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BACHELOR OF ARTS SINGLE HONOURS
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE
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Abstract

The study reported here is an exploration of practitioner and child perceptions of school readiness within a reception class in an urban area of Birmingham. The aim was to expose the concept as a complex and multidimensional construct and highlight the misplaced emphasis from the government. This study asked; how is school readiness defined? What factors affect a child being ready for school? And how can a child be made ready for school? Ethical approval was sought and gained from Newman University and protocol for ethical consideration of working with children and practitioners took place throughout. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews with practitioners of varying job roles provide a contrast of expectations. Observations with set focus points took place to observe how the children felt during school transitional stages. Documentary analysis was undertaken to investigate how school readiness is presented within policy and their impact in this particular setting. Qualitative thematic analysis of the data indicated that the influence of ‘good parenting’ and preschool experience were the two main factors affecting a child’s school readiness within this setting and the presence of social constructivist theories noted. Findings conclude that there are various factors affecting school readiness, these are acknowledged within the study however, definition of school readiness, good parenting and preschool are presented in depth and analysed critically. It is argued that the child should not be made ready for school but the school should be preparing for the individual child; this debate continues and is discussed further.
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Common Abbreviations

- **EYFS** Early Years Foundation Stage
- **EYFSL** Early Years Foundation Stage Leader
- **KS1** Key stage one
Introduction

Formerly considered as an invariable construct that is inherent within a child, it is now broadly acknowledged that School Readiness is influenced by a wide range of external factors including preschool experiences, the child and their environment, socioeconomic background and age (Jeon, Buettner and Hur, 2014, p.718; Pears et al, 2014, p.431; Doyle, Finnegan, and McNamara, 2012, p.371). Schaub (2015, p.47) acknowledges that there are various components to school readiness and therefore it is a broad yet sometimes controversial term. This is illustrated by the coalition government having implemented changes to sure start programmes and two year old child care provisions, in a bid to allow more children to have the right guidance and support in preparation for school. Parenting style was identified as the single largest factor affecting this, and in particular associating those in disadvantaged families as high risk of being inadequately prepared. This claim suiting their individual behavioural discourse (Cronin, 2015) and allowing them to manipulate parents into thinking that professionals are better equipped to teach their children than they are. This concept is widely disputed by practitioners, parents and academics as research has shown that positive parental involvement in the early years is crucial to a child’s development and later academic success (Henderson and Mapp 2002, p.13; Baldock et al, 2009, p.116; Campbell and Smith, 2012, p.V). Due to its complexity it is recognised that school readiness has no clear definition and therefore allows for the concept to be interpreted by the individual, leading to inconsistent expectations of children and their families. The present study seeks to
extend the literature by exploring the factors that affect school readiness in young children living in urban Birmingham and what is understood of the concept by the practitioners who work there. This research asks what are practitioner and child perceptions of school readiness, How do they define school readiness? What are the factors that affect school readiness? And how can a child be made ready for school? As a researcher with a summer born child currently in reception, issues of school readiness have been and still remain a worrying concern. Therefore this research will provide an invaluable insight just prior to the upcoming transition into year one. For the setting and its staff, this research hopes to raise awareness of such a multifaceted concept, ensuring each unique child is recognised as such and their individual needs continuously met. This research was carried out in an ‘Outstanding’ (Ofsted, 2013) reception class within an infant school in an urban area of Birmingham. The setting was smaller than the average primary school consisting of 229 pupils, aged 3-7. The majority of pupils were White British but there were a number of pupils from various ethnic minority backgrounds. The reception class pupils were aged four to five years.

An ecological approach (Hay, 2015, p.14) to school readiness will be taken within this study focusing on the relationships surrounding the child in context, including the parent-child relationship, the home-school environment and relationships across home and their early educational experiences. The bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005) provides the overarching conceptual framework within which children are believed to develop in various intertwined systems that exert an influence over the child. Originally developed as the ecological model,
Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2005) developed his theory to recognise the symbiotic and reciprocal relationship that exists between the child and their environment. This approach is strengthened by Vygotsky’s (1978, p.7) social constructivist theory, which identifies the child as a social being and acknowledges the importance of an individual’s ability to construct meaning from their social interactions and experiences (Levine & Munsch, 2011, p.49). A Case study approach (Mukherji and Albon, 2015, p.101) was chosen focusing on four children based on gender, preschool experience and age, and four practitioners based on their experience and job role within the setting. Trainor and Graue (2013, p.16) suggest this will provide in depth research on the factors affecting school readiness. A thematic analysis (Guest, Macqueen and Namey, 2012, p.10) of the findings was conducted to provide qualitative data. The Qualitative approach is suggested by childhood studies as the most useful when researching with children (McKechnie et al, 2004, p282) compared to the quantitative approach which depending on sample size can be argued to be generalizable to wider society and therefore have a greater impact on shaping practice. However, quantitative research does not provide the in depth discussion surrounding the issue, which is what this study sought to achieve. To accomplish the research aim the methodology consisted of documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews with practitioners, along with observations of the four pupils selected.

This section has introduced the current school readiness study providing both a professional and a personal rationale for the research; this has provided the context in which the study was undertaken. The key aims and objectives have been clearly identified and the methodological approach briefly presented as to how these will be
reached and will be discussed further in the methodology section. The next chapter will review relevant and current school readiness literature, acknowledging what is understood by the school readiness concept; the child and their experiences, a child’s age and government influence through policy. This will ensure the research is informed and an in depth knowledge base gained to ensure the research questions are addressed.


**Literature Review**

This literature review is a critical analysis and interpretation of the current literature that relates to school readiness; (Aveyard, 2010, p.9). Ridley (2012, p.3) defines it as the section where connections are made with extensive reference to relevant research and theory, this will allow the researcher to reach an informed position for the proposed study. Adler and Clark (2007, p.487) argue this will justify the proposed research by addressing previous studies on and around school readiness, the themes and issues that are present within this area of study and whether any techniques or research methods can be adapted to fit the research purpose. Hart (2001, p.2) reiterates this by suggesting there are two areas of literature to search for; those relevant to the topic enabling the researcher to gauge definitions, research questions and scope and those on methodology and data collection techniques, providing assumptions, arguments and debates. This was utilised within this research. Rubin and Babbie (2010, p.143) insist that the literature review is one of the most important aspects of a study, Hart (1998, p.1) concurs that without the literature review a researcher cannot acquire the knowledge needed to understand the topic thoroughly and therefore will not address relevant issues within their study. This review will form the basis of the research design and with its thorough in-depth analysis of recent research and literature surrounding school readiness will ensure a relevant and valid study. It will focus on what is understood by the school readiness
concept, the child and their experiences, a child’s age and the government influence through policy. This will ensure the research is informed and an in depth knowledge base gained for the research questions to be addressed.

