

INVESTIGATION OF 'AT-RISK' STUDENTS

Investigating the Elements Influencing the Identification of “At-Risk” Students in the
Context of the Full-Day Early Learning - Kindergarten Program in Ontario

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Abstract

This study was designed to explore the elements that influence the identification of young children that might be considered at-risk for early school failure. To this end, guided by complexity theory, the study sought to examine (a) system requirements and expectations at the provincial and school board levels, (b) current practice in schools and classrooms, and (c) the beliefs and knowledge of individuals surrounding the assessment and identification of at-risk students in Kindergarten. Using a qualitative, case-study approach 23 individuals from two different school boards in Ontario were interviewed to explore both practice and beliefs. Review of relevant provincial and school board documents as well as artifacts that were gathered during school visits provided further information. While there were some differences in details, the findings were similar in the two boards. In describing which characteristics were of concern when considering an at-risk designation, most participants cited social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties. While both school boards required tracking and assessment of literacy skills, teachers and ECEs concentrated more on ongoing observations and anecdotal notes to determine student progress. Interventions for students at-risk were more often provided for students with academic difficulties. However, there was also some support for behaviour difficulties in terms of consultation from special education personnel in one board and an early intervention team in the other. It was clear from the findings that many elements influence the identification of a student as at-risk including the characteristics of the student, the student's family, and the particular classroom, school, and board the student attends. The study findings contribute to our understanding of practice and beliefs around young student at-risk and how the interactions of the various elements involved impact the identification of individual students.

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Investigating the Elements Influencing the Identification of “At-Risk” Students in the
Context of the Full-Day Early Learning - Kindergarten Program in Ontario

Chapter 1 – Introduction

“Success in the early grades does not guarantee success throughout the school years and beyond, but failure in the early grades does virtually guarantee failure in later schooling” (Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1992/1993, p. 11).

Sarah is a happy child who enjoys school, particularly playing with friends. She prefers the dress-up center and tends to avoid activities that involve cutting and pasting or writing. Sarah’s mother is a little concerned that she is behind in knowing her letters and doesn’t seem to enjoy the books in the home the way her older sister did at that age. Will her teachers realize that Sarah is significantly behind her peers in reading and writing?

Harrison is a quiet boy who likes to draw and play with puzzles. He does not contribute during circle time and rarely interacts with his peers. When he is asked questions, he answers with brief statements, often just one word. He is an only child with busy parents who both work full time. Will his teachers recognize his delayed language development and weak social skills?

James is a very active little boy. He loves gym and outside play but is reluctant to sit during circle time and struggles to be quiet when stories are read aloud. His impulsivity and high energy means that he does not always interact positively with his peers. James’ early literacy skills are quite strong but he does not always pay attention to instructions and rarely completes activities that require writing. His father is a single parent working hard to support James and his two younger siblings. Will his teachers recognize that James’ behaviour is negatively impacting his social and emotional development and possibly his academic progress?

Sarah, Harrison, and James are examples of the estimated 25% of children who begin school with some difficulty that makes them less ready to learn than their peers (Offord Centre for Child Studies, 2009). It will be helpful to keep students such as Sarah, Harrison, and James in mind while reading the study.

Students who struggle early at school often continue to lag behind their peers and are at-risk for poorer long-term outcomes including school dropout and reduced employment opportunities (Heckman, 2008; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2008). Intervening before these problems become entrenched has been shown to be an effective way to avoid or mitigate these poorer long-term outcomes (Heckman, 2008; Sutherland, Lewis-Palmer, Stichter, & Morgan, 2008). However, determining which students might be identified

as at-risk so that they can be provided with support is not a simple matter. In a complex, multi-layered organization such as the school system, many elements may come into play including policies and practices at each level as well as the personal knowledge and beliefs of individuals involved. The purpose of this study is to explore the elements that influence which children might be considered to be at-risk within the newly implemented Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Program in the province of Ontario.

Background and Context

Traditional views of school readiness have focused on specific skills that would allow students to progress academically. These have typically included elements of language development such as verbal expression and early literacy skills such as letter recognition as well as basic concepts including colours, shapes and numbers (Janus & Duku, 2007). More recently the idea of readiness and therefore the characteristics that might be considered to put a child at-risk has expanded to include other, non-cognitive domains of development (Simner, 1995; Vervaeke, McNamara, & Scissons, 2007). Social and emotional skills are now considered as important, if not more so, by many (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006).

While there are a variety of characteristics that might cause a child to be considered at-risk for early school failure, there are also many factors that might lead to the lack of readiness. The Early Development Instrument (EDI; Janus et al., 2007) is a widely used measure designed to determine the level of readiness for school learning in Kindergarten children across Canada. Analysis of the EDI links a number of risk factors related to children being less ready for school learning than their peers including: socioeconomic status (SES), family structure, child health, parent health, and parental involvement in literacy development (Janus & Duku, 2007). Gender and age were also found to influence readiness to learn with boys and those who are younger at school entry more likely to show weaknesses.

Regardless of the cause, as stated, early intervention has been shown to be an effective way to avoid or mitigate the poorer long-term outcomes related to early school failure (Heckman, 2008; Sutherland et al., 2008). In the province of Ontario the concept of early intervention has been embedded in the Education Act since 1982. Direction with regard to early identification of student's learning needs is provided by the Ontario Ministry of Education's Policy/ Program Memorandum (PPM) 8 and PPM 11 which were both revised in

1982 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1982). PPM 8 is directed specifically at the identification of students who may have learning disabilities; it includes a definition of LD as well as recommendations for assessment procedures. PPM 8 states:

The Education Act requires school boards to provide appropriate special education programs and services for all their exceptional students by 1985, either directly, or by purchasing them from other school boards.

The Act also requires school boards to implement procedures for early and ongoing identification of the learning abilities and needs of pupils, and to prescribe standards in accordance with which these procedures are implemented (para. 1&2)

PPM 11 more generally refers to the early identification of the strengths and needs of all young children and stipulates that assessments should begin when the child is first enrolled in school:

Each school board is required to have approved and in operation by September, 1981, procedures to identify each child's level of development, learning abilities and needs and to ensure that educational programs are designed to accommodate these needs and to facilitate each child's growth and development (para. 1. Please see Appendices A and B for complete versions of both policy statements)

School boards are guided in their implementation of these policy memoranda by the document "Standards for School Boards' Special Education Plans" (Ontario, 2000). According to the document, the plans must include: the boards' philosophy or guiding principles in regard to early identification of children's learning needs, the roles parents and teachers are to play in the process, policies and procedures used throughout the identification process as well as those used to inform parents. Types of assessments as well as early intervention strategies to be used before students are referred for formal identification must also be included. In practice, however, school boards vary a great deal in their interpretation of the memoranda and policy leading to a wide range of approaches to early identification (Underwood, 2012).

