34041), 528 repeated children represented 1.55%. Along with similar pages as the example above, the data was drawn together and constructed as tables to provide percentages for each group of children. Tables for each year such as the one below were constructed.

2001FEB AGE	INDIGENOUS			NON_INDIGENOUS			ALL		
	All	Boys	Girls	All	Boys	Girls	All	Boys	Girls
5yrs	35	24	11	528	365	163	563	389	174
	2318	1196	1122	34041	17499	16542	36359	18695	17664
6yrs	1.51	2.01	0.98	1.55	2.09	0.99	1.55	2.08	0.99
	108	63	44	1004	655	349	1112	718	394
7yrs	2682	1328	1354	36870	19155	17715	39552	20483	19069
	4.03	4.74	3.25	2.72	3.42	1.97	2.81	3.51	2.07
8yrs	146	89	57	1199	776	423	1345	865	480
	2909	1537	1372	36946	19100	17846	39855	20637	19218
	5.02	5.79	4.15	3.25	4.06	2.37	3.37	4.19	2.50
	103	67	36	1107	667	440	1210	734	476
	2880	1516	1364	37122	19190	17932	40002	20706	19296
	3.58	4.42	2.64	2.98	3.48	2.45	3.02	3.54	2.47

3. The figure below shows the data displayed in graph form: Comparison - Indigenous/Non-Indigenous Repeated Children Aged 5 to 8 February 2001 Queensland State Schools (Education Queensland, 2003).



**Indigenous/Non-Indigenous/All Children aged 5-8 repeated in Queensland Schools, February 2001**

# Appendix F

## Description of Case Study Sites and Participants

### 1. Introduction

Charmaz (2000) and Lincoln and Guba (2000) argue a qualitative, case study approach is best conducted in its 'natural' setting. A description of the case study sites is divided into three sections, Pre-schools that repeated children, schools that returned children to Pre-school from Year 1 and schools that provided alternatives to all forms of Pre-school retention. Pseudonyms were used for all school sites and participants.

### 2. Schools with Repeated Children

Three schools that were believed to repeat children were chosen. The schools were Maroochee State Preschool, Willow Park Kindergarten and Windemere State Preschool.

#### *Maroochee State Preschool and participants*

Maroochee State Preschool was located approximately four kilometres from Maroochee State School. Maroochee State School had a student population of around seven hundred and fifty students and comprised a variety of cultural groups including those from non-English speaking backgrounds (10%), those with English as a second language (2%) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (11%) (Maroochee State School, 2001, p. 2). Being in a well-established area of the town, both Maroochee State School and the off-campus Pre-school had extensive gardens and large shady trees. Parent groups at the school and Pre-school were responsible for the well-equipped, indoor and outdoor areas.

Janice was a permanent, part-time Pre-school teacher who had taught for approximately twenty years. She taught one Pre-school class two and a half days per week. Janice's Pre-school philosophy emphasized "the developmental progress of the individual child within the context of home and community" (Maroochee State School, 2001, p.9). To achieve the learning outcomes of the Preschool Curriculum Guidelines (Education Queensland, 1998) used at the centre, Janice employed a play-based program.

Two children in her class, Martin and Jaiden, were repeating Pre-school. Janice had been concerned about Martin before he commenced Pre-school, noting that he had been born in December. Coming

from an isolated property in Western Queensland, Martin had limited opportunities to socialise with other children before he commenced Pre-school. Following an end of the year screening test before the children commenced Year 1 Janice reported that Martin had a range of concerns which included poor fine motor skills, and an inability to recognize colours and numbers. She presented these concerns to Martin's mother, Felecia, who agreed to repeat Martin at Pre-school. Janice was similarly concerned about Jaiden who was also born in December, was emotionally immature and lacked a basic knowledge of shapes and colours. When Janice brought these concerns to the attention of Jaiden's mother, Marion, she was uncertain for a while but then agreed to repeat him at Pre-school (Field notes: Maroochee State School, 12-11-01). The learning support teacher was advised and the Guidance Officer was consulted. As there were sufficient places available for the children to repeat, it was decided that Martin and Jaiden would repeat Pre-school (Field notes: Maroochee State School, 12-11-01).

### ***Willow Park Kindergarten and participants***

Willow Park Kindergarten was a non-government, educational facility, affiliated with the Crèche and Kindergarten Association of Queensland. The centre was responsible to the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care and was advised by the Crèche and Kindergarten Early Education Consultant (Willow Park Kindergarten, 2001a). It was initially included in the study because it was a private Pre-school and possibly represented a different socio-economic group of repeated children. When the interviews commenced, it became apparent that the centre fostered a different Pre-school retention practice to one that was anticipated.

Its sessions incorporated Playgroup, Kindergarten and Pre-school. Children in the Pre-school group attended three full days per week. Being in one of the more established residential areas, the centre featured large shady trees, gardens, and surroundings that were well maintained and resourced. Although some children who attended the centre spoke English as a second language such as several Chinese and Spanish children, Indigenous children rarely attended the centre (Field notes: Willow Park Kindergarten, 28-11-01).

The Director, Fiona, had taught at Willow Park Kindergarten for ten years. Previous to her position as Director of Willow Park Kindergarten, Fiona was employed with Education Queensland. Fiona adhered to the developmentally appropriate philosophy of the Crèche and Kindergarten Association and used Education Queensland's Preschool Curriculum Guidelines (Education Queensland, 1998) as the basis for programming (Field notes: Willow Park Kindergarten, 28-11-01). She believed that

her Pre-school program at Willow Park was “exactly the same” as the state education system’s Pre-school program but admitted that during third and fourth term, she “provided a little more structure with the Pre-school group” (Field notes: Willow Park Kindergarten, 28-11-01).