**Defining School Readiness**

The current Coalition government defines school readiness in the Early Years Statutory Framework as ‘the broad range of knowledge and skills that provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life’ (DfE, 2014, p.5). Based on this definition and the recent implementation of state funded childcare provision for two year olds, the underlying political ideology lays emphasis on the utilitarian discourse (Arnold, 2015, p.169) that school is a preparation for life and work. Therefore it could be argued it is reinforcing the conservative behaviourist view (Down and Smyth, 2012, p.71) that within today’s society vulnerable families are impoverished due to their own decisions and actions and do not provide the right foundation for their children. Implying that disadvantaged children are further condemned as they are not effectively prepared for school. Numerous studies have made an attempt to define their perception of school readiness; Mistry *et al* (2010, p.433) Welsh *et al*, (2010, p.44) believe the cognitive skills and social-emotional competence of pre-school children play a significant role in their successful transition into formal schooling. It is agreed that socio-emotional competence is vital in a child’s ability to cope with the demands of the classroom. It enables children to make friends and communicate their emotions and needs effectively. Fitzpatrick (2012, p.334) further develops this by suggesting it refers to a child’s maturity and their ability to negotiate the classroom demands. This definition recognises each child as an individual but does not recognise the evident age gap with in the
classroom which arguably affects a child’s maturity. Meisels (1999, p.52) suggests that there are two perspectives by which to approach school readiness: the empiricist and the interactionist. The empiricist views readiness as factors that lie outside the child which Carlton and Winsler, (1999, p.138) suggests that preschools are positioned, in order to provide the children with the knowledge, skills and experiences needed to ensure their academic success. This is supported by Linder, Ramey, and Zambak, (2013, p.1) who discuss the concept of school readiness as encompassing the learning processed and expectations of what children should know and should do upon entry to school. The interactionist approach believes readiness to be co-constructed by both the child and the school (Meisels, 1999, p.49). These approaches highlight the current debate; should the child be made ready for school or the school prepare for each unique child. It could be argued that a more interactionist approach would benefit both the child and the setting as it allows parents to be in partnership with the school. Epstein and Sanders (2006, p.87) suggest that, as practitioners, communicating with families, having active co-operation and sharing of information between all parties is a necessity in order to reach higher levels of academic success, as the specific needs of the individual can be identified. However, with the current demands on teacher’s and children within the classroom the empiricist approach is unavoidable. It is clear that school readiness is a broad and complex area for which there is no precise definition particularly within the research context (Dockett, Perry, and Kearney, 2010, p.6). For the purpose of this research, school readiness is defined as not only the expected cognitive skills required but physical, social-emotional and language competence in order for them to cope with the demands of the classroom; this has been
amalgamated from research carried out by Winter and Kelly, (2008, p.260), Halle et al (2012, p.613) and McTurk et al, (2011, p.69). This was chosen as it provides a holistic definition to a child’s school readiness. However, throughout the research the debate will be presented whether the child should be made school ready or the school should be preparing for the child. In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature and research based upon the factors that contribute to a child’s school readiness (Jeon, Buettner and Hur, 2014, p.718; Pears et al, 2014, p.431; McGettigan and Gray, 2012, p.15). It could be suggested that the Coalition Government and its emphasis on school readiness has festered a growing concern with regards to the concept and how it is understood. Therefore researchers have endeavoured to clarify what is meant by school readiness and discuss several factors they have found to affect this.

School ready for child or child ready for school “too much, too soon”

In England the compulsory age school age for children is five (DfE, 2014, p.3), however, many begin school aged 4. ‘Too much Too Soon’ Campaigners (Save The Child Movement, 2013) argue that England’s effective four year old starting age is too early for formal schooling and a more balanced holistic approach should be implemented in order to support these crucial years. According to Bingham and Whitehead (2012, p.88) when compared to 90% of the world’s nations having a starting age of 6/7, with countries such as Finland and Denmark annually topping academic tables, evidence suggests that early admission to school does not support a child’s academic success in the long-term. Studies carried out by Sakic, Burusic and Babarovic, (2013, p.652), Bedard and Dheuy, (2006, p.1469) and Hutchinson
and Sharp, (1999) explore the effects of entrance age and academic success; findings suggest that older pupils usually outperform the younger members of the class. However, a recent study by Carroll and Cunningham (2011, p.488) in the UK, provided evidence to suggest that is not necessarily the case. By testing literacy skills of children formally taught in state schools from the age of four compared with those taught in Steiner schools with formal literacy introduced at aged 7, findings suggest that both groups seemingly progress at a similar rate. However, it could be argued that the research was comparative of not only age but the approach taken; therefore it would be reasonable to assume that differing teaching methods could also have affected these findings and has been conveniently unacknowledged to suit the research purpose. As overwhelming evidence from numerous studies by Huang and Invernizzi, (2012, p.431), Muhlenweg and Puhani, (2010, p.408), and Black, Devereux, and Salvanes (2008, p.14) argue that although short-term it may not benefit children to delay formal tuition, by allowing children time to develop emotionally and socially in the long-term these skills are learnt and applied more effectively. Bedard and Dhuey (2006, p.2) supported by research carried out from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (Crawford et al, 2013, p4), state that due to the magnitude of the age range on the first day of school, summer-born children are distinctively disadvantaged, for example a child born in August, 11 months younger than that of a child born in September are subjected to the same assessments and expectations. Heckman et al (2006, p.3) suggests that these early relative age differences can cause long-lasting effects because the maturity advantage puts them in a better position to accumulate more skills, be selected for higher ability groups, therefore progressing through curriculum more rapidly. Piaget (1956) suggests that
at age 6, there is significant cognitive development which enables a child to process information and forms the basis for complex thinking. In England, the transition into the formal learning of KS1 coincides with this proposed phase. De Lemos (2002, p.1) proposes that the debate with regards to the process underlying this transition still continues, however she concurs that there is a general agreement that this significant shift in a child’s thinking takes place between the ages of five and seven. By specifying a particular age at which this occurs and discussing development within age categories leaves Piaget (1956) open to major criticism. By suggesting that only cognitively mature children due to age will be able to comprehend the demands of more complex lessons, an enormous number of children are therefore conversely expected to experience difficulty. However, it is widely recognised through various literatures (Beckley, Elvidge, and Hendry, 2009, p.77; Nicol, 2010, p.72; Mayesky, 2011, p.263) that children mature and develop at different rates and in a variety of ways.

Eivers et al, (2010, p.851) advocates that being the youngest in the year can seriously damage a child’s self-esteem and confidence, stating that a year is a substantial amount of time in the early years. This is reiterated by Bradshaw and Tipping (2010, p.80) who suggest that children’s social and emotional development is an extremely important factor contributing to a child’s academic success. However, this supports the argument that it is not solely reliant on the particular age of the child, but what socio-emotional skills the child has in order to cope with the demands of the classroom. The research must recognise each child as unique as some summer-born children may outperform or be just as capable as their autumn
born peers, which suggests that the early years’ admission system should be structured for the individual child rather than a blanket system which creates disadvantage.

**Government Influence on School Readiness**

Since the Coalition government came in to power in May 2010, there have been many significant policy developments in relation to the early years’ sector including the introduction of the revised EYFS (DfE, 2012 & 2014) and the state funded provision for two year olds. From September 2013, under the Coalition government, the 15 hours free child care provision for three year olds was to be extended to two year olds who meet certain criterion (DfE, 2013). Linking parenting classes to the provision for two year olds from the most disadvantaged families, to highlight their target intervention. Identifying with the conservative behaviourists view (Down and Smyth, 2012, p.71), Murray (1986) argues, implies poverty is caused by individuals, that poor people are not self-sufficient and independent due to their morals (cited in Lister *et al*, 1996, p.25). A study carried out on parenting styles compared with child character development found that the tough love approach was the most effective and provided evidence to suggest this was less frequently used in disadvantaged families (Lexmond, Reeves, 2009, p.56). Within this research 59% of parents questioned could not be categorised, therefore suggestions were based on 41% of the families involved. MP Graham Allen released his Early Intervention report (2011) which was based on this flawed research, and whose recommendations found their way into new policies and strategies as they suited the government’s promotion of the new Sure Start (Shields, 2009, p.11). It could be argued their suggestions implied parents within these families are incapable of giving their children the best
start at home, indicating that schools and teachers provide better quality learning in comparison to other provisions (McGillivray, 2014). Therefore such provision will ensure school readiness giving children a better opportunity to thrive and ultimately strengthen their employability insinuating that the state knows what’s best for all children. In reality Moss (2013, p.102) suggests that teachers are not ready to provide care for the specific needs, and vulnerability of the age range. Therefore this is a concerning prospect for those who advocate children needing a caring, loving and nurturing environment and amplifies the debate of the UK imposing formalised schooling too soon.