More recently, the recognition of the importance of early intervention, combined with stronger understanding of the tremendous growth and development happening during the first five years of life has led to increased interest in early childhood education (Bennett, 2005; Friendly, Doherty, & Beach, 2006; McCain, Mustard, & McCuaig, 2011). The belief,

held by many, is that early childhood education programs present a prime opportunity to identify students that might be at-risk and provide remediation that will improve these students' chances of succeeding later in school (McCain, Mustard, & McCuaig, 2011; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2008; Pascal, 2009). However, early childhood education programs vary a great deal in their design. Broadly, the programs have been described as ranging between the pre-primary style focusing mostly on academic elements of school readiness and the social pedagogical approach which has a more holistic view of development (Dickinson, 2005). Differing goals, curriculum, and pedagogical approaches of the programs, also likely lead to diverse views of which children might be at-risk and in need of early intervention.

One example of the growing focus on early childhood education has occurred in the province of Ontario. Until recently, school boards varied in their approach to ECE, while some boards provided full-day programs for both Junior and Senior Kindergarten other provided half-day programs or alternate day programs. In 2010, the province began the implementation of a new Full-Day Early Learning - Kindergarten Program (FDELKP) providing universal access to full-day Junior and Senior Kindergarten for all students. Based on the expert panel report, *With Our Best Future in Mind*, by Charles Pascal, the goals of the FDELKP include not only promoting the development of skills that better prepare students for the primary grades but also providing opportunities for students who might be at-risk to be identified early and to receive intensive intervention before moving into Grade 1 (Pascal, 2009). In terms of design, the program retains many of the principles of the existing Kindergarten program with the same specific curriculum expectations. The new program, however, places a stronger emphasis on educational experiences that are child-centred and play-based. Another main feature is the inclusion of both a qualified classroom teacher and an Early Childhood Educator in the classroom (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a).

While the FDELKP offers new possibilities for early intervention, there are a number of potential issues surrounding how the process of identifying at-risk students and providing interventions will proceed. For example, as mentioned earlier, school boards have existing protocols for early identification. In the primary grades, these protocols are often based on

meeting benchmark levels of curriculum expectations¹ by specific points in the school year. While the expectations are very similar to those used in the previous Kindergarten curriculum, the play-based, child-centred nature of the program includes an emphasis on assessment based on observations and a continuum of development (Pascal, 2009). While assessments based on benchmark expectations are likely to identify students that are behind in specific academic skills, assessments based on continua of development are more likely to address a broader range of developmental domains. These differing assessments present a potential conflict between existing practices and the new program.

Further, the FDELKP involves the collaboration of Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) and regular teachers in Kindergarten classrooms. ECEs are qualified through programs focused specifically on early childhood development which are consistent with the approach outlined in the FDELKP (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b). Ontario teachers are certified through Bachelor of Education programs that provide them with general knowledge of curriculum theory, instructional strategies and assessment practices applicable across a variety of grade levels. Teachers can specialize in teaching Primary/Junior (including Kindergarten) Intermediate and/or Senior grades. While the intent is that the knowledge and skills of the ECE and teachers complement one another, there has been little actual research completed, especially in the context of Ontario schools, on how successful this collaboration will be (Pascal, 2009). Given their differing types of preparation and expertise, these two groups of educators may have disparate perspectives and practices in the area of assessment and different beliefs and understandings of which students might be at-risk. Moreover, difficulties surrounding these processes and decisions may waste precious time and resources that need to be focused on helping students.

Statement of Problem

There is widespread agreement that a significant number of children begin school less ready to learn than their peers and that providing support as soon as possible can mitigate longer-term damage (Janus & Offord, 2007). However, there is much less agreement on how to determine which students should be considered at-risk and what kind of support to offer.

¹ Curriculum expectations are: "The knowledge and skills that students are expected to learn and to demonstrate by the end of every grade or course, as outlined in the Ontario curriculum documents for the various subject areas" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003).

There are many elements influencing these decisions including policies at the provincial, board, and school levels of the education system, as well as the beliefs and knowledge of the individuals involved. Understanding these elements is an important first step in promoting dialogue and resolving any tensions that may interfere with the promised benefits of the FDELKP in terms of giving students the best possible start to their academic career.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

In order to explore these issues the following overarching research question and four sub-questions were addressed:

What are the elements influencing who is identified as at-risk in the Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program in Ontario?

1. What are the system requirements and/or expectations for assessing and identifying at-risk students?
2. What assessments are being carried out at the school and classroom level and how are they being used to identify students at-risk.
3. What are the beliefs and knowledge surrounding the assessment and identification of at-risk students at the various levels of the school system?
4. To what extent are the conditions present that would allow for the emergence of a shared understanding regarding the identification of at-risk students and what it means for a student to be at-risk?

The Research Approach

Following approval from the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board, I conducted interviews in three schools within two different school boards. Using a qualitative, case-study approach informed by complexity theory, 23 individuals were interviewed to explore both practice and beliefs around the identification of at-risk students. Participants were recruited in an effort to represent a variety of levels within the school system. These included administrative personnel at the board and school level – Superintendents involved with Special Education and administration of the FDELKP, principals and Special Education Resource Teachers (SERTs) – as well as teachers and ECEs at the classroom level. The data from the interviews formed the basis for the findings of the study. All participants as well as the schools and school boards involved were assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

All interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed by the researcher and reviewed by the participants to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All interview transcripts were read and re-read and passages that were deemed compelling or significant were identified. Data summary sheets were first created for each interview question. As the analysis continued, data were clustered around the central elements of the theoretical framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Coding categories were developed and refined on an ongoing basis.

In addition to interview data, a review of pertinent documents at the provincial, board, and school level was conducted to provide context, supplement the research data, and improve the validity of the research (Merriam, 2002). Artifacts, such as examples of assessment and tracking methods, were gathered in the schools and in the target classrooms to provide evidence of practice and were used to confirm or disconfirm evidence gathered through interviews.