Fiona believed that being a fee-paying institution, the centre attracted not only financially secure parents but ones who were also “very interested in their child’s education” (Field notes: Willow Park Kindergarten, 28-11-01). The Director believed this ‘interest’ may have been demonstrated in several ways, one of which included a desire for their children to “learn basic academic skills” (Field notes: Willow Park Kindergarten, 28-11-01). Fiona explained, however, that learning the alphabet was not a priority of the centre (Field notes: Willow Park Kindergarten, 28-11-01). Another way in which Fiona believed parents demonstrated their concern “about their children’s education” was to allow them to have an extra year of Pre-school before going to “a more structured learning situation” (Interview with Fiona, Director, Willow Park Kindergarten, 7). Fiona believed that younger children, in particular, needed more time before entering a more structured situation at school (Field notes: Willow Park Kindergarten, 28-11-01).

Although no children in the study attended Willow Park Kindergarten during the data collection stage, two children, Fraser and Bradley, spent their first year of Pre-school at Willow Park Kindergarten. Their second year of Pre-school was spent at Crestleigh State School, one of the schools in the study where children were returned to Pre-school from Year 1. Both the Director of Willow Park Kindergarten and the children’s parents made me aware that while the children were having a second year of Pre-school, they were not repeating Pre-school. Thus while Willow Park Kindergarten did not repeat children, which was clarified during the interview process, it remained in the study so that further insight might be gained into the voluntary practice of giving children an extra year of Pre-school.

Fraser’s mother, Chris, chose to give Fraser an extra year, as he was born in October. Bradley’s mother, Shelley admitted that she too, had considered two years of Pre-school for Bradley while he was still a baby because he was born in December. As both parents believed that being younger than their peers may place their children at a comparative disadvantage in schooling, they chose, along with many other parents at Willow Park Kindergarten, to give their children an extra year of Pre-school at a different location (Field notes: Willow Park Kindergarten, 01-11-01).

### ***Windemere State Preschool and participants***

Windemere State Preschool was located within the grounds of the Windemere State School. The school had approximately thirty teaching staff and five hundred and forty students. There were two Pre-school units with three classes of around twenty-five children in each class. The classes operated five full days per fortnight (Windemere State Preschool, 2001). The Pre-school rooms were spacious, air-conditioned and well-resourced. Being located on the outskirts of town in an established, rural-residential area, the Pre-school, as well as the school, had large, well-equipped playgrounds.

The Pre-school teacher, Gwen had taught Pre-school for approximately fifteen years. Gwen's program was based on the Preschool Curriculum Guidelines (Education Queensland, 1998) and implemented through an active, outdoors program balanced with an indoor period of play and several focused, group sessions (Windemere State Preschool, 2001).

To cater for children who attended Pre-school irregularly or who failed to reach the "competency level" required by the school for children to commence Year 1, and parents who were reluctant to repeat their children at part-time Pre-school, Gwen had developed a Transition program which had operated for six years (Interview with Gwen, Pre-school teacher, Windemere State Preschool: 4). Children in the Transition group effectively repeated Pre-school but on the days when Pre-school was not offered, they went to a Year 1 class, giving them full-time schooling status. Five children repeated pre-school. While Jason, Caitlin, Rebecca and Fintan were deemed eligible for the Transition program, Bradley, who had language delays, was considered ineligible for the Transition program.

### **3. Schools with Returned Children**

The schools with returned children included Raintree State Preschool, St. Christopher's College and Crestleigh State Preschool. The nine returned children commenced Year 1, but at some stage during the year they were returned to Pre-school to repeat. The time the returned children spent in Year 1 before they were returned to Pre-school to repeat varied from three days to six months.

### ***Raintree State Preschool and participants***

There were approximately fifteen staff and two hundred students at Raintree State School. The Pre-school was geographically disconnected from the main school and located diagonally across the road. The single unit classroom operated for two and a half hours each morning, five days per week.

Although twenty children were enrolled in the group at the beginning of the school year, no more than fifteen children were present each time I visited the Pre-school (at least ten occasions). The Pre-school room had an abundance of resources and appeared bright and spacious. It led outdoors to a large covered area and a shady, well-equipped playground.

The Pre-school teacher, Ewan, had taught for more than forty years. The Pre-school program was based on the Preschool Curriculum Guidelines (Education Queensland, 1998) and offered a child-centred, developmentally appropriate approach to learning. Ewan admitted that during his seventeen years at the school, he had developed strong attachments to the school community (Field notes: Raintree State Preschool, 05-09-01). Ewan believed that a certain stability characterized the Pre-school which was not only due to his and the Teacher-aide's (twenty-five years) length of time at the school, but it was also due to the purposeful fostering of a family atmosphere by everyone at the centre (Field notes: Raintree State Preschool, 05-09-01).

He described the families in the Pre-school's catchment area as a "mixed bag"; consisting of "low socio-economic groups", "business people" who liked to live in this area because it was "close to town", and some academics (Field notes: Raintree State Preschool, 05-09-01). Most of the families of the children attending the Pre-school were from two parent families and had "at least one parent working" (Field notes: Raintree State Preschool, 05-09-01). Ewan believed that the Pre-school had good parent support, as evidenced by the fact that it was "rare" to have "under ten parents at any Parent Group Meeting" (Field notes: Raintree State Preschool, 05-09-01). The Pre-school not only had a good relationship with the Pre-school Parent Group, but also with the school, both of which provided resources such as air-conditioning, a television, a computer and a range of outdoor equipment.