Under the Coalition, the EYFS statutory framework (DfE, 2012 & 2014) has been revised twice. In 2012, the main findings of the Tickell review (2011, p.4) were implemented which claimed to have reduced the burden of the EYFS by decreasing the learning goals from 69 to 17 in order to simplify them and make them more effective. It could be argued that this reduction in fact further complicated the remaining 17 goals. The reduction in guidance justified under the false premise that teachers would have more control on how these were interpreted, however expectations of both the teachers and children were raised. In reality this led to more pressure and confusion. Hayward (2011) of Pen Green research base, one of the most respected in the country, criticise the government for not accurately translating the recommendations of the Tickell review; stating the tone now is very regulatory and there is a greater emphasis on school readiness. The loss of focus on play and understanding of how children learn is concerning as it promotes a tick box practice which does not support weaker practitioners. Therefore by not inspiring the
early year’s workforce, encouraging practitioners to reflect on their practice and to get to know children and their families it effectively creates less opportunities to tackle the issues the government is striving to address. A further recommendation was the six areas of learning being changed to seven but with the focus placed on three prime areas, suggesting that these are essential in preparing the child for school (Baldock, 2009, p.33) these being; communication and language, physical development, and personal, social and emotional development. This provides a welcomed focus on communication and language in the early years, Shah (2011) from the children’s communication charity ‘I CAN’ argues this enhances a child’s ability to make friends and improves educational attainment. However, in reality the aspects of focus within this learning goal seems to be more about how they follow instruction, their understanding of what they are told, and how they narrate back to the listener to show their understanding, rather than their ability to communicate with peers or express themselves freely. This highlights the utilitarian discourse (Arnold, 2015, p.169) once more. Revised further the EYFS (DfE, 2014) seemed to add focus on privatisation giving clearer guidelines for child minders (Cremin and Arthur, 2014, p269), and eliminating the requirement for a risk assessment policy, special educational needs policy or behaviour management policy. It could be argued that this was a regression rather than improvement as all areas still need to be recognised and it is left up to the setting to prove this when required. Furthermore, the focus on slimming down has lost important and useful guidelines for practitioners, effectively making the EYFS an impossible ‘one size fits all’ curriculum. This places children in a concerning position, good practitioners will not allow this to affect their individualised approach to practice yet for those who need
extra support it could prove detrimental. House (2011, p.4) highlights concerns surrounding the argument of ‘too much too soon’ suggesting that within the EYFS (DfE, 2014) the essence of the Birth to Three matters 2003 principles had been lost inside school readiness ideology.

**The Child and their environment**

Research carried out by McGettigan and Gray (2012, p.16) suggests that school readiness is not dominated by developmental stage theories; indicating specific ages as representatives for maturity and readiness to learn. They propose that children obtain readiness-associated capabilities from the social relationships they experience from parents, teachers and peers. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory (1979, 2005), supports this by seeing the child as a social being, providing a framework outlining the influences surrounding the child which affect their experiences and their unique development. Strengthened by Vygotsky (1978) and his social constructivist theory placing great importance on the individual’s ability to construct and make sense of their social interactions both at home and in school. Further supported by Lemelin et al., (2007, p.1855) advocating that school readiness and academic achievement are predominantly shaped by environmental factors. It is suggested by Belsky, Pasco Fearon and Bell, (2007, p.1233) that these ecological and transitional theories of child development affect a child’s engagement within the classroom, identifying that supportive parents encourage children in sustaining their attention enabling them to develop these skills in preparation. Supported by the EPPE Project (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2008), whose findings concurred that irrespective of age, attending preschool showed a positive influence on later
educational attainment. Research carried out by Feldman (2009, p.545) and Marcovitch and Zelazo (2009, p.2) suggests that important transitional stages also occur throughout the preschool period, which identifies that the early experiences of a child are fundamentally important in their preparation for school.

Research by Jeon, Buettner and Hur (2014, p.718) found that the family and the socioeconomic background had a direct correlation to the child’s cognitive ability and increased risk of social-emotional problems. A limitation to this study and the questionable validity of its results being that data surrounding the home environment and children’s social skills were reported from the parents, allowing for exaggeration and elaboration of the facts, furthermore the majority of participants within the study were middleclass therefore the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population. However, Dupere et al (2010, p.1228) recognise that there are vast international studies to support that family factors and social background are influential in a child’s school-readiness and future academic success. Research carried out by Doyle et al, (2012, p.382) suggests that there is a significant difference between how teachers and care-givers measure a child’s school readiness suggesting that parents rate children as more socially competent, more mature and with higher levels of cognitive and language skills. There are various explanations for this and it is important to highlight that the child at school may be a different child to that at home. Parents may understandably carry bias towards their own child and over exaggerate their abilities. However, the expectations, behaviours, and responsibilities may differ between home and school e.g. the child may be a carer for a parent or family member and when attending school are finally able to act like
a child. This presents the debate as to whether it should be the child that is made ready for school or if in fact the school should prepare for the individual child. Highlighting the immense importance of good communication and continuity between home and school, Epstein and Sanders (2006, p.87) suggest that as practitioners, communicating with families, having active co-operation and sharing of information between all parties is a necessity in order to reach higher levels of academic success, as specific needs can be identified. In a study carried out by Sahin, Sak and Tuncer (2013, p.1711), semi-structured interviews were carried out with practitioners, findings identified the family as the most effective people in the school readiness process, they presented a broad definition of school readiness taken from key words mentioned by teachers; ‘school readiness relates to the physical, social/emotional and cognitive readiness of the child, their understanding of language and the self-help skills they possess’. Furthermore challenges to the school readiness process were identified as conducting academic activities throughout the transitional stages and managing behaviours. They also provided suggestions for an effective school readiness process aimed at parents, children and teachers; summarised as children should attend preschool, parents should co-operate with teachers and share information as well as provide continuity at home, and preschool teachers should share information effectively with reception teachers.

Research carried out by Duncan et al, (2007, p.1428) measured school readiness as the academic skills the child has acquired prior to entry including; oral language and conceptual ability as well as a foundation knowledge of numbers. They insist that the consequent poor readiness for school reflects a lack of quality early learning
experiences. Reiterated in the EPPE project carried out by Siraj-Blatchford et al (2008, p24) the quality and type of pre-school provision available can affect a child’s social and cognitive development. Research by Geoffroy et al, (2010, p.1363) found that children from families with low education levels showed consistently lower scores on four standardised readiness tests which included; cognitive school readiness, receptive vocabulary, mathematics, and reading performance in comparison to that of highly educated families unless they had received formal childcare. Providing evidence to suggest that quality preschool experiences can reduce cognitive inequalities between disadvantaged and advantaged children, therefore supporting the government agenda to increase provisions for disadvantaged children as a preventative measure to attenuate effects of children’s expected academic results. Aside from the clearly concerning concept of measuring a child’s ability to be school ready it is clear that there are numerous factors affecting school readiness which this study does not begin to address prior to testing therefore it is irresponsible to generalise their findings.

**Summary**

This literature review has explored the vast evidence encompassing school readiness concluding that it is a complex and multidimensional concept, which is relevant and current in today’s society. With the current political ideology having a set focus on educating parents, and implying that they are to blame if their child is not ready for school. This is not immediately reflected in today’s pedagogy within the classroom however, family are still recognised as one of the key factors in preparing children
for school and the expectations from teachers of parents to support their child is evident. There are various factors influencing a child’s readiness for school; age, social background, pre-school experiences, which reiterates the dramatic impact a child’s environment, has on their development and highlights the disadvantage for younger children (Lijuan, 1999, p2; Collins et al, 2000, p221; Morrison and Cooney, 2001, p146). However, with no agreed definition of the concept it is unclear how this can be consistently measured. The preventative measure of quality preschool has been promoted which underlies government agenda (H.M. Government, 2010, p.29) to ensure disadvantaged children are provided with better early experiences to help close the achievement gap, supporting their behaviourist notion that parents are unable to provide them with the experiences needed to achieve (McGillivray, 2014).

The literature explored in this section has provided evidence to support and inform the current research study. The next section will present the research design and the methodologies used to investigate this issue further.
Methodology

This section will provide a systematic theoretical analysis of the research design outlining the most appropriate approach undertaken for this research project, and providing justifications for the methods chosen. Ethical considerations, sampling and sample selection will also be discussed in depth, along with data collection tools and method of analysis rationalised. Research allows for a critical and systematic investigation in a specific issue or phenomena in order to inform future judgements or decisions on the subject, Johnson and Christenson (2012, p.5) suggest there are five types of research and the purpose of the proposed study will determine which is undertaken, they are identified as; basic research, action research, applied research, evaluation research and orientational research. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p.73) suggest that the research design must be fit for purpose, reiterated by Murkherji and Albon (2014, p.1) who propose that within any research the methods need to be justified by the researcher as to why their design is the most appropriate. Therefore the current methodology will justify the proposed design. Furthermore, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p.4) suggest that through research we discover the truth by combining both experience and reasoning, therefore research in early childhood is critical to the essential reflection on practice to make an impact on the policies affecting the pedagogy and ideologies within today’s classrooms.