Researcher perspectives. As Greene and Caracelli (2003) explain, we all have assumptions and presumptions whether we have articulated them into a formal epistemological stance or not. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln state, "All research is interpretive; it guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied" (2005, p. 22). It is important that researchers understand their own beliefs, values, and biases because these influence not only how we chose to conduct research but also the questions we consider are worth asking and the way we look at the results (Kuhn, 1996). My beliefs and feelings in regards to education in general and the early identification of learning difficulties, specifically, have been shaped first by my personal experience as a mother of a child who struggled a great deal from the beginning of his academic career and then by my own experiences as a teacher.

My son, Nicholas, disliked school from the beginning. While he enjoyed recess, and playtime, he avoided any of the paper-based tasks such as writing, colouring, and/or cutting and pasting that were a very common part of the Kindergarten program at the time. His problems were first put down to immaturity, especially because he often became upset when forced to complete these activities. This continued through Grade 1 where the teacher felt he just needed more time. By Grade 2 it was obvious to me, but not really his teacher, that he was well behind his peers, with many pages unfinished in the workbooks he was supposed to

be completing. He was also missing days of school because of stomach aches that would mysteriously disappear in the middle of the school day. Nearing the end of Grade 2 both he and I were frustrated and discouraged with his struggles to learn and my attempts to help him at home. This was a very stressful time and some of the teachers involved were less than helpful and supportive. It was Grade 3 before the process of assessment and identification was started and the end of that school year before accommodations and modification were put in place. By this time, identified with Learning Disabilities in reading, mathematics, and writing, as well as Central Auditory Processing issues and below-average Fine Motor Control and Visual-Motor Integration skills, Nicholas was more than two years behind academically. He was also later diagnosed with AD/HD (inattentive type). The constant struggles had left him with very little faith in himself and his ability to learn, this damage to his self-esteem followed him throughout the rest of his school career.

I did not begin my Bachelor of Education until 1997, when Nicholas was in Grade 5. Before Teacher's College I did not really understand how the school system worked, especially when it came to children that did not meet expectations. So, like many parents, I felt like I was on the outside when he began to struggle and did not at first feel comfortable challenging the system. I also felt the guilt and shame that often accompanies having a child with exceptionalities. I worried that it was somehow my fault, that I maybe hadn't pushed him enough, or disciplined him properly. On the positive side, this made me especially sensitive to children's early school experiences and to how parents feel when their children are struggling.

As a Special Education and primary classroom teacher I have seen both the benefits of early intervention and the negative impact that early school failure can have on the academic progress and self-esteem of young children. However, the attempts at early identification and intervention for students at-risk, at least in the school board for which I worked have been inconsistent at best. When I first began teaching there was no early identification protocol within our school board. The approach was generally "wait to fail", as happened with my son, in which students were either held back and made to repeat early grades or were moved along until they were far enough behind to qualify for assessment and identification. Soon after I started, the board began to focus on early identification but did not settle on a particular process. Over the next ten years, we went through a progression of

methods for identifying students at-risk for school failure². Each time the Kindergarten and/or the Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT) would be trained, supplies would be bought and processes would be put in place for assessment, tracking and follow-up in terms of interventions for those deemed to need remediation. However, it seemed that one method would become popular for a time only to be replaced by a new system within a couple of years. There was rarely any explanation for the changes and there appeared to a “flavour-of-the-month” approach to adopting and abandoning each method. I became quite frustrated with the changes and concerned about what I saw as wasted time and energy.

In my last few years of teaching, yet another approach to early identification was introduced, this was an assessment of early literacy skills and system of tracking progress that was specifically designed to make sure that students would be ready to be successful on the Grade 3 EQAO (Education Quality and Accountability Office) assessment³. While individual student achievement was a concern, the ultimate goal was to make sure the school met the improvement goals they were obliged to set each year. This shift from a focus on the individual student to system improvement as well as the focus on a narrow number of skills was quite worrying to me.

My beliefs and knowledge of what it means for a child to be at-risk has changed over time and continues to evolve. I do feel that when my son first started to struggle, I believed the risk came from some deficiency in him (and to some extent in me). I felt that the school system could have and should have done more to help and support him in his learning but ultimately, it was his problem and something that he would have to learn to deal with. While I still feel that a child like my son needs to learn coping mechanisms that will help them get through the school system and be successful in life, I now believe that our perception of the child has far more to do with them being at-risk than anything inherently “wrong” within them. I will address these ideas further in the concluding chapter.

Given my background as a parent of a child that struggled from the very early days of and throughout his academic career, as well as my experiences as a classroom and special education teacher, I feel well situated to explore the elements influencing the identification of students at-risk. However, while my personal experiences put me in a position to offer

² A description of the various protocols is provided in Chapter 2.

³ The Education Quality and Accountability Office is responsible for the creation and administration of the series of mandated standardized assessments in the education system in province of Ontario.

insight, they may also prove to be a liability in terms of researcher bias. A number of steps have been taken to strengthen the credibility of the study including the use of multiple data sources, member checks of interview transcripts, and the identification of researcher assumptions as outlined below.

Researcher assumptions. Based on my experience and background, three basic assumptions were made with regards to this project. First, there are many different understandings and attitudes about the concept of at-risk and early school failure and therefore the term at-risk was placed within quotes the first time it was used to acknowledge the fact that the term is very open to interpretation. These understandings range from a focus on academic skills and the need to make sure the child is ready for learning when they reach Grade 1 to a more general concern that the child is progressing appropriately in all developmental domains. This is evident in the different descriptions that appear in the literature (Janus & Offord, 2007; Simner, 1987). It was also assumed that the identification of at-risk students is not a scripted process, in that a number of people looking at the same child may each have a different opinion of whether or not that child is at-risk and in what way. Identification will vary depending on the individual characteristics of the child, but also on personal beliefs of those making decisions as well as protocols in place. Finally, it was assumed that the current emphasis on accountability and desire to improve scores on provincially mandated assessments has led many school boards to focus their efforts at early intervention on assessing and tracking skills, mostly literacy, that will improve those scores. This assumption is based on my personal experiences as well as a review of early identification protocols of school boards.

Rationale and Significance

While it is agreed that a significant number of children begin school less ready to learn than their peers and that early intervention can mitigate longer-term damage (Janus & Offord, 2007), there is much less agreement on how to determine which students should be considered at-risk and what kind of support to offer. The rationale for this study stems from my desire to promote discussion of early identification approaches currently being used with the school system. Through this discussion, it is hoped that a more holistic and timely method of supporting students that might be at-risk for early school failure can be promoted.