Ewan went on long service leave during part of the data collection stage and was replaced by Janet, a relief teacher in her mid-thirties. After the school year commenced, three Year 1 teachers at Raintree State School had requested that three children be returned to Pre-school. Sam and Tammy, who had both taught for more than twenty years, worked part-time, sharing the same Year 1 class. Marie, another Year 1 teacher with around five years teaching experience, taught full-time. Sam admitted that because so many children were not ready for Year 1, the Year 1 teachers had devised a form letter (see Appendix P). If children were identified as 'unready' when they commenced Year 1, a letter was despatched to parents explaining that their children were "not yet ready for the more formal setting, or academic activities undertaken in Year 1" (Appendix P). Sue, the Acting

Principal, negotiated the return of 'unready' children to Pre-school with parents (Field notes: Raintree State Preschool, 05-09-01).

After the Pre-school session finished each morning, two of the returned children, Jacob and Tanya, joined a Year 1 class for the afternoon. Julian, the other returned child, was not considered mature enough for a Transition program and went home after Pre-school. Julian's mother, Juanita, received ongoing assistance from social workers, psychologists and speech pathologists from various government agencies for herself and her children. Ewan believed she had contact with the people from such agencies because others in the community had reported suspected child abuse (Field notes: Raintree State Preschool, 05-09-01). Julian, one of the returned children had "a severe language disorder" and "behavioural difficulties" (Report in a letter from Townsville District Health Service: Child Youth and Mental Health Services made available to me by the Pre-school teacher). While Julian's mother was reluctant to have him returned to Pre-school from Year 1, she agreed to return him after an incident where he was to be suspended from school for behavioural problems (Field notes: Information about Raintree State Preschool, 05-09-01).

Phillip was the father of Tanya, who was returned to Pre-school because of her "immaturity, speech and co-ordination problems" (Field notes: Raintree State Preschool, 05-09-01). Both Tanya's parents were upset by her return to Pre-school (Field notes: Raintree State Preschool, 05-09-01). Clarrie was the grandfather of Jacob, another returned student. Jacob's grandparents had assumed responsibility for his care (Field notes: Raintree State Preschool, 05-09-01). The relieving Pre-school teacher, Janet, explained that Jacob had been returned to Pre-school because of his "behaviour" and that his grandparents were "well aware of his aggressiveness" but "were willing to co-operate with the school" in regard to his "being returned to Pre-school" (Field notes: Raintree State Preschool, 07-06-01).

### ***St. Christopher's College and participants***

St. Christopher's College provided "a distinctively Christian education" (St. Christopher's College, 2001b, p.1). While the school did not require church attendance or commitment to a particular religious denomination, it did require parents to support the mission statement of the school, which was "to provide a Christ-centred education for children from various local churches and the wider community" (St. Christopher's College, 2001b, p. 1). Approximately four hundred children from Kindergarten through to Year 12 attended the school. At St. Christopher's College, the Pre-school

class was called a Preparatory or Prep class. There were two Preparatory classes of around twenty-five children, each class with a teacher and a full time Teacher-aide.

The Prep classes were offered three full days per week. Education Queensland's Preschool Curriculum Guidelines (Education Queensland, 1998) was used as the "basis for programming" (St. Christopher's College, 2001b, p. 4). Upon entering Prep at the beginning of the year, children were "given a range of tests to determine their strengths and weaknesses and remediation programs (were) tailored to suit the specific needs of the children" (St. Christopher's College, 2001b, p. 2). At the end of the Prep year, children were again screened to ensure their readiness for Year 1. To enter Year 1, children were required to have such skills as recognizing numerals to 20, recognizing letters of the alphabet, knowing initial alphabet sounds, counting to 20 and writing their full name. Along with an "academically focused" Prep class and a "fairly advanced standard in Year 1", parents of the returned children noted other valued features of the school which included: "frequent reporting to parents"; a "good behaviour management program"; and "a strong focus on the academics, particularly in the basics" (Field notes: St. Christopher's College, 08-11-01).

At St. Christopher's College, the Prep classes were overseen by Sarah who had taught in early childhood education for more than twenty years. Sarah qualified as a teacher in the United States and incorporated many of the Pre-school practices of the United States, such as testing children before Prep and Year 1, into her practice in Australia. Sarah believed in the importance of screening children to ascertain their level of development as they entered the Prep year. If children did not meet the requirements of the Prep year, they were provided with support throughout their Prep Year. If tests revealed that they were unable to meet Year 1 entry requirements, parents were advised of the necessity to repeat their children in Prep.

Mary, the Year 1 teacher at St. Christopher's College, had taught there for three years. If children had difficulty with the Year 1 program, Mary advised parents to return the children to Prep where they could learn the necessary pre-Year 1 skills (Field notes: St. Christopher's College, 08-11-01).

Carmel was the mother of Daniel who had been returned to the Prep class after commencing Year 1. Daniel had gone into Year 1 from Pre-school "without knowledge" of his "letters, sounds and number concepts" (Interview with Sarah, Prep teacher, St. Christopher's College, 4). Although Daniel's parents had been advised of his poor end of the year test results, they advanced him to Year 1. Sarah believed that Daniel's parents sent him to Year 1 because they wanted him to be "in

Year 1 and at school five days a week” instead of the three days a week that was available in the Prep class (Interview with Sarah, Prep teacher, St. Christopher’s College: 16). Daniel’s parents resisted his being returned to Prep from Year 1 until midway through the year when his behavioural difficulties reached a stage where he was taken out of Year 1 and returned to Prep (Field notes: St. Christopher’s College, 08-11-01).

Sharon was the mother of Esther who was returned to the Prep class at the end of first term. Like Daniel, Esther went from a state Pre-school to Year 1, skipping the Prep class where letters, sounds and number concepts were learned. Sarah had advised Esther’s parents against sending her to Year 1. When it had become apparent that Esther was unable to cope with Year 1, Mary asked Esther’s parents if they would allow her to be returned to the Prep class. As Esther was becoming so upset in Year 1, her parents agreed to return her to the Prep class (Field notes: St. Christopher’s College, 08-11-01).