This research aims to focus on the perspectives of children and practitioners, to explore what is understood by the term ‘school readiness’ and the impact of this, if
any, on practice. The intention of this methodology is to outline the research design and the approach taken; the research methods will be described and analysed, informed by school readiness studies, the limitations will be presented in its attempt to clarify the supposition. It sought to build and improve on these to eliminate any prior weaknesses so as to formulate an appropriate research design to gain the objective set. Due to the nature of this study and the focus upon the participants’ perceptions an interpretivist paradigm was used, based on the philosophical premise that there is a practical knowledge interest in making sense of the social world by the use of a variety of perspectives. Calderhead and Shorrock, (1997, p.101) suggest that within education it’s likely the interpretivist paradigm would assume the form of a case study, whereby opinions, experiences and documents may be interpreted to form a valid conclusion. Humphrey (2010, p.9) argues, studies set within this paradigm can generate a more holistic truth about the specific topic and its reality and disputes the existence of the dominant or proposed ultimate ‘truth’. By ascertaining practitioner and child perceptions this study hopes to uncover the truth behind school readiness; what is understood by the term in practice and how this impacts upon the child. It is recognised that within the interpretivist paradigm a study’s reliability may be compromised as it is unlikely that if the study were to be replicated that the same phenomena would be uncovered in comparison to that of a positivist paradigm which takes on a more systematic, scientific approach (Murkherji and Albon, 2014, p.11). However, the multiple methods used known as triangulation (Robert-Holmes, 2014, p.74) should increase its reliability and allow the researcher to reach a better understanding of the research topic, as there is no intention for the results of this study to be generalised. The in depth data collected from this study
will provide an insight into the complex concept of school readiness. The literature surrounding school readiness will be extended but the researcher will gain invaluable knowledge to apply to their professional practice. The setting, practitioners, parents and children will benefit from the study as awareness of school readiness will be gained, so that in the future they can work together to provide the most appropriate support for each individual child as they enter school.

**Research Approach**

The Qualitative approach was selected for this study; Potter (2009, p.21) suggests qualitative methodologies with a small holistic focus produce descriptive data surrounding the individuals and the setting in which the research takes place. Furthermore, Bell (2005, p.7) describes qualitative research as a method which focuses on people’s relationships, their perceptions and insights into the world. Merriam (2009, p.1) believes that qualitative research due to its focus on discovery, insight and understanding offers the most valuable data, making the largest difference to practice and people’s lives. Due to the holistic focus of this study and its small sample size, Denscombe (2010, p.238) suggests qualitative research is the most appropriate method in order to carry out the ‘thick’ description required. Therefore this is the most applicable approach for this research study as it focuses on individual’s understanding of the school readiness concept and the impact this has on their world, with the fundamental aim being to discover and interpret this meaning to provide valuable findings. The current study attempts to elicit Reception teachers and their pupils’ views about school readiness through observations and interviews in contrast to that of government ideology identified in policy documents.
Tummons and Duckworth, (2013, p.9) suggests that a case study allows for a deeper investigation into a particular real-life situation, as we seek to better understand the issue gaining further in-depth knowledge of the subject we are exploring, which provides the most appropriate approach in order to conduct this small scale project. Yin (2009, p.18) along with Cohen et al (2000, p.185) support this by suggesting the case study approach is chosen to delve into a real life phenomenon and within context, proposing that identifying clear boundaries and highlighting a specific focus, can eliminate other complex variables enabling us to analyse data extensively. Furthermore, Blaxter et al (2006, p.74) state that a significant advantage of a case study is that they are constructed on existing practices and experiences relating to action; the findings and insight gained can contribute to changing practice. This study may not impact on wider practice due to the approach chosen and small sample size, however if it can raise awareness of school readiness and it’s possible changes will be made in the setting to improve practice and benefit the children who attend there. However, Russ-Eft and Preskill (2009, p.174) propose that the disadvantage of a case study focusing on such unique scenarios can be the possible presence of evaluator bias as well as being extremely time consuming. Measures were taken to ensure that the researcher was neutral to the setting and therefore did not input any judgements throughout the data collection and analysis. An action plan was adhered to in order to ensure the research was carried out within the time frame. Research by Brown (2013, p.559) uses the case study to provide insight on the issue of school readiness and discuss the impact of policy makers; justifying their small sample size by using instrumental stakeholders from the community to help illuminate the potential impact. They
advocate that the case study provides an in depth examination of the issues, and by asking focussed and concise questions, rich and detailed information can be gained. Brown (2013, p.560) claims that the sample used was representative to the community, therefore they do intend to generalise their findings. However, with a sample size of nine, it could be argued further studies must take place with a larger number in order to generalise to the wider population. Within this research study no generalizations will be made due to the small sample size but the research will be used to benefit the researcher, the immediate setting and its children therefore still worthwhile. School readiness is a complex and multi-dimensional concept; it could be assumed that many teachers and children hold a multitude of different opinions on the topic; therefore the case study is the most appropriate approach.

**Participants**

The sampling strategy used was purposive, in order to fulfil the research objectives the participants chosen will need to be strategically selected to ensure the data collected is relevant and purposeful (Walliman, 2011, p.418; Roberts-Holmes, 2011, p.71). It is reiterated by Whitley and Kite (2013, p.489) that the purposive sample is most frequently used in case studies as it allows the researcher to guarantee that their research will answer the questions posed and that the sample chosen is of special interest to the researcher. Within this research the practitioners chosen were of different ages, different backgrounds and qualified to a range of different levels, ensuring a broad spectrum from which to gather the evidence. This triangulation of perspectives was presented and analysed, further validating the study and ensuring its reliability. However, the teaching assistant provided suggestions for child
participants based on age, their background and preschool experiences in order to provide a range of results; this consisted of four children, mixed gender. A critique of the purposive sampling strategy in this instance would be the possible presence of bias within the selection process, as the practitioner having prior knowledge of these pupils within the setting and the types of answers they may give could have led to the selections made. In a study carried out by Kotaman (2012, p.545) a purposive and convenient sample was used to ensure that the sample chosen were people who had experience of the phenomena of school readiness and therefore could provide relevant and valid information. Within the current study the sample was chosen purposely from a reception class in order to observe children who had experienced starting school and were preparing for their transition into year one. EYFSL, teacher and teaching assistant were chosen as it is their role to support and facilitate the range of abilities on entry to school and provide equal opportunities for all pupils in their attempt to prepare them for the formal schooling they will receive in year one. The head teacher was interviewed in order to illuminate the ethos of the school surrounding this issue and also to ascertain perspectives from a wide range of levels.

**Research Methods**

Woodside (2010, p.6) suggests that to gain an in depth understanding within case study research, multiple research methods must be executed across various time periods. For the purpose of this study non-participant observation with children were chosen, semi-structured interviews with practitioners and documentary analysis of both the EYFS (DfE, 2012, 2014) and ‘Are You Ready?’ Ofsted report (2014). The majority of data will come from semi-structured interviews, as the teachers are the
gatekeepers of this research. Raworth et al. (2012, p.3) suggest that semi-structured interviews provide a clear purpose, with well thought out questions, ensuring the collection of data is appropriate to the study, without conflicting the natural flow of conversation. Four interviews were carried out with practitioners identifying their perceptions of school readiness; how they define it and exploring their own understanding of the concept. Each interview lasted 15-20 minutes and took place during spring 2015 at a convenient place and time determined by the practitioners, the interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. Bryman (2012, p.470) suggests that within semi-structured interviews there is probability interviewees will deviate from the specified line of questioning therefore compromising the reliability and validity of the measurement. This was addressed by giving each practitioner the same overview prior to the interview; this ensured the context of the study was understood. By using semi-structured interviews and having set questions in place the researcher was able to draw the participants back onto the relevant topic if necessary. In a study carried out by Sahin, Sak and Tuncer (2013, p.1710) semi-structured interviews were used to discuss teachers views about school readiness. To ensure valid results, findings were peer reviewed to ensure their reliability; therefore the study was identified as trustworthy. Aspects from this study were used to inform the current research such as piloting in order to carry out successful semi-structured interviews. Nunan (1992, p.27) proposes that by piloting a semi-structured interview, researchers can gain an idea of the general flow of the interview as well as ask any relevant additional questions. This reflective piloting phase of the research is likely to increase the validity of the results and within this study proved invaluable towards the design. Gudmundsdottir and Brock-
Utne (2010, p.360) suggest that by using a pilot study the researcher is able to identify possible problems that may occur, whilst gaining insight into the research field which may then lead to the redesigning of the focus, questions and methods. Kezar (2000, p.387) concurs, suggesting that researchers often study issues with which they have minimal experiential understanding, therefore a pilot study offers a first-hand experience to enhance not only the research design but the conceptualization, analysis and ultimately the findings. However, throughout both of these studies it is identified that although the benefits of pilot studies are universally understood their importance is not acknowledged within most studies, signifying that they are not utilized to their potential which suggests that due to time constraints or lack of resources these initial trials do not take place. Within this case study the interview piloted identified some issues with questioning, enabling the researcher to focus and adapt the questions asked within the interview to suit the situation to become more replicable; it cemented the research focus and identified key themes initially discovered within the literature review. The number of questions was reduced from fifteen to eight to ensure that conversation flowed and allowed the opportunity for interviewee’s to elaborate on areas of interest.