This study will add to the existing research in a number of ways. To begin with, it will add to the body of knowledge about the assessment and intervention practices being used in Kindergarten classrooms. By identifying current practice and how these align with the beliefs and knowledge of individuals at various levels of the education system, areas of potential conflict as well as common understandings can be identified. The findings of this study will provide insight into tensions that may be impacting the collaborative experiences of teachers and ECEs, an area that has not been explored to date. Establishing positive working relationships and clear understandings of assessment and intervention protocols is crucial if young children are to receive the assistance they need and deserve. This information can be used to direct policy and practice both within Ontario and beyond.

Definitions of Terminology

At-risk – The understanding of the term at-risk varies a great deal from one person to the next and from one jurisdiction to the next and is explored within the study. However, the main focus of this project involves the prediction and prevention of early school failure, therefore the term will generally be used in reference to students who are in danger of falling significantly behind their peers academically. Because the understanding of the term is not clear it is being used as a coined expression and therefore appears in quotation marks the first time it was used and thereafter it appears without quotation marks.

Early Identification, Identification, and Formal Identification – As will be discussed, the concept of early identification is embedded in the Education Act of the province of Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1982). The goal of early identification is to recognize students who may need extra support in the early primary grades, generally before Grade 1. The identification as used in the study refers to the recognition of students who might be at-risk. Formal Identification refers to the process of identifying a student as having an exceptionality. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education:

Exceptional pupils are identified as such by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC). Upon receiving a written request from a student's parent(s)/guardian(s), the principal of the school must refer the student to an IPRC. The IPRC will decide whether the student is an exceptional pupil and, if so, what type of educational placement is appropriate. The principal may also, on written notice to the parent(s)/guardian(s), refer the student to an IPRC. The parent(s)/guardian(s), as

well as a student who is sixteen years of age or older, have the right to attend the IPRC meeting and may request that the IPRC discuss potential programs that would meet the student's needs. On the basis of these discussions, the IPRC can recommend the special education programs and/or services that it considers to be appropriate for the student. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014)

Early literacy skills – Early literacy involves “the knowledge and skills that children need in order to read with fluency and comprehension include: oral language; prior knowledge and experience; concepts about print; phonemic awareness; letter-sound relationships; vocabulary; semantics and syntax; metacognition; and higher-order thinking skills. These are not isolated concepts taught in a lock-step sequence; they are interrelated components that support and build on each other” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). For the purposes of this project, early literacy also involves the skills necessary for writing as well as reading.

Intervention – The term intervention refers to activities aimed at helping students who need extra support in order to achieve expectations. Interventions vary a great deal depending on the issues such as the expectation in question (can include academic and/or behaviour). They vary in range between informal, short-term supports such as extra teaching time in the classroom to more formal arrangements involving support from outside the classroom.

Pre-primary – The term pre-primary is used to describe an approach to early childhood education that focuses on making sure the child acquires the academic skills necessary to be successful in school. It tends to involve a standardized, structured curriculum, teacher directed activities and assessment based on product and achievement of curriculum expectations.

Social pedagogical – In contrast to the pre-primary approach, early childhood education programs based on the social pedagogical ideals include a more holistic view. The well-being of the child is of primary concern. Activities are child-centred, and play-based, the curriculum is flexible and locally developed, and assessment is based on developmental continua of a variety of domains.

Chapter 2 – Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study was to investigate the elements that influence the identification of at-risk students in the context of the Full-Day Early Learning - Kindergarten Program in Ontario. The main goal of the project was to gain insight into how these elements vary within and between the multiple levels of the education system.

An essential step in the research process is to place the study in the context of the current literature. To that end, a thorough and critical review was completed of the literature relating to early identification and intervention in the early years of schooling. This review was ongoing throughout the data collection, data analysis, and data synthesis phases. Four main areas of literature were examined: 1) interpretations of school readiness and what it means to be at-risk; 2) early identification and intervention in terms of at-risk students; 3) approaches to early childhood education/Kindergarten, and 4) the connection between educator beliefs and practice. Multiple sources were utilized to conduct this focused literature review including peer reviewed journals, periodicals, dissertations, books, technical reports, and legislation. These sources were accessed primarily through university-based digital databases including Scholar's Portal, RACER, and ProQuest Digital Dissertations. Internet-based resources such as Google Scholar were also employed. No particular delimiting time frame was used while conducting this review.

This chapter is divided into five parts. The first part will explore the concept of at-risk including the characteristics that might be considered as well as the factors that might lead a student to be at-risk. In the second section I review the importance of and current approaches to early identification and intervention. The third part will describe the different approaches to early childhood education and provide a context for the various elements of current FDELKP. This will include a discussion of how the concept of at-risk might be interpreted within different approaches. In the fourth part of the chapter, the impact of educator beliefs and understandings on practices within the classroom as well as in the larger context of the school will be explored. Finally, the last section will present the theoretical framework used to guide the study. Gaps in the literature will be identified to provide direction for future research and justification for the questions included in this project.

Concept of At-Risk

Who is at-risk? As stated in Chapter 1, it is estimated that up to 25% of young children experience cognitive and/or behaviour issues that interfere with their ability to be successful in school (Offord Centre for Child Studies, 2009). While it is not disputed that many children begin school less ready to learn than their peers, neither the characteristics that would lead to a student being considered at-risk nor the factors that lead to these characteristics are simple or straightforward. The various interpretations of the term at-risk as well as some of the reasons students might be at-risk for early school failure will be explored in this section.

The concept of students at-risk in the early years of education is often discussed in terms of school readiness; does the child have the skills and abilities that will allow them to be successful in school? However, which skills and/or abilities is a question that has been debated over many years (LaParo & Pianta, 2000). Approaches range between those that focus on cognitive skills and those that take a broader view by including social and emotional issues (e.g., Snow, 2007).

Focus on cognitive skills. Traditional views of school readiness have focused mostly on cognitive skills, particularly pre-reading and oral language; because it was believed that these skills would be most predictive of later academic success (Janus & Offord, 2007; Simner, 1987; 1995). These views have been supported in research including meta-analyses by Duncan et al. (2007) and later by Romano, Babchishin, Pagani, and Kohen (2010). However, the predictive validity of some assessments aimed at identifying children that might be at-risk has been questioned. In their meta-analytic review, LaParo and Pianta (2000), found that efforts to predict performance in Grades 1 and 2 based on single assessments in Kindergarten were only moderately effective and that “instability and change may be the rule rather than the exception during this period” (p. 476). Similarly, Miesels and Atkins-Burnett (2006) found in their differential analysis of studies that relatively little (25%) of the variance in later academic performance can be predicted by pre-school or Kindergarten cognitive skills. Vervaeke, McNamara, and Scissons (2007) found that the screening system they studied, which was intended to identify students that might be at-risk for later learning disabilities in reading, over-identified many children and missed many others. Their concern was that efforts to remediate the skills of those who were falsely

identified as needing support were unnecessary while those that did need support did not receive it. They argued for ongoing, multiple opportunities for assessment. Despite the difficulties in finding appropriate screening mechanisms, some would argue that demands for accountability within the school system have increased the focus on academic skills and making sure students are ready for learning in Grade 1 (Kagan & Kaurez, 2007).