Lydia was the mother of Hannah who had come from a Year 1 class at a state school where she had been struggling with the Year 1 work. Hannah came to St Christopher’s College mid-way through the year. It was suggested, following a test, that Hannah be returned to Prep so that she might be better prepared to commence Year 1 the following year. When Hannah was offered a five-day-a-week Transition program, Lydia readily agreed to this arrangement (Fieldnotes: St. Christopher’s College, 08-11-01).

### ***Crestleigh State Preschool and participants***

Crestleigh State Preschool was in the same grounds as the school. The school had a stable teaching staff of around thirty-five teachers and an enrolment of six hundred students. The school and the Pre-school had been well-resourced over the twenty years since its establishment. Four Pre-school classes operated for two and a half days per week with approximately twenty-five children in each class. The Pre-school grounds had well-established gardens with a generous supply of shady trees, well-maintained gardens, lawns and outdoor equipment. The rooms were air-conditioned and its many resources included six computers, video, television and camera equipment.

The Preschool Parent Group was very active and supportive, and over the years had been responsible for the purchase of the Pre-school’s many resources and general improvements. Most of the children had a least one parent in paid employment, although in many cases both parents worked on a part time or full time basis (Field notes: Crestleigh State School, 21-10-01). Parents

were generally a mixture of “professionals” and those with “skilled trades” (Field notes: Crestleigh State School, 21-10-01). The school as a whole had an Indigenous student population of around seventy children (Field notes: Crestleigh State School, 21-10-01).

The Pre-school teacher-in-charge, Melanie, believed that the school had a “good name in the community for two main reasons: it focused very much on the academics and it had a sound behaviour management program” (Field notes: Crestleigh State School, 21-10-01). According to the 1999 –2001 School Survey of Parent Satisfaction, parents at the school were generally very happy with most aspects of the school.

Melanie believed that parents at the Pre-school were interested in their child’s education and often enquired about the philosophy of the Pre-school and the nature of the program. There was also “a growing expectation by a number of parents to provide a more structured approach to Pre-school” (Field notes: Crestleigh State School, 21-10-01). While the Pre-school adhered to the Preschool Curriculum Guidelines (Education Queensland, 1998) and provided a developmentally appropriate, play-based approach to learning, the early childhood teachers from Year 1 onwards appeared to favour a more structured approach to learning and teaching (Field notes: Crestleigh State School, 21-10-01). There was an unwritten expectation by many Year 1 teachers that children would enter Year 1 ‘ready’ to begin formal learning (Field notes: Crestleigh State School, 21-10-01).

Melanie had taught for more than thirty years, teaching Pre-school for fourteen of those years. Kate, Toni and Rachael were the Year 1 teachers who had taught the returned children. Kate and Toni had taught for between five to ten years each, while Rachael had taught for almost forty years. Because the Year 1 teachers believed that children should be ‘ready’ to begin learning when they commenced Year 1, three children, Nicholas, James and Grant, who were deemed ‘unready’ for Year 1, had been returned to Pre-school.

Thel was the mother of Nicholas who was returned to Pre-school during his first week in Year 1 (Field notes: Crestleigh State Preschool, 21-10-01). Melanie had suggested to Thel that Nicholas might have difficulty meeting the expectations of the Year 1 program due to his general immaturity. Thel, however, preferred to advance Nicholas to Year 1 (Field notes: Crestleigh State Preschool, 21-10-01). Three days after Nicholas commenced Year 1, his teacher, Kate, suggested to Thel that Nicholas be returned to Pre-school to repeat. As he experienced considerable difficulties in Year 1, Thel agreed to return him to Pre-school (Field notes: Crestleigh State Preschool, 21-10-01).

Rebecca was the mother of James. As James had come from interstate halfway through the year, there was some indecision as to where to place James although he was the correct age for Year 1. After two weeks of observing James in Year 1, the Deputy Principal suggested that he be sent back to Pre-school for the morning and join the Year 1 class for the afternoon. Jacob's mother was happy with this suggestion.

Mavis was the grandmother of Grant who came to the school half way through the year. As Grant was the correct age to begin school, he was placed in Year 1. After two weeks, the teacher, Rachael, suggested to Grant's grandmother, Mavis, that he be returned to Pre-school for the remainder of the year. Mavis agreed and Grant completed the remainder of the year at Pre-school in the morning and Year 1 in the afternoon (Field notes: Crestleigh State Preschool, 21-10-01).

#### **4. Schools that Provided Alternatives to Pre-school Retention**

The three schools that provided alternatives to all forms of Pre-school retention were Riverview State School, Woodrow State School and Gardenia State School. These schools sought an alternative approach to preparing children for school, particularly at Riverview State School and Woodrow State School where large numbers of children were considered 'unready' for school.

##### ***Riverview State School and participants***

Riverview State School was located on the outskirts of town in a semi-rural location. The surrounding suburb lay adjacent to the river, which was one of the more beautifying features of the area. Generally speaking, Riverview was a low-cost housing area, providing homes for a number of families who received income-support. More recently, the school had seen a decline in numbers, which placed teaching staff at around twenty-two and a student population of four hundred and thirty students.

While Riverview State School had two Pre-school classes, it also had a Preparatory class. This had been an initiative of the Principal who saw a high need to develop a program that could support the growing numbers of children who were unable to cope with the demands of a Year 1 program (Field notes: Riverview State School, 19-04-02). The Preparatory class provided "early childhood education programs" to "help prepare children for school ... by providing a full time additional year of school between Pre-school and Year 1" (Riverview State School, 2002b, p. 13). The Preparatory class was offered to children who required "further development in readiness for formal schooling" (Riverview State School, 2002b, p. 13). The Transition class was set up "instead of repeating Pre-

school” and to provide for the growing number of children who were ‘not ready’ for Year 1 (Field notes: Riverview State School, 19-04-02).