The observations will enable the consideration of children’s feelings when entering school for the first time and their upcoming transition into year one. This will provide an insight from the most instrumental people involved. By listening to the child and understanding their fears and concerns we can identify what support they may have benefitted from and consider this when planning for future learning. It will also allow
practitioners to be aware of the emotions that entering school evokes and may influence their approach to this transitional stage. Bell (2005, p.194), advocates that identifying a clear purpose prior to the observation was essential as this provides focus, enabling relevant data to be selected in order to construct answers to the subsidiary questions. Denscombe (2010, p.206) defines participant observations as a method through which the observer participates in the daily life of those being studied. However, it was decided that non-participant observations would be more appropriate, described by Kothari (2004, p.96) as observations carried out where the presence of the observer is unknown, as they make no attempt to experience what others feel through participating in the activity. A key factor here is to ensure a trusting relationship with the individuals involved so there is as little disruption as possible to the natural way in which they will act. This was gained during the months prior to the observations taking place. As the children were comfortable with the presence of the researcher, it was decided that by not participating in the observations the children could freely express themselves within their peer group. This provided invaluable data as there was minimal adult influence and therefore each response noted was valid. By carrying out non-participant it is important to consider the positioning of the observer to reduce the ‘observer effect’ (Papatheodorou, Luff and Gill, 2013, p.90), sitting too close the child may become aware they are being observed, however sitting too far from the child can result in data being missed. In the current study the researcher had visited on several occasions prior to the observations taking place, supporting and carrying out activities with the children. This allowed the children to become familiar with the observer’s presence and enabled the researcher to position themselves
appropriately. Observations took place within four separate circle time activities, an observation sheet highlighting possible prompts to be aware of and any relevant quotes were transcribed, these were then used during analysis to identify key themes and issues that occurred throughout. Lown et al (2010, p.110) suggests circle time as a beneficial activity that enables teachers to support children in learning how to recognise their emotions, to understand and manage these emotions in themselves and others, and educating children on how to respect and treat each other. Furthermore, Canney and Byrne (2006, p.20) state that it raises self-confidence and promotes positive personal, social and emotional behaviours, allowing children an avenue to share their experiences. Within the SEAL foundation stage (DfES, 2005) guidelines ‘New Beginnings’ children are able to discuss how they feel starting school, the intention being to promote self-awareness, belonging, enabling children to understand and manage their feelings encouraging social skills. These observations provide researchers with the unique insight into a child’s world and their true perception of it; therefore if the children feel comfortable with the observer it offers an exceptional opportunity to gain some valuable information in this area. Gravetter and Forzano (2012, p.390) suggest, observations will always have a degree of selective bias, as the researcher will always pick the most dramatic or most successful case in order to support their study. However, Bannister et al (2011, p.72) state that irrespective of this, all observations are subject to interpretation and therefore are open to researcher manipulation. Within this study the researcher remained subjective and ensured that all data was treated equally. Attempts were made to reduce manipulation by using the same researcher for all observations, and following an observation grid for each child. A study carried out by
McGettigan and Gray (2012, p.18) under a social constructivist framework, provided an acknowledgement of the child’s competence and capacity to understand and act on their own world. They found that children were just as good if not better informants than adults on issues that directly affect them. Therefore on this premise, the current study endeavoured to hear the voice of the child on their experiences before and after starting school. A pilot (Jarvis, George and Holland, 2014, p.85) observation took place which identified other possible prompts to look out for within the sessions, these were then added to the observation sheets which allowed the researcher to maintain their objectives ensuring important data was not missed. Including the pilot; five observations took place, on different children within separate circle time activities. The pilot supported the subsequent observations but the data was not used within the findings and analysis of this research.

Documentary Analysis was carried out on the EYFS (DfE, 2014), and the Ofsted (2014) report ‘Are you ready?’ to evaluate the acknowledgement and understanding of school readiness within national policies and guidelines, which Gillham (2010, p.42) suggests provides a wider picture of the case in hand. Mangal and Mangal (2013, p.213) define documentary analysis as analysing and interpreting relevant documents which may provide information and evidence to answer the research question. Bailey (2010, p.317) suggests that although documentary analysis can increase the validity and reliability of the research if written from personal experience of the author, it can also be a detriment to the validity as the author could have had an ulterior motive. This may be present within government policies
that have been analysed within this research, and has been addressed by looking at the author and the intended audience, therefore any specific ideologies, pedagogies or purpose will be identified within the analysis. This will enable the researcher to distinguish the reliability of the document and acknowledge this appropriately. In a study carried out by Shepard, Taylor and Kagan, (1996, p.7) documentary analysis was used to support the interviews carried out to identify the trends in early childhood assessment policies and practices. Through their data analysis they identified discrepancies within the practice which had not progressed to the standard the policy was now requesting. Within the current study documentary analysis will provide the government understanding and the intentions behind their school readiness concept interpreted by the researcher. A thematic approach; described by Mangal and Mangal (2013, p.221) as exploring the meanings both literal and those that hide behind the words, will be used when analysing the documents and throughout the data analysis. This allows for the researcher to identify any themes that appear and identify links when compared to that of the data gathered during the semi-structured interviews and observations.

**Ethical Considerations**

Aubrey *et al* (2000, p.157) states that good ethical practice is essential when carrying out research. At the beginning of this study Newman University’s agreed ethics application was proposed and agreed; providing an evaluation of all the processes and consideration for ethical insensitivities that may occur to eliminate them where possible before research commenced. Undertaking ethical research is extremely important in order to ensure that all participants are protected, aware and
comfortable at all times. Farrell (2005, p.3) suggests that the growing emphasis on ethics when researching with children is due to the moral panic surrounding child protection. However, all research with participants requires an agreed acceptable conduct, this ensures that the researcher accepts the moral and ethical obligation to think and act appropriately to protect vulnerable people from harm. Whitley and Kite (2013, p.72) suggest that the principle of informed consent requires all potential participants to receive prior knowledge and understanding of the study before deciding whether to participate. Within this research study informed consent was gained from all participants involved including parents, teachers and verbal assent from children whom the case study was focused, all were advised that they had the right to withdraw themselves and any data collected at any time. Kodish (2005, p.13) defines assent from the child as the requirement for them to have a reasonable understanding of what the research will entail and their right to refuse participation if they so wish to at any time. UNICEF (2002) states parental consent is important; however, Brownhill (2014, p.51) identifies that in line with the rights of the child, children must agree themselves to participate. Within this case study continual assent was gained verbally using child friendly language and a simple explanation of the research focus was given. Pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity of the child and setting, ensuring they remain untraceable. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured at all times, however it was highlighted that if a child were to disclose information of a sensitive nature there could be a breach of confidentiality in accordance with the setting safeguarding policy. The National Children’s Bureau has policy guidelines surrounding such occurrences which state
that if issues surrounding child protection arise, a moral duty to protect the child and ensure their safety is of greater importance (Laws et al, 2013, p.167).