Focus on the whole child. While academic readiness is a key focus for many ECE programs (Howes et al., 2008), there is growing concern over the number of students who are considered to be at-risk for school failure due to emotional and behavioural problems (Bayat, Mindes, & Covitt, 2010; Blair & Diamond, 2008; Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006). In a number of studies, it was found that teachers believed there were significant numbers of students in their classes whose behaviour problems interfered with their learning (Blair, & Diamond, 2008, Hemmeter et al. 2006). Teachers also identified behaviours and attitudes rather than academic skills as the most important indicators of school readiness, including: the ability to follow directions, self-regulation, the ability to communicate needs and thoughts verbally, and sensitivity to the feelings of others and enthusiasm for learning (Blair & Diamond, 2008; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000).

Connections between academic success and social skills. Other research supports the view that a range of skills should be considered by citing the strong connection between social and emotional behaviours and academic achievement. McClelland, Morrison and Holmes (2000) found that learning-related social skills were directly related to academic performance. These included interpersonal skills (interacting positively, playing cooperatively, sharing, and respecting others) and work-related skills (listening and follow directions, participating appropriately in groups and staying on task). Particularly, work-related skills “predicted unique variance in academic outcomes at school entry and at the end of second grade” (p. 307). Children who scored lower on work-related skills also scored lower on academic outcomes. In their study involving teacher referral of students Soles, Bloom, Heath, and Karagiannakis (2008) found that the connection between social and emotional skills and academic success continues into later grades with the majority of students who were referred for social and emotional behaviour difficulties, also experiencing moderate to severe academic difficulties.

While research evidence exists to support the connection between social and emotional well-being and school success, the consideration of a variety of domains when deciding who might be at risk is not universally accepted and the debate about how to identify those at-risk continues. In their meta-analysis of related research Duncan et al. (2007) showed a strong link between early math and literacy skills and later achievement but “measures of socioemotional behaviours, including internalizing and externalizing problems and social skills, were generally insignificant predictors of later academic performance, even among children with relatively high levels of problem behaviour” (p. 1428). However, when Romano, Babchishin, Pagani, and Kohen (2010) replicated and extended the analysis in a Canadian context they found different results. While early math and literacy skills were still strong predictors of later achievement, they also found that “kindergarten socioemotional behaviours, especially hyper-activity/impulsivity, prosocial, and anxiety/depression, were significant predictors of 3rd-grade math and reading” (p. 995). The authors attribute differences between their analysis and that of Duncan et al. (2007) in part to improved methodological approach (specifically the handling of missing data). It must also be noted that the data sets involved were somewhat different, Romano et al. (2010) used data exclusively from Canada while Duncan et al. (2007) included data from Canada, the United States, and Great Britain. Romano et al. (2010) also indicate that they specifically sought to compare Kindergarten socio-emotional behaviour to similar behaviours in 3rd grade while Duncan et al. (2007) focused only on whether socioemotional behaviour in Kindergarten predicted academic behaviour in later grades.

The previous discussion frames the concept of at-risk within the child, with the focus on a set of skills that the child either has or needs to have in order to be successful in school. However, others would argue that readiness for school and therefore who is at-risk because they are not ready can be dependent on social and cultural factors (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006). As Scott-Little et al. state:

Persons involved in the conceptualization of readiness develop shared meanings of school readiness, and these shared meanings are shaped by the context within which readiness is defined. Cultural, historical, institutional, and political forces influence views on what skills, knowledge and abilities are important for children's success in school. (p. 155)

Cultural influences on the concept of at-risk were also noted by Pellegrini (1991) who found that the development of early literacy skills has more to do with the context of the literacy activity than the discrete skills involved. Understanding the “rules” of the game, which varied from one context to another, was the most important factor in successful literacy experiences. Thus within this interpretation, a student may appear at-risk if the materials being used for teaching and assessment are not the ones with which the student is most familiar.

Still others would question whether “children should be ready for school or schools ready for children” (LaParo & Pianta, 2000, p. 476). As will be discussed in a later section, only quality ECE programs appear to benefit children considered to be at at-risk and research has demonstrated that characteristics such as teaching style, class size, curriculum, and policy can influence student success (e.g., Barnett, 2008; LaParo & Pianta, 2000; Meisels, 2007).

While there is no clear agreement of how to determine precisely which students might be at-risk, there is research that identifies a number of factors that may influence a child’s readiness to learn. These factors are discussed in the following section.

Factors influencing readiness to learn. The Early Development Instrument (EDI) is widely used to determine the level of readiness for school learning in Kindergarten children across Canada. The purpose of the EDI is to provide community-level information for program planning purposes rather than diagnostic information at the individual level (Janus & Offord, 2007). According to recent EDI results, one in four children demonstrates weakness in one or more developmental areas putting them at greater risk for school failure (2007). Analysis of the EDI links a number of risk factors related to children being less ready for school learning than their peers including: socioeconomic status (SES), family structure, child health, parent health, and parental involvement in literacy development (2007). Gender and age were also found to influence readiness to learn with boys and those who are younger at school entry more likely to show weaknesses.

Socioeconomic factors most commonly related were family income, as well as parent education and employment. “Children with fewer risk factors (which included low maternal education, single-parent family status, utilization of social assistance, and home language other than English) were more likely to arrive at kindergarten with better cognitive and

reading skills” (Janus & Offord, 2007, p. 378). Other studies have confirmed that students may be at risk for school failure due to socioeconomic issues such as poverty (Falk, 2010; Friendly, 2008; Pianta et al., 2005). While poverty itself is not necessarily responsible for reduced success in school, issues related to poverty such as increased family stress, lack of access to adequate health services, and poorer nutrition can impact readiness to learn (Falk, 2010; McCain, Mustard, & Shanker, 2007). While poverty is undoubtedly an important factor, it must be noted that the majority of students identified as being vulnerable to school failure through the EDI were actually from households and neighbourhoods in the middle- and upper-income ranges (Janus & Duku, 2007).