Various Transition class models had been trialled since the idea was first conceptualised but the full-time Transition class was believed to be the most successful. In the Transition model at Riverview School, the children remained in the same classroom all day to ensure stability in the program and for the children (Field notes: Riverview State School, 19-04-02). Because many children in the Transition class were Indigenous, an Indigenous Teacher-aide was employed. Children in the class were, according to the teacher of the Transition class, generally from “low income and/or large families” (Field notes: Riverview State School, 19-04-02). Some children from the school’s Special Education Unit joined the Transition class for some of the time. Either a teacher or a Teacher-aide from the Special Education Unit assisted the children from the Special Education Unit while they were in the Transition class. A speech pathologist and an occupational therapist also supported the children (Field notes: Riverview State School, 19-04-02).

The Transition program was based on the Year 1 curriculum but was modified to meet the needs of the Transition children. As the program focused on developing core skills and concepts that would enable children to successfully commence Year 1 the following year, areas of the Year 1 curriculum such as science were given a lesser priority (Field notes: Riverview State School, 19-04-02). The Principal at the school, Josie, initiated the Transition program at Riverview State School because of the “need in the community” (Field notes: Riverview State School, 19-04-02). The Transition program was not set up to replace Year 1; it was set up as a full-time alternative to repeating children at Pre-school so that they were prepared for Year 1 (Field notes: Riverview State School, 19-04-02). As most parents preferred their children to be in full-time schooling rather than repeating Pre-school two and a half days a week, a full time Transition class was established (Field notes: Riverview State School, 19-04-02). Josie’s vision for the early years of schooling at Riverview had been influenced by her experience in New Zealand where children went to Kindergarten from three and a half years of age. Kindergartens, in the schools where Josie had previously worked were similar to Pre-schools in Queensland. When the children went to primary school on their fifth birthday, they entered a reception class that was not unlike the Transition class. When children were able to master a core set of skills and concepts in the Transition class they were admitted to a Year 1 class. Transition class at Riverview State School was based on this approach. Josie believed that the early years of schooling should not be hurried but allow for flexibility and a good grounding in the basics (Interview with Josie, Principal, Riverview State School, 54).

The Transition class teacher, Meg had taught for more than thirty years. She taught Year 1 for many years and was very familiar with the core requirements of the Year 1 curriculum. She had combined these requirements with the children's needs to develop a program that she believed might better prepare 'unready' children to meet the demands of the Year 1 classroom (Field notes: Riverview State School, 19-04-02).

The Transition class children were selected by the Pre-school teacher and the Year 1 teachers. Many of the children in the Transition class had either attended Pre-school irregularly or not at all. As such, it was assumed by the Year 1 teachers that such children would not have the readiness skills to successfully commence Year 1 (Field notes: Riverview State School, 19-04-02).

### ***Woodrow State School and participants***

Woodrow State School was a large established school that catered for a diversity of student groups. It had grown over the years from a one-teacher school to a large school with around forty teaching staff and well over nine hundred students. It was situated in a very picturesque part of the river and, having been established for some time, boasted many large, shady trees and lush, tropical gardens.

The Transition class at Woodrow State School was formed when the Pre-school teacher identified a large number of 'high risk' children at the Pre-school who were about to commence school (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02). Because children who attend Woodrow State Preschool most often attend Year 1 at Woodrow State School, it was decided that these children might be better supported as a group in a Transition class (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02).

As the Transition class operated in a demountable (a temporary classroom) shared with a Year 1 class, the physical space necessary to operate a Transition class with a play-based approach to learning was limited. While a classroom for the Transition group had been available at the Pre-school, the Transition class was purposely located at the school to avoid the possible impression that the children were repeating Pre-school (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02). While teaching space was an issue, and budget allowances for teaching resources were minimal, a full-time Indigenous Teacher-aide was available through funding (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02). Assistance was also given to most of the children through the Support-a-Reader, Writer, Number Program from which the children could receive one-on-one assistance from a Teacher-aide employed for this purpose (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02).

The Principal, Kurt, who had more than thirty years experience in education, was very supportive of the Transition class. Kurt believed that through a more activity-based approach to learning provide through the program in the Transition class, children, who were “not ready...to pick up on formal learning” could be supported to reach Year 2 (Interview with Kurt, Principal, Woodrow State School, 35).

The Deputy Principal, Jade, who had nearly thirty years of experience in teaching, was similarly supportive of a Transition class to assist children who had a range of ‘delays’ in key learning areas. Jade felt that “too much formal stuff” happened “too quickly” (Interview with Jade, Deputy Principal, Woodrow State School: 19). Jade believed that in the Transition class, the children could cope better, as there was “less pressure” than in a regular Year 1 classroom and they were with other children “who were emotionally and academically at their level” (Interview with Jade, Deputy Principal, Woodrow State School: 19).

The Transition teacher at Woodrow State School, Ruth, was specially chosen for the task when the need to form such a class arose (Interview with Kurt, Principal, Woodrow State School: 35). Because Kurt believed that a teacher with a “developmental focus” was required for this task, Ruth, who had not long graduated from university, was chosen and was more than happy to assume the position (Interview with Kurt, Principal, Woodrow State School: 31). Ruth found the task of devising a suitable program for the Transition class difficult, as there were “no guidelines” (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 10-04-02). Ruth admitted that although this was difficult, she devised a program based on the Preschool Curriculum Guidelines (Education Queensland, 1998) for the first term before progressing to a more structured program (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02). The Transition program focused primarily on the needs of the children for whom language development, numeracy and social-emotional development were key considerations (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02). Although the class did not begin with a Teacher-aide, it became apparent after the third day that to run a ‘developmentally appropriate’, play based, Transition class, a Teacher-aide was necessary (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 10-04-02).