**Summary**

In order to ensure the validity and reliability of this particular study, various sources of data such as semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis and observations relating to the same topic were consulted to inform the findings, Walliman (2011, p.73) defines this as triangulation. By using more than one research method the data collected ensured that the themes to be identified were representative of the setting in which the study took place. Four interviews took place in an attempt to gain a variety of perspectives on the issue. The observations with children took place in four routine circle time activities; an observation sheet was used in order to identify a clear focus. Documentary analysis was used in order to ascertain the researcher’s interpretation of the governments understanding and meaning intended by school readiness within their policy documents, it is important to highlight that in an interpretivist paradigm the conclusions made are subjective which Bassey (1999, p.X) suggests can be deemed unscientific and invalid however, he concurs that through triangulation, research can be rigorous and therefore reliable and totally justifiable. Thematic analysis of each data set collected was used to identify practitioner and child perspectives in contrast to that of the government. All ethical considerations have been discussed and every attempt has been made to ensure participants were fully informed, confidentiality was maintained and anonymity upheld. The results are presented and discussed in depth in the following section.
Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this chapter is to critically and rigorously analyse the data findings from the research carried out and discuss the various aspects supported by the literature review. However, by identifying key themes that were not apparent prior to the research, it will also attempt to provide an informed debate surrounding school readiness through the eyes of practitioners and children. School readiness has become more of a focus since the current Coalition Government came into power in 2010 (H.M. Government, 2010); in respect of this sudden emphasis, the current research aimed to gauge practitioner and child perceptions of school readiness in order to discover how it is defined within the setting and to identify key factors they felt have an effect on a child’s ability to be ready for school. This section will analyse the data and draw out specific themes which will address these questions, by interviewing practitioners and observing children in their discussions of the transitions into reception and how they feel about moving into year one, as well as the documentary analysis of the EYFS (DfES, 2014) and the report published by Ofsted on school readiness ‘Are you ready?’ (Ofsted, 2014). This research attempts to highlight the need for a universal definition of school readiness and ultimately answer the key research question of whether the child should be ready for school or if in fact, the school should be ready for the individual child.

To identify themes and highlight meanings across this dataset a thematic approach was used, which Braun and Clarke (2013, p.175) suggest is the most widely used in qualitative data as it allows for the researcher to generate an analysis not shaped by the existing theory but recognises that any analysis will always be influenced to
some extent by the standpoint and knowledge of the researcher. However, within this research the responsibility lay with the researcher to be totally subjective when analysing the data and to not manipulate the findings to suit their own objectives. In order to provide continuity between accounts the same set questions were asked of each practitioner and an observation focus sheet used with children in order to ensure the observer followed the same protocol. Various factors were acknowledged as affecting school readiness however, the three most prominent themes were identified as; definitions of school readiness, influence of ‘good parenting’ and preschool experience and are discussed in depth.

**Definitions of School Readiness**

Each participant interviewed and the documents analysed showed that school readiness is a subjective concept, it often means various different things to each person and there is differing opinion as to whether the term refers to starting reception or in fact entry to year one. This was highlighted in an interview with the EYFSL who said;

‘*So I’d say that it means the children in reception begin to have a transition in the summer term, sitting for longer periods of time, with a fuller time table for learning as they begin to get ready for year one*’

Differing from the head teacher’s opinion who defines school readiness as;

‘*Starting reception toilet trained, with some independence, putting on their coat, shoes, clothing, able to sit and listen for short periods and the ability to follow simple instructions*’
It could be suggested that this conflict of expectation between practitioners is impacted by differing job roles, their length in practice and the training they would have received. The EYFS leader qualified in 2009 and only has experience within the classroom since the EYFS has been implemented, therefore is bound and influenced by the expectations within it. Whereas the Head teacher is driven by overruling targets and statistics, therefore the practical skills expressed ensure that time is not wasted on such tasks, reflecting on her time in the classroom where children were expected to be independent. Documentary analysis of the 2014 Ofsted report ‘Are you ready?’, identifies there is no universally agreed definition and highlighted the confusion between settings of whether or not it refers to Year one or entry to reception, with no clear consensus about what constitutes a child being ready for school. It discusses the difficulty due to the many factors affecting this issue, but does not identify the two transitional periods as requiring separate definitions. This is concerning as the shift into a more academic based curriculum in year one makes it reasonable to assume the expectations compared with that of children entering reception would be completely different; further supported by the definitions from practitioners. They suggest that a child’s early learning experiences are fundamental and that continuity for the home learning environment is vital. Which supports the research carried out by Feldman (2009, p.545) and Marcovitch and Zelazo (2009, p.2). Within the EYFS (DfE, 2014, p.5), school readiness is defined as ‘the broad range of knowledge and skills that provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life’, it then continues to identify factors such as good parenting and high quality early learning as providing the best foundations to ensure children are able to reach their full potential. The knowledge and skills are then
discussed through the areas of learning and development which encompass the three prime areas; communication and language, physical development and personal, social and emotional development with the four specific areas; literacy, mathematics, understanding the world and expressive arts and design to be brought in as and when the children are ready. It would seem that in the EYFS (DfE, 2014) the Government have identified that upon entry to reception the social and physical aspects of a child’s development are the most important with the progression throughout the reception year to move towards the more academic subjects ready for year one. However, the government have insisted that the guidelines are now more open to practitioner interpretation therefore providing us with vague and undescriptive guidelines.

The teacher and teaching assistant both reported social-emotional attributes within their definitions providing valuable perspectives, as these are the two practitioners who spend the most time within the classroom and therefore with the children. The teacher, who came into teaching after having children and seeing them through their primary education suggested;

'School readiness is that they will come in and try things and speak to the adults, its more about that social rather than the academic side of things, in that they can manage the feelings they’ve got and can deal with the situation, it’s that sort of preparation that I think they need to come in to reception’

It would be reasonable to assume that the shift from being a parent to practitioner, going through the worries and concerns of sending your child to school to then become responsible to address these issues would have great influence on your
In theory, it should allow for a greater partnership as the practitioner understands the concerns of the parent and has the ability to reassure them.

Collectively these practitioners may have a holistic view of school readiness, however individually they have various ideas which provides a chillingly realistic example of how different practitioners, who have a variety of roles each, interpret school readiness as something different. Dockett, Perry, and Kearney (2010, p.6; Janus and Offord, 2000, p.72) advocate that school readiness incorporates every aspect of a child’s life that directly contributes to that child’s learning ability, highlighting that school readiness as a multidimensional construct. It could therefore be assumed that an agreed definition and mutually constructed guidelines would be beneficial for both the setting and the families to ensure a consistent message is being given to enable continuity for the home learning environment.

**Influence of ‘Good Parenting’**

The most prominent theme that occurred throughout the interviews and observations was the importance of parental involvement in the home. This is supported by a study carried out by Sahin, Sak and Tuncer (2013, p.1711) who found that the family were the most effective people in the school readiness process. In order for a child to be ready for school, parents were consistently identified within the semi-structured interviews as the main factor in preparing them for this transition. Highlighted in an interview with the head teacher;
‘It’s important for the parents to communicate and talk to their children, the more interactions had with parents rather than the iPad or TV ensures the child can communicate effectively which is essential when coming to school’

Berk (2013, p.112) promotes that the parents with positive attitudes and a personal commitment to children’s education can make them more verbally stimulating and sensitive to their child’s needs and educational preparedness. It could be interpreted that the head teacher implies that parents need to talk to their child. Suggesting therefore that some parents do not ‘effectively’ communicate, but what qualifies as effective communication. It shows a deliberate lack of respect for parents, dismissing their experience suggesting she knows what is best for their children.