Research has shown that children from families whose first language is not English are often at a disadvantage when starting school and are at higher risk of being identified with learning disabilities (Bernhard et al., 2006; Janus & Duku, 2007). Disrupted family structures have also been shown to have an impact on school readiness. This has been found to be most strongly connected to lower income related to single-parent households (2007).

Poor health can also affect children's school readiness due to increased absences, lower participation in activities as well as negative effects of some medication (Janus & Duku, 2007). Parental health, particularly that of the mother in the prenatal period, can also have a significant influence on ability to learn. Other parental health factors negatively impacting child readiness to learn include: parental abuse of alcohol, maternal smoking as well as affective disorders such as depression (2007).

Finally, while direct mechanisms are not clear, there is consistent evidence that parents can positively influence school readiness by being directly involved in literacy development through activities such as reading with their children, and providing print rich environments (Falk, 2010; Janus & Duku, 2007; Pianta et al., 2005).

Summary. While the concept of at-risk may vary a great deal between a focus on cognitive skills and academic readiness to a more holistic focus on the whole child and multiple domains of development, clearly many children are beginning school less ready to learn than their peers. The factors that have been found to influence later achievement and success are also quite varied but include contextual issues such as socioeconomic status and family structure which interact with and influence the cognitive and social development of the child. It is also clear that early school experiences are extremely important; children that

experience early acceptance and success are more likely to have positive experiences in the future (Blair & Diamond, 2008). Similarly, early negative experiences, whatever the underlying cause, are more likely to result in a downward spiral making it increasingly difficult for the child to achieve success in school (Blair, 2002; Blair & Diamond, 2008). Without intervention the gaps between those who are successful early in school and those who struggle tend to remain or grow over time often with long-term consequences, however it has also been shown that early identification and intervention can mitigate the damage (Falk, 2010; McCain, Mustard, & McCuaig, 2011). In the next section, the importance of early learning experiences as well as the value of early intervention will be further examined.

Early Identification and Intervention

The period of early childhood is one of great potential; consequently many countries have focused new attention on early childhood education (ECE) programs (Bennett, 2005; Friendly, Doherty, & Beach, 2006). While ECE is considered beneficial to all children, it is also seen as a way to support children that might be disadvantaged in some way and therefore at-risk for poorer educational outcomes. The importance of ECE for all students and especially those at-risk for school failure will be reviewed in the following discussion of the literature surrounding early brain development, and the value of early intervention. Several examples of identification protocols will be presented followed by a discussion of concerns surrounding the assessment of young children that should be considered when deciding which assessments to perform and how the results might be used.

Early brain development. Research in the area of neuroscience has led to significant advancements in the understanding of the early brain development (McCain, Mustard, & Shanker, 2007; Schweinhart, 2006). The period from birth to 5 years of age is one of rapid growth and development of brain structures including neurons and synaptic connections (Blair, 2002; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2008). There is also clear evidence that experiences in early childhood can strongly impact brain development (Blair, 2002). Stimulating, supportive environments promote growth and create the foundation necessary for future learning. Conversely, lack of stimulation or negative experiences such as excessive stress, neglect or abuse can inhibit growth with long lasting implications (McCain et al., 2007; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2008). An important function and reason behind the development of ECE programs is to provide children with a

stimulating and supportive environment, especially those who might be exposed to negative experiences that could put them at-risk (Friendly, 2008; McCain et al., 2007).

Early intervention. As stated, early childhood is a period which is extremely sensitive to both positive and negative influences making it a time of prime importance for both the prevention and mitigation of factors that may impede learning and success in school (Wylie, Hodgen, Ferral, & Thompson, 2006). Intervening early when a child is struggling academically is essential, as early intervention can reduce the severity of learning difficulties (Bernhard et al., 2006; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). The economic impact of early intervention has also been established by a number of authors who argue that investing in programs that enhance early academic success can yield long term financial benefits in terms of reduced social problems that are often related to low skills and lack of academic success including crime, and teenage pregnancy (Heckman, 2008; Karoly, Kilburn, & Cannon, 2005; Reynolds & Temple, 2008). The earlier interventions take place, the more successful they are and the greater the beneficial economic impact (Heckman, 2008). Janus and Offord (2007) argue that even if the level of risk is relatively low, “a large number of children at a small risk for school failure may generate a much greater burden of suffering than a small number of children with a high risk” (p. 2). Unfortunately the authors go on to state, “in the current climate, school or preschool interventions are based on individual diagnostics usually only with serious clinical cases” (p. 2).

Identification and intervention. While it is generally agreed that early intervention is important, how to identify which children may be in need of intervention and how to provide that intervention is much less clear. In her review of early intervention across the province of Ontario, Underwood (2012) noted the wide range of services, agencies, and professionals involved in providing interventions for young children in the preschool and school years. Although other agencies are still involved (e.g., Ministry of Child and Youth Services), she notes that the majority of services are delivered through the school system, in school settings. As will be illustrated in the discussion of approaches to ECE, the goals of the program tend to influence the other elements of the program. Programs based on academic readiness for Grade 1 will have expectations and assessment practices to track the acquisition of academic skills, and will then be concerned with children not meeting those expectations. When it comes to students that might be at-risk the assessments used for identification and

the interventions provided will depend on the characteristics considered most salient in any particular setting. Examples of the range of identification protocols are presented in the next section.

Early Identification Protocols. Reviewing the full range of identification and intervention strategies is beyond the scope of this project however a number of examples will be provided from my professional experience. From discussions with colleagues and evidence gleaned from students transferring in from other school boards, it was clear that many school boards went through similar transitions in terms of early assessment.⁴ Assessments used between 2000 and 2010, in the school board for which I worked included the Brigance® Diagnostic Inventory of Early Development – Revised (Curriculum Associates, Inc. , 1991), a comprehensive screening device that tracks development in a wide range of domains including physical, cognitive, language, and social-emotional. The next protocol replaced the use of the Brigance but began as part of a pilot project centred on early identification sponsored by the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) and the Ontario Ministry of Education. The Promoting Early Intervention (PEI) initiative involved a number of screening devices including the Teacher’s School Readiness Inventory (TRSI; Simner, 1987) which included measures of attention, verbal fluency, participation, letter identification and printing skills, as well as the Rosner Test of Auditory Analysis (Rosner, 1975) to assess phonological awareness.⁵ These assessments were then followed by an internet-based tracking and intervention system, the Web-Based Teaching Tool (WBTT). The pilot project was deemed quite successful and many school boards including my own adopted and continued the use of the assessments as well as the WBTT for many years (Harrison, 2005).