The issues for which these children required “extra support” ranged from academic to behavioural (Interview with Kurt, Principal, Woodrow State School: 35). The Transition teacher believed that “many of the children did not even have the basic living skills” which was generally related to language and communication skills (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02). Many of the children had language problems which Rachael attributed to their use of English as a second

language (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02). Because most of the children in the class were Indigenous, some parents initially believed it to be an “Aboriginal class” (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02). Following some initial misunderstandings about the Transition class, the school administration commenced a campaign to enlighten both teachers and parents about the nature and purpose of the ‘Transition class’ (Field notes: Woodrow State School, 19-04-02).

### ***Gardenia State School and participants***

Gardenia State School was a relatively small primary school with a student population of one hundred and eighty-four students (Education Queensland, 2000). The children who attended Gardenia State School were thirty-seven percent European, forty-four percent Aboriginal, fourteen percent Torres Strait Islander and five percent South Sea Islander (Gardenia State School Improvement and Accountability Framework, 2003-2005). There was a mobility rate of eighty-three percent, usually between Gardenia State School and Palm Island, the Cape and the Torres Strait islands (Gardenia State School, 2002a). English was often a second language (Gardenia State School, 2002a).

The school placed a high emphasis on its integration with the community as “both the staff and students (had) close connections with the local community” (Gardenia State School, 2002b, p.1). The school was actively involved in “Newspapers in Education, the local Police Beat, the CWA’s Country of Studies Program, and NAIDOC” as well as the “local Community Centre”(Gardenia State School, 2002b, p.1). The community regularly used the school’s sporting facilities and school grounds. The integration of the school and community, through two parent liaison officers, who were also Teacher-aides at the school, had been largely responsible for the virtual elimination of chronic absenteeism at the school (Field notes: Gardenia State School, 11-10-02).

Gardenia State School had a general, unwritten policy of not repeating children at school. Aware that such approaches may impact negatively on children’s self esteem, staff at Gardenia State School adopted alternative approaches to ensuring children achieved success at school (Field notes: Gardenia State School, 11-10-02). Children were supported in-class through eleven Indigenous tutors funded by DETYA (Fieldnotes: Gardenia State School, 11-10-02). The federally funded school tutors, along with the Soundway Program, the Gardenia Reading Improvement Program, small class sizes and teacher enthusiasm for such initiatives were attributed to the demonstrated improvements in student outcomes in reading, writing and spelling (Education Queensland, 2000b,

Gardenia State School Information Leaflet, 2002). Through their “unique Whole School Literacy Plan”, Gardenia State School won the National Literacy Awards in 1999, 2000 and 2001 based on documented improvements in student’s literacy standards (Gardenia State School, 2002a). In 1999, Gardenia State School was the “state winner for national literacy week, based on the success of its literacy improvement program” (Education Queensland, 2000, p. 85). The many community organisations, volunteers and members that liaised with the school enabled the school’s literacy programs to be grounded in a meaningful context (Field notes: Gardenia State School, 11-10-02). A specialist teacher was employed to develop a Cultural Studies Program that has an Indigenous emphasis (Field notes: Gardenia State School, 11-10-02).

Lance, the Acting Principal, had taught for more than twenty years. He had taught for many of those years at his current school which his children also attended. Ella was one of the Indigenous Teacher-aides at the school and was a highly regarded elder in the community. She was one of the school’s major links with the community. Ella, now a grandmother, had maintained links with the school for more than thirty years when her own children attended the school (Field notes: Gardenia State School, 11-10-02).

### **Conclusion**

The description of the case study sites and participants provides a glimpse the context from which the stories of repeating children at Pre-school have been constructed. The practices provided in each of the schools were different to what I initially believed was occurring in the schools. Within a context of increasing accountability, teachers and some parents were attempting to find alternative ways to prepare children for school other than by repeating them at Pre-school. Teachers are attempting to find different ways of drawing upon funding to support children in their learning at school. Gardenia State School provides at least one example of a school that has rejected all forms of school and Pre-school retention and was able to achieve sound educational outcomes for children (Education Queensland, 2000; Gardenia State School, 2002a).

# Appendix G

## Example of a letter sent to District Directors requesting permission to conduct research in schools

The Director Catholic

Education Roadsville

Dear Ms Pink

I am a Preschool teacher employed at Gumtree State School. I am currently undertaking research for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at James Cook University. As a requirement of my study, I am investigating Preschool practices that support children's successful from Preschool to Year 1. The title of my research is, "The impact of the school's philosophy in catering for children in the transition from Pre-school to Year 1".

I am writing to obtain your permission to contact the principals and particularly the Preschool teachers in a number of Roadsville Catholic schools to invite them to participate in this project in February 2001. The schools I wish to contact are St Matthew's Catholic School, St Mark's Catholic School, St Luke's Catholic Community School, St John's School, St Paul's Catholic School and St Peter's Catholic Community School.

At this stage of the research, I am asking that Pre-school teachers complete a preliminary survey which describes their perceptions and experiences of children's transition from Pre-school to Year 1. I believe that the outcomes of this research will contribute to a better understanding of the issues that relate to children's transition to school and may provide information that will assist both students and teachers.

I look forward to your cooperation in this matter and ask that you write, fax or e-mail me with your approval.

Yours Sincerely

Robyn Anderson

Teacher, Gumtree State School.