Supported by Epstein and Sanders (2006, p.87) it is essential that practitioners communicate with families, and have active co-operation and sharing of information between all parties to reach higher levels of academic success, as the specific needs of the individual can be identified. Highlighting the need for a strong partnership between parents and teachers, based on mutual respect, rather than one feeling superior due to qualifications and job title when in fact the parent is arguably the highest qualified in knowing what is best for their child. It could be argued therefore that parental partnership is crucial in any setting and therefore it is imperative that each individual knows what role they play. This was further supported and implied by the EYFSL;

‘You can always tell if a parent is actively involved at home in their child’s learning, as teachers we expect parents to help us with this transition by enabling a continuity
between home and school, so meetings are held at the beginning nursery outlining the expectations for the end of the year and guidance is given on how they can help them at home to be more independent. At the end of nursery the reception staff reiterates those expectations plus the ones we need to add. We will outline the expectations for the end of reception and then at parents evening we will go through it all again and at this point individual targets will be identified’

Epstein and Sanders (2002) describe a continuum of partnership models highlighting the various levels of parental involvement that a setting can employ. Although the EYFSL suggests this is a partnership it would seem more like parental involvement or even engagement, as they seem to be dictating to parents what they expect and how they would like it to be reached rather than discussing the issues that affect their children equally. The Teaching Assistant further developed this by specifying particular ways in which the parents can not only support them as practitioners but their children in developing specific skills that reinforce the definition given earlier;

‘Parents must enable their child to be independent, by talking to them, and allowing them to express their feelings whilst feeling valued and listened to, promoting confidence in daily activities like taking a step back and letting them get dressed for example’

Interestingly, although the expectation of parents being responsible for their child’s preparation for school is clear and consistent the requests made by practitioners are for social attributes to enable the child to know and use their own voice to communicate in order to cope with the situation in which they are placed. It could be argued that this will inevitably make their lives easier, however with the current
constraints placed on teachers such as teacher to child ratios EYFS (2014, p. 21) and the ever increasing workload it would be impractical to allow our children to enter the classroom without the ability to communicate their basic needs. Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological systems theory (1979, 2005), supports this by seeing the child as a social being, providing a framework outlining the influences surrounding the child which affect their individual development and unique experiences. Strengthened by Vygotsky (1978) and his social constructivist theory placing great importance on the individual’s ability to construct and make sense of their social interactions both at home and in school, which further promotes the necessity of parental partnership. It is suggested by Belsky, Pasco-Fearon and Bell, (2007, p. 1233) that these ecological and transitional theories of child development affect a child’s engagement within the classroom, identifying that supportive parents encourage children in sustaining their attention enabling them to develop these skills in preparation for school. During an observation of a circle time activity, an encounter with Nasim (pseudonyms used), aged 5 supports that parental involvement at home can ensure children are able to develop favourable characteristics such as confidence, independence and good communication skills;

‘My favourite thing to do at home is play with mommy, she helps me with my homework, number lines, my writing competition, tracing, letters, and we play games with my toys’

Throughout the observation Nasim communicates and responds well to his peers, he expresses his emotions clearly, is self-aware and shows excellent social skills. From
his discussion he provides an insight to his home life and in particular his relationship with his mother. It shows that mother is involved in various aspects of his education and most importantly his play. In a study carried out by Martin, Brooks-Gunn and Ryan (2010, p.145) findings suggest that children with supportive mothers who exert a strong influence will be better set on a positive developmental trajectory than those without that role present, be it played by father or mother. Maternal supportiveness was also associated with academic and social competence however; within this study (Martin, Brooks-Gunn and Ryan, 2010, p.146) the paternal and maternal supportiveness measured was when both are present within the home. Therefore this does not account for the single fathers, mothers and carers which, suggests the study is limited and cannot be generalised to the wider population. However, its findings are still relevant as they show that supportiveness from either or both parents influence their child’s ability to be ready for school.

The influence of good parenting is identified in the Ofsted (2014, p.8) ‘Are you ready?’ report and The EYFS (DfE, 2014, p.5) as a crucial aspect of a child’s ability to be school ready. Supporting the government’s consensus reinforced by MP Graham Allen’s Early Intervention report (2011) which states that ‘the right kind of parenting is a bigger influence on their future than wealth, class, education, or any other social factor’ (Allen, 2011, p.xiv). This suggests that parents are to blame for a child’s success at school and in particular those who are living in disadvantaged areas needing further support. This is a concerning concept, as who has the authority to define ‘a good parent’ and is a national definition of a good parent plausible considering every child has individual needs, and unique experiences that contribute
to the construction of their character. Cronin (2015) discusses the evidence on which the Allen report based his findings and suggests that the research undertaken by Demos ’Building Character’ (Lexmond & Reeves, 2009) conveniently ignores that household income is more statistically significant than parenting style in order to facilitate the government agenda at the time suggesting that the broader structural factors which are out of the parents control were buried in order to reinforce the individual behaviour discourse.

**Preschool Factors**

The findings from the semi-structured interviews and the observations suggest that pre-school experience can make a huge impact on a child’s school readiness, this is supported within the EYFS (DfE, 2014) and the Ofsted report (2014) ‘Are You Ready?’ which both state that the impact of high quality preschool provisions can ensure children have the opportunity to thrive and fulfil their potential. The Ofsted report (2014) further insists that a good preschool experience can bridge the gap for disadvantaged children to succeed in school, highlighting once again the individual behaviourist discourse (Cronin, 2015) suggesting that teachers are better qualified to support children in their early years than parents (McGillivray, 2014). This supports a wide range of literature suggesting that the impact of the environment on a child’s development is enormous (Lijuan, 1999, p2; Collins et al, 2000, p221; Morrison and Cooney, 2001, p146), but contradicts Vygotsky (1978) who advocates that children learn first through their interactions with people (cited in Levine & Munsch, 2011, p.49), Froebel (1887) suggested these interactions take place from birth with the parents and family who are a child’s first teachers, advocating that the home
learning environment must provide first-hand meaningful experiences and opportunities (cited in Bruce, 2011, p.59) which suggests that teachers must respect that irrespective of background, each child’s experience is unique and many parents who have a lower socio-economic status still provide their children with the best possible start. The EPPE project concurs that the quality and type of pre-school provision available can affect a child’s social and cognitive development (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2008, p24). Throughout the observations it became apparent that pre-school experience may have a distinct effect on a child’s school readiness, independence and confidence, an encounter with Becky, aged five;

‘I felt a bit worried because I didn’t know the big children, I felt better because I knew Alfie’

Becky attended the school nursery at the setting, she has a large group of friends and socialised well within the group. Reiterated in the interviews with the Class Teacher and Teaching assistant, they specified Becky as being ‘extremely confident’. Both expressing the opinion that school nurseries provide a quality pre-school experience for children in terms of readiness for school especially when the child will be continuing within the same setting;

‘We work in partnership with the nursery, pupils enter reception knowing and understanding the vocabulary used within the school, the behavioural expectations and golden rules. The practitioners, the setting and some of the activities are familiar which instantly puts the child at ease.’

Supported by the EYFSL;
'The children that have been to school nurseries definitely have more of a base at the beginning of reception, they are generally the children who are more able to cope with year one, when they get to it’

Further supported by Mistry et al (2010, p.433; Welsh et al, 2010, p.44) who believe the cognitive skills and social-emotional competence of pre-school children play a significant role in their successful transition into formal schooling. It is clear that preschool experience is a well-documented factor by researchers in studies such as the EPPE project (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2008 in the school readiness concept. If a child attends the same setting for both nursery and school it would be reasonable to assume that the transition would be smoother as the environment is the same and the familiar faces of the teachers, and staff provides children with a sense of security. However, there are some children who thrive at home, they may be a younger child but not necessarily whom the home environment is as stimulating, with parents who communicate effectively and allow their child to explore their independence whom would not benefit from a school nursery as they are developing these skills at home. This is reflected in an observation of Iman, aged 4;

‘I was worried because I didn’t know the children, I felt ready, I made a lot of friends which made me feel better’

Iman did not attend school nursery and stayed at home with her mother until starting school, however showed confidence and independence on entry to school allowing her to make friends easily which allowed her to settle in and cope with demands of the classroom much more efficiently.
Practitioners also highlight that continuity between home and school plays a huge part in a child’s readiness to learn. All practitioner interviews suggest a good parental partnership, with meetings and an open door policy in place to allow parents to feel comfortable and able to approach the school if they wish to; this is reflected in the interview with the class teacher:

'We send home the usual sound books to help with phonics, target books to help them with reading, maths passports, but we also involve our parents in our curriculum meetings and have various opportunities throughout the year to discuss how we can support the child at home and at school, they have input in our school policies and we continuously share ideas’

This supports Sadek et al, (2004, p.153) who states that teachers must take the time to communicate with parents and that sharing information is vital to the individuals development as it enables the teacher to be aware of every aspect of the child ensuring that they fully understand the individual’s needs. Further supported by McKenna and Millen (2013, p.10) who insist that if parents are listened to, their fears and anxieties, hopes and wishes, there are lessons to be learnt and suggestions to be made that derive from a deep sense of love and care which by promoting an open door policy this setting is seen to encourage parents to do.