However, after the advent of provincial assessments it was considered important to find assessments that could be standardized and provide statistical data for tracking purposes. The WBTT involved a rating system based on teacher judgment which was not standardized therefore a team was assembled to compile a series of assessments which were standardized and could be used as data to track results. The result was a battery of literacy assessments

⁴ In the school system in Ontario a file is created for each student when they begin school. The Ontario School Record (OSR) includes personal information, progress reports and any assessments completed. The OSR follows the child and is transferred to the receiving school whenever a child moves within the province.

⁵For more information on the PEI initiative as well as issues surrounding early identification see Harrison, 2005.

which included oral language development (Crevola, 2007) and assessments of phonemic awareness, letter identification skills, concepts of print, and reading level taken from Marie Clay's Observation Survey (Clay, 2005). The assessments were used to identify students that needed support but were also tracked board wide and used for school improvement planning purposes with the goal of improving EQAO results.

Issues surrounding assessment. A number of concerns appear in the literature surrounding assessments used for early identification. To begin with, the assessment of young children must be approached with caution due to the nature of this period of growth and development (Bagnato, 2006; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2006; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004). Assessment results can easily be inaccurate because children's growth rates vary widely making results difficult to interpret, and developing skills can be unstable and may not be performed on demand (Feldman, 2010; Strickland et al., 2004). The possibility of inaccurate results is of particular concern in the case of high-stakes testing (i.e., those used to make important decisions about students or programs) (Bagnato, 2006; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004). Recommendations by a number of organizations and authors stress that no such testing should be used on children below the age of eight years (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2006; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004). Assessments can provide essential information about learning, however care must be taken to make sure the information is accurate and used properly (LaParo & Pianta, 2000).

Assessment information can and should be used for a number of purposes including: identification of students at-risk, instructional improvement, program evaluation, and accountability (Epstein, Schweinhart, DeBruin-Parecki, & Robin, 2004; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2006). Difficulties may arise when assessments designed for one purpose are used inappropriately for another. Meisels and Atkins-Burnett (2006) note confusion around tests to establish readiness and those intended as screening devices for learning difficulties as an example.

A further issue in the literature centres on accountability and the demand for improved performance on wide-scale assessments. The concern is that the pressure to increase scores filters down to the younger grades resulting in a narrowing of the curriculum toward the skills that will be tested (Hollingworth, 2007; Supovitz, 2009) with a focus most

often on the specific literacy and numeracy skills most easily assessed in wide-scale assessments (Epstein et al., 2004; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2006).

Response to intervention (RtI). Described as a paradigm shift in K- 12 education by Greenwood et al. (2011), Response to Intervention (RtI) is a relatively new approach to early identification and intervention. Issues around the validity of assessment, and especially the use of standardized assessments at early ages, meant that young children had to wait until the later primary years to be formally identified with a number of learning problems including learning disabilities. As has been noted, this wait-to-fail approach often denied students the early interventions that might have improved long term outcomes (Vervaeke, McNamara, & Scissons, 2007). A RtI approach is based on a system of tiered interventions aimed at providing support for all students and then increasing the level of intervention for those who do not respond. It has also been suggested that the interventions and lack of response to interventions be used as a step in the formal identification process (Pyle, 2011; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

The three-tiered model begins with school-wide programs that are intended to be preventative and proactive and universally applied to all students. For students who do not respond to the first tier, interventions are provided that become more intensive and individualized as the needs of the students increase. Tier 2 interventions are often provided to small groups while Tier 3 interventions are more targeted and often require programming and/or assessment services from special education or outside agencies (Fuchs, Mock, & Young, 2003; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005; 2013). This tiered approach to intervention is outlined in the document *Education for All* and in the expanded document *Learning for All* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005; 2013) both created to provide guidance for the delivery of special education within the province of Ontario thus indicating the acceptance and promotion of the approach.

While an in depth discussion of Response to Intervention is not possible here, there are a number of implications for the identification of at-risk students in the FDELKP arising from RtI. The approach means that students do not have to be formally identified before receiving support, therefore interventions can be offered in a timely manner when the risk is noticed. However, according to Fuchs, Fuchs, and Stecker (2010), this has created a “blurring” of the lines in terms of the delivery of services and it is not always clear who can

or will provide the interventions. In some schools, teachers provide both Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions while in others the Special Education staff provide support for and/or deliver Tier 2 interventions. It is also not always clear when Tier 3 interventions are necessary. While there are different interpretations of RtI, many agree that it must be based on screening and tracking results in order to decide which students are and are not responding (Fuchs, Mock, & Young, 2003; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; Greenwood et al., 2011). Therefore, who receives interventions will depend on which skills considered important and are being screened and tracked.

Summary. In the research reviewed, findings indicate that early childhood is a critical time in development and that if a child is possibly at-risk, providing support as soon as possible is essential to mitigate negative outcomes. There is less agreement on how to identify which children need support. The sample of identification protocols presented are just a few of those that have been or are being used in schools in Ontario. While the focus appeared to be on a wider range of developmental domains at one point, current protocols are more focused on early literacy skills. While these assessments may identify students who are potentially at-risk there are concerns about making judgements about students' abilities so early in their academic careers. Many researchers urge caution when assessing young children especially if those assessments might be used to make important decisions about the child. Response to Intervention is one approach to supporting students that might struggle without the need to be formally identified.

Early Childhood Education

Recognizing the importance of learning in the early years and the value of early intervention, many jurisdictions have focused on Early Childhood Education (ECE) as a way of providing support for young children, especially those who might be disadvantaged in some way (Bennett, 2005; Friendly et al. 2006; McCain et al. 2011). The next section will explore the various approaches to ECE and the implications these have for students at-risk. Current understandings of the most effective ECE programs will be reviewed and a brief outline of Ontario's Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program (FDEKP) will be provided.

Approaches to early childhood education. Despite general consensus on the value and approach to ECE, there is a great deal of variation in ECE programs due to the many

factors that influence both the original design of the program and how it is implemented. Understanding these two traditions and the elements involved provides important background information regarding how different individuals will approach teaching and assessment, and therefore the identification of at-risk students.

In their review of preschool programs in the late 1990s, researchers with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found widespread agreement in the articulation of the basic concept and goals of early childhood education within policy and curriculum documents. These included the support of children's academic learning but also elements of social and emotional growth, and physical well-being (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) Directorate for Education, 2004). Most policy statements encouraged learning experiences that were child-centred and play-based (Bennett, 2005; Friendly et al., 2006). On further investigation; however, it became clear that the policy statements did not provide an accurate picture of the programs in place (Bennett, 2005; Dickinson, 2005). Researchers found that the programs fell into two broad traditions: pre-primary and social pedagogical. Programs varied both in general approach and on specific elements. Therefore, these traditions and the elements within them should be viewed as opposite ends of continua rather than absolutes (Bennett, 2005; Dickinson, 2005). Understanding these two traditions and the elements involved provides important background information regarding how different individuals will approach teaching and assessment, and therefore the identification of at-risk students.