# Appendix H

## Example of permission letter sent to School Principals, Day-care and Kindergarten Directors

The Principal

Bottlebrush State School

Dear Maree

I am a Preschool teacher employed at Gumtree State School. I am also undertaking research for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at James Cook University. As a requirement of my study, I am investigating Preschool practices that support children's successful transition from Preschool to Year 1. The title of my research is, "The impact of the school's philosophy in catering for children in the transition from Pre-school to Year 1".

I am writing to obtain your permission to contact the Preschool teachers in your school to invite them to participate in this project. I have received approval from the District Director (please see attached letter) to carry out the research, however I will only involve schools where both principals and teachers are comfortable and supportive of the project.

At this stage of the research, I am asking that Pre-school teachers complete a preliminary survey which describes their perceptions and experiences of children's transition from Pre-school to Year 1. You will know, 2010 Queensland State Education argues that development of reforms *should be based on further quality research into the needs of Pre-school children* (p. 16). As a teacher, I understand that research must be informed by practicing teachers to be worthwhile. I believe that the outcomes of this research will contribute to a better understanding of the issues that relate to transition and may provide information that will be of assistance for both students and teachers.

I look forward to your cooperation in this matter and ask that you pass this letter onto your preschool teacher and write, fax or e-mail me with your approval.

Yours Sincerely

Robyn Anderson

Teacher, Gumtree State School.

# Appendix I

## Reply form sent to Principals, Day-care and Kindergarten Directors

Dear Robyn

I have read your request to conduct research in my school and I have viewed the approval from the District Director.

Permission is granted to conduct the research in this school \_\_\_\_\_

Permission is not granted to conduct the research in this school \_\_\_\_\_

Principal's Signature

.....

**Fax to:** 7777 7777

**Post to:** Robyn Anderson  
Gumtree State School  
Azure Street  
Gumtree QLD 7777.

**E-mail:** robyn.anderson@jcu.edu.au

# Appendix J

## Survey form for Pre-school Teachers

### PRESCHOOL REPEATS

Preschool \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. How many children have been repeated in the last three years in your Preschool group?

1998 \_\_\_\_\_

1999 \_\_\_\_\_

2000 \_\_\_\_\_

2. How many of these repeated children were:

Boys \_\_\_\_\_

Late birthdays \_\_\_\_\_

Indigenous \_\_\_\_\_

Low socio-economic status \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

3. How would you describe the life circumstances of these children?

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4. What were the main reasons for these children repeating?

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5. Who was the main initiator in this process? (eg parent, teacher, guidance officer, etc)

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6. What process / method / test/s was / were used to determine whether the children should repeat?

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7. What were the main benefits of these children repeating?

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8. Were there any disadvantages to these children repeating?

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9. Were any particular strategies or programs used for these children?

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10. Do you believe repeating was the best alternative for these children?  
If yes, why? If no, why not?

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11. Have you heard of any other alternatives to children repeating?

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12. Do you have any comments regarding this topic?

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*Thank-you for your time and support.*

## PRESCHOOL RETURNS

**Preschool** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_

1. How many children have been returned to your Preschool group from Year 1 in the last three years?

1998 \_\_\_\_\_

1999 \_\_\_\_\_

2000 \_\_\_\_\_

2. How many of these returned children were:

Boys \_\_\_\_\_

Late birthdays \_\_\_\_\_

Indigenous \_\_\_\_\_

Low socio-economic status \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

3. How would you describe the life circumstances of these returned children?

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---

---

4. What were the main reasons for these children being returned?

---

---

---

5. Who was the main initiator in this process? (eg parent, teacher, guidance officer, etc)

---

6. What process / method / test/s was / were used to determine whether the children should be returned?

---

---

7. What were the benefits of these children being returned?

---

---

8. Were there any disadvantages to these children being returned?

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---

9. Were any particular strategies or programs used for these children?

---

---

10. Do you believe returning was the best alternative for these children?  
If yes, why? If not, why not?

---

---

11. Have you heard of any other alternatives to children being returned to Preschool?

---

---

12. Do you have any comments regarding this topic?

---

*Thank you for your time and support.*

# Appendix K

## Information letter sent to Pre-school Teachers

Date

Dear

I am currently studying part time for a Doctor of Philosophy degree through James Cook University of North Queensland. As a requirement of my study, I am undertaking a research project that will consider the transition of children from Pre-school to Year 1.

The study will look at a range of issues surrounding the transition of children from Pre-school to Year 1, including ways in which the school might assist with the transition difficulties some children experience. Children's characteristics and aspects of their background will be considered in the study.

Participation in this study is voluntary and schools or participants will not be identified in the study by name. Only pseudonyms will be used. I can also guarantee that strict confidentiality will be maintained at all times.

Data collection for the study will begin in November 2000 and finish in December 2002. During this time, survey forms, will be kept securely in a locked cabinet after datum have been analysed and stored for the required period of five years, after which all forms will be destroyed. If you are willing to be involved in this study, you will need to sign the attached consent form.

Yours Sincerely

Robyn Anderson

Teacher, Gumtree State School.

# Appendix L

## Information letter to Parents

Date

Dear

I am currently studying part time for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at James Cook University of North Queensland. As a requirement of my study, I am undertaking a research project that will look at the transition from Pre-school to Year 1.

This study will look at the ways your child's school provides for children in this transition, particularly children who may experience transition difficulties. I would like to discuss with you and if possible your child as well, how the process at this school has aided your child's transition into Year 1. I would like you participate in the study and be interviewed along with your child.

Participation in this study is voluntary and no school or participant will be identified by name. Only pseudonyms will be used. I can also guarantee that strict confidentiality will be maintained at all times.