**Summary**

School readiness is a complicated and multidimensional construct which encompasses a wide range of factors such as; preschool experience, parenting skills, socio-economic background, age and numerous others. Due to its complexity it is impossible to define or measure. There is overwhelming evidence to suggest the
effects of such factors on future academic success, in particular the disadvantages for vulnerable children within the class are highlighted and the preventative measure of quality preschool promoted which, McGillivray (2014) suggests underlies government agenda to ensure disadvantaged children are provided with better early experiences in order to close the achievement gap. This supports their behaviourist notion that these parents are unable to provide them with the experiences needed to achieve. Within this study four practitioners were interviewed and four different understandings of the school readiness concept were given from the same setting which provides further evidence of the complexity and varying meanings of this construct, so although a nationally agreed definition would deliver continuity for each child, the fact remains that in an idealistic reality each child in each school prior to starting would need to be given their own unique plan, as it is impossible to implement a blanketed concept when each child is different. Linking to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979, 2005) their background, their socio-economic status, their early years’ experience and their cognitive ability are all unique which is supported by the research by Jeon, Buettner and Hur (2014, p.718). If parents are expected to work in partnership to prepare their children for school whether it be reception or year one the child must be recognised as a unique social being and their learning planned accordingly. However, it would be reasonable to assume that the education sector at present would not have the resources to implement such a system.

Observations showed that the supportiveness of parents in the home and a positive preschool experience allowed them to develop the social skills they need to be able to cope with the demands of the classroom. The semi-structured interviews further
supported this by identifying that school nursery is the most beneficial in attempting to prepare children for school, however the child observations provided evidence to suggest that as long as the child is given the opportunity to develop confidence and independence they will be able to thrive upon entry whatever their preschool background. By working in partnership with parents, teachers are able to get to know their pupils, it therefore enables them to provide an individual support program which suggests that it is not the child that needs to be ready for school but in fact the school that needs to be ready and prepared for each individual child.
Conclusion

An analysis of the findings within this case study explicitly presented the complex and subjective concept that is school readiness, and identified preschool and parenting as the two main factors affecting a child’s school readiness within the focus setting. This research has shown that children come to school with varying experiences that in some instances provide the child with an advantage to formal schooling, however it is less clear as to how these advantages can be created. This research aimed to highlight the perplexity and common misunderstandings in respect of school readiness by using practitioners and children’s perceptions in one setting to illuminate the differing meanings existing within one environment, and furthermore acknowledge the various factors that affect a child’s school readiness.

The results indicate that within the reception class the four practitioners who are consistently involved with the children and their learning have various different understandings of the concept. However, it was clear that those who spend considerably more time within the classroom were more focussed on the children having social attributes to enable the child to effectively communicate their feelings and needs, linking to Vygotsky (1978) who emphasises the importance of positive social interactions for the child’s development (Levine & Munsch, 2011, p.49).

Practitioners acknowledge that family and community affect a child’s successful transition to school supporting Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2005) whose ecological systems theory presents the different systems which overlap and intertwine to influence the child. The findings show that although all practitioners acknowledged that parent partnership was a crucial and effective tool to be utilised within the classroom to support the child and aid their success, in the majority of incidences
described, parents were merely informed and then expected to fulfil their delegated part. This could disengage the parent from the setting as they may feel less comfortable to approach teachers and practitioners, leading to vital information about their child being missed and therefore indirectly affecting the child and their relationships at school. The various factors that affect school success were discussed such as family background, age, policy and socio-economic status, and preschool experience which is complimented by Siraj-Blatchford et al (2008, p.4) EPPE project findings. For the purpose of this research school readiness is defined as not only the expected cognitive skills required but the physical, social-emotional and language competence a child should have in order to cope with the demands of the classroom environment to enable them to achieve success; this has been amalgamated from research carried out by Winter and Kelly, (2008, p.260), Halle et al (2012, p.613) and McTurk et al, (2011, p.69) used to inform the observations of the focus pupils. The results were consistent that age and ability play a distinct role in affecting a child’s school readiness, however parenting and preschool experience were most prominent in enabling a child to be more confident and independent allowing them to manage a successful transition into formal schooling. Although identified within the review of literature, the government influence in fact made minimal impact to this particular settings approach to school readiness. It could therefore be assumed that with the emphasis being placed on such a subjective concept that if the school feels they have an already successful program in place they are fulfilling their duties by supporting children individually to ensure their successful transition. However, the individual behaviour discourse (Cronin, 2015) is still present as parents were identified by all practitioners as having the most effect on their child’s school
readiness suggesting that the Conservative ideology had made a significant impact on their opinions individually. Illuminating once again that if the government wish to ensure children are all given equal opportunities, with particular focus on those in disadvantaged areas in order to meet the demands of their political manifesto’s, then a nationally agreed definition is a must, so that rather than blaming parents for their children’s inability to meet the demands of the school, that the school is able to support the parents and children by providing guidance to reach these agreed characteristics. However, it is clear from the current study that a blanket definition is unrealistic and could be detrimental to an individual’s academic success. However, Clarke, Sheridan and Woods (2014, p.301) suggest that early childhood services need to develop tiered approaches in order to address the differing needs of the unique and individual child, starting with a universal support with increasing intervention dependent on needs. A utopian concept, however in reality drastically impractical, as whom has the ability to measure a child’s potential? With the right intervention for the right child their potential is surely limitless.

In review of the methodology, it may have been beneficial to involve parents within the semi-structured interviews as well as practitioners, for in the current study, although providing a valuable insight into how the setting values school readiness, the lack of parental voices allows for them to be silenced on a topic which they have been identified as having the most influence (Allen, 2011; Jeon, Buettner and Hur, 2014, p.718; Sahin, Sak and Tuncer, 2013, p.1711). It would have also been useful to use focus groups (Litosseliti, 2003, p.6) rather than the observations of circle time activities as this would have enabled the researcher to provide a set relevant topic upon which children could then discuss rather than the observations being open to
the interpretation of the observer whose knowledge and opinion would have inevitably affected the data. However, the discussion with the practitioner after the activity to collate the data recorded helped to eliminate this. It may have also been favourable to undertake this research in September as the opportunity to witness the children during the transition stage from their pre-school setting in order to truly observe how the practitioners address and support each child within the strategies present at the beginning of the year (Benson and Haith, 2010, p.141). A further limitation to this research was the small sample size, as the results cannot be generalised (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p114). However, this was never the intention for this study and the exploration of the factors affecting school readiness will provide a valuable extension to current literature. The research design with the addition of the parent interviews and children focus groups would be replicable in the future and could provide further insight into a very current topic.

The findings presented are meaningful as they support previous research such as the EPPE Project (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2008), and the theoretical shift away from dominant developmental stage theories (Piaget,1956) which suggest age as the indicator of maturity and therefore the readiness to learn towards interpretive sociocultural theories (DeLamater, 2006, p.130) identified within this research. In further research this could be used to identify that the current education system is inconsistent in its measure and expectations of school readiness. Therefore parents feel disempowered as although the blame lies within parenting style and competence it’s unclear and complex as to what can be done to support children, with no explicit guidance offered. Informed by this approach, school readiness can be understood as a multidimensional construct that incorporates all aspects of a
child’s life that contribute directly to that child’s ability to learn (Dockett, Perry, and Kearney 2010, 16). This study supports that the primary stages through which children acquire readiness-related capabilities are the social relationships children form with peers, parents and teachers, it is also well researched by Siraj-Blatchford et al, (2008) that attendance at preschool has a positive impact on the child’s readiness for school and on their future attainment. Practitioners in each setting must work with parents to get to know the children and identify their strengths and plan to support their weaknesses ensuring an individualised plan for each unique child and therefore shifting the focus from the child being ready for school but allowing the school to be prepared for the individual child.
References