Two Curricular Traditions. The term 'curricular tradition' combines a number of interrelated issues including the values and beliefs underlying a program, as well as what is taught and how it is taught (Kagan & Kauerz, 2006). The goal of the program is the general principle that guides many other elements, including pedagogical guidelines, the curriculum expectations, and assessment practices. Table 1 provides an overview.

Table 1

Overview of Curricular Traditions

	Pre-primary	Social Pedagogical
Goals	School readiness	Holistic development and well-being
Pedagogy	Teacher directed	Child-centred, play-based
Curriculum	Standardized, centrally created	Flexible, locally created
Assessment	Skills and product based, benchmarks	Holistic, based on developmental continua, formative assessments

The way in which children experience the curriculum is determined by the pedagogical guidelines. They include the type of experiences the child has as well as the role of the educators in guiding the learning process. The curriculum document outlines what the child is expected to know and be able to do, including knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Assessment practices are used to determine how successful the child has been in achieving the curricular expectations (Bennett, 2005; Dickinson, 2005).

Goals. The goal of the pre-primary tradition is to ensure that the child acquires the knowledge and skills that they will require for a successful transition into formal school. Activities include play; however, the emphasis is on teacher-directed learning experiences. The curriculum is prescribed and created by a central government and is expected to be implemented in a standard way across jurisdictions. Curriculum goals are generally set by government. Teachers are expected to assess student levels of achievement of predetermined skills (Bennett, 2005; Dickinson, 2005).

The social pedagogical tradition focuses on the development of a wide range of abilities with attention to the well-being of the child as a whole. Learning is directed by the child’s own interest and natural curiosity and occurs through relationships with peers and adults mostly in the context of play. Curriculum expectations are created by local authorities who interpret broadly defined goals set by the government. Assessment is less formal than in the pre-primary tradition and is based on individual growth along developmental continua. Screening for specific learning difficulties is used if necessary.

Pedagogical approaches. While the main focus of ECE programs can differ greatly, so too does the way in which the child is expected to engage in learning. Broadly speaking

these experiences can be seen as a range between more formal, teacher directed learning and play based, child-centred learning. While there is often a mix of learning experiences, a stronger emphasis toward teacher directed learning is connected to the pre-primary traditions. In contrast to teacher directed learning, programs based on the social pedagogical approach expect the child to be more in control of learning. Learning is initiated by the child and is centred on their own individual interests and abilities (Bennett, 2005; Dickinson, 2005).

Curriculum. Although it is generally accepted that young children learn in different ways and at different rates (McCain et al., 2007), there is much less agreement as to what it is they need to learn in ECE programs. These expectations outlined in the curriculum are tied directly to the purpose or goal of ECE program. The explicitness of these expectations may vary from general development goals outlined in a broad framework connected to the social pedagogical approach to the detailed listings of specific academic and cognitive skills more common in the pre-primary traditions (Dickinson, 2005).

The assessment continuum. As with many of the elements that make up early education programs, assessment practices can be seen as a continuum. At one end are practices based in positivist traditions. These are tied more closely with traditional curriculum and the pre-primary approach. Assessment is viewed as summative to determine the level at which a specific goal has been achieved. The child is a passive participant with the product of learning being assessed rather than the process. The emphasis is on uniformity, standardization, and objectivity (Shepard, 2000; 2001). At the other end of the continuum, aligned with the social pedagogical tradition are the more holistic approaches based on social – constructivist theory including developmental continua and formative assessments. The emphasis is on assessment as part of the learning process with the results used to guide instruction. Children are seen as active participants in both learning and in the evaluation of their work (Shepard, 2000; 2001).

Implications for identifying students at-risk. Given the differing goals, curriculum expectations, and approaches to teaching and assessment it follows that understanding of students at-risk would also vary within the two broadly defined educational traditions. Within pre-primary systems the goal is school readiness; with assessment based on meeting benchmark expectations of the prescribed curriculum; children who do not meet those

expectations will likely be considered at-risk. Alternately, a system based on social pedagogical assumptions will have a more holistic idea of students who struggle. Rather than focus on curriculum expectations, the child's progression along developmental continua in a variety of domains is more likely to be considered.

ECE is seen by many as a way to 'level the playing field' by providing learning opportunities to those students who may be disadvantaged in some way (Falk, 2010; McCain et al., 2007). This does not mean though, that all educational experiences will be equally beneficial. It is apparent that only ECE programs that are of high quality produce lasting positive effects, especially for at-risk students ((Barnett, 2008; Friendly et al., 2006; Howes et al., 2008; Pianta et al., 2005). The next section will address the issue of quality in ECE programs.

What is quality ECE? While there is agreement in the literature that high quality ECE programs benefit young children, especially those at-risk (Barnett, 2008; Falk, 2010), it is less clear where on the continua the various elements must be located to produce a high quality educational experience. As Friendly, Doherty and Beach (2006), point out, the issue of quality can be quite complex because it can vary depending on what the initial goals of the program are (school readiness in terms of academic skills or overall development) and may be different depending on personal perspective. For example, parents may view health and safety of their children as well as convenience and affordability as key, while program planners may be more concerned with efficiency and achievement of curriculum goals.

However, general recommendations, based on reviews of the child development research and literature, have been made by a number of organizations. The scope of this literature review does not allow for an in depth discussion of these recommendations, therefore, an overview of some of the issues involved as well as how they might influence which children are considered to be at-risk will be presented.

Suggested Pedagogical Approach. There is some evidence that children do benefit from direct instruction, but it would also seem that these gains are short lived (Schweinhart, 2006). There is also evidence that excessively prescriptive instruction can actually be detrimental to learning (Miller & Almon, 2009; Phillips, Norris, & Steffler, 2007). Recommendations for pedagogical approaches support a range of adult-directed and child initiated experiences (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC),

2009; Pascal, 2009) but also strongly support play as the main vehicle for learning. Play is widely believed to be an essential element for normal development and the main means through which learning occurs for young children (Hewes, 2006; NAEYC, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). While it has been difficult to clearly define the concept of play, it is generally agreed that play activities occur in a number of different forms including: exploratory, sensory