Data collection for the study will begin in November 2000 and finish in December 2001. During this time, interview recordings and notes taken from interviews will be kept securely in a locked cabinet. On publication of the study, tapes and notes will kept in a locked cabinet for a further five years, due to the requirements of the university, before being destroyed.

If you and your child are willing to be involved in this study, please sign the following consent form.

Yours Sincerely

Robyn Anderson

Teacher, Gumtree State School.

# Appendix M

## Information letter to Teachers, Principals and Guidance Officers

Date

Dear

I am currently studying part time for a Doctor of Philosophy degree through James Cook University of North Queensland. As a requirement of my study, I am undertaking a research project that will look at the transition of children from Pre-school to Year 1.

This study will look at the background of these children as well as the ways in which the school provides for this transition, particularly the children who may experience difficulty. I would like to discuss/observe/document some of the issues relating to the children in these transitions.

Participation in this study is voluntary and schools or participants will not be identified by name. Only pseudonyms will be used. I can also guarantee that strict confidentiality will be maintained at all times.

Data collection for the study will begin in November 2000 and finish in December 2002. During this time, survey forms, interview recordings and notes taken from interviews, classroom observations and document analysis will be kept securely in a locked cabinet. After data have been analysed and stored for the required period of five years, all tapes and notes will be destroyed.

If you are willing to be involved in this study, please sign the following consent form.

Yours Sincerely

Robyn Anderson

Teacher, Gumtree State School.

# Appendix N

**Consent Form for Teachers, Principals and Guidance Officers and Parents.**

**JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY OF NORTH QUEENSLAND  
SCHOOL OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN STUDIES  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

Consent to participate in research

**Project:** The impact of the schools philosophical positioning in catering for children in the transition from Preschool to Year 1.

**Principal Investigator:** Robyn Anderson

**Supervisors:** Dr Sue McGinty

Associate Professor Nola Alloway

The aims of this study have been clearly explained to me and I understand what is required of me. I know that taking part in this study is voluntary and I am aware that I can stop taking part in it at any one time and may refuse to answer any questions.

I understand that any information I give will be strictly confidential and as only pseudonyms will be used it will not be possible to identify me with this study.

NAME (Print) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. If you require further information about this research, please do not hesitate to contact me.**

# Appendix O

## Interview Questions

### Interview A - Parents of children who are repeated or returned to Preschool

- 1) Can you tell me about your child?
- 2) What does your child like to do at home?
  - Alone,
  - With you, others.
- 3) What were the main reasons for her/him being repeated/returned to Preschool?
- 4) Who arranged for your child to repeated/returned to Preschool?
- 5) Was school administrative staff involved in your child repeating/being returned to Preschool?
- 6) How do you feel about her/him being returned to Preschool to repeat the year?
- 7) What do you know about repeating Preschool/other year levels?
- 8) Has repeating Preschool helped her/him? How? How not?
  - Academically
  - Socially
  - Emotionally
  - Speech
  - Gross motor
  - Fine motor
- 9) Have there been any problems with her/him repeating?
- 10) Has s/he enjoyed coming back to Preschool this year?
- 11) Did your child have any special help to help at school/Preschool this year?
- 12) Do you think repeating/returning your child to Preschool this year has been the best decision?
- 13) Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

### **Interview B - The Child Returned to Pre-school from Year 1**

- 1) What did you like to do when you were in Year 1?
- 2) What were you good at doing when you were in Year 1?
- 3) Who did you like to play with?
- 4) Did you like coming back to Pre-school?

### **Interview C - The Child Repeating Pre-school**

- 1) Did you like being able to come back to Pre-school again this year?
- 2) What are you good at doing at Pre-school?
- 3) Who do you like to play with at Pre-school?
- 4) Would you like to go to Year 1 next year?

### **Interview D - Teachers and School Personnel Involved with Repeating and Returning Children.**

- 1) Can you tell me about the family:
  - Social and cultural background
  - Parent's work
  - Parent's education
- 2) Can you tell me about the child:
  - Academically
  - Socially
  - Emotionally
- 3) What were the main reasons the child was repeated/returned?
- 4) How did the parents feel about their child repeating/being returned to, Pre-school?
- 5) How was it decided that the child should repeat/be returned to, Pre-school?
- 6) How did you approach the parents about the child repeating/ being returned to Pre-school?
- 7) How did you determine whether the child should repeat/be returned to, Pre-school?
- 8) Did the child receive special assistance in any areas?
- 9) In what ways has repeating/ being returned to, Pre-school helped the child?

# Appendix P

## Form Letter from Raintree State School

Dear

After much observation of \_\_\_\_\_ in the classroom, we feel that \_\_\_\_\_ would benefit greatly from additional time at our Preschool.

\_\_\_\_\_ has shown that \_\_\_\_\_ is not yet ready for the more formal setting, or academic activities undertaken in Year 1. We believe the Preschool will provide an environment more suited to \_\_\_\_\_ developmental needs. It will also reinforce and enable \_\_\_\_\_ to practise many of the social behaviours and formalities expected of \_\_\_\_\_ at the Primary School.

(The Preschool teacher) has a place available for \_\_\_\_\_ in the morning session from 8.45am to 11.15am, commencing

The Preschool aides will walk \_\_\_\_\_ back to school to join \_\_\_\_\_ class for the remainder of the day.

Please see (the Class Teacher) to finalise arrangements and return the form below. (The Preschool teacher) will organise a time to meet with you also.

Looking forward to your support and a happy, successful time for \_\_\_\_\_ at the Preschool.

Yours in caring,

PRINCIPAL

STLD Teacher

Class Teacher

.....

I/we give permission for ..... to attend Preschool and have made arrangements for an adult to drop .....at the Preschool at 8.45am each school day.

Signed: ..... (Parent/Caregiver) Date: .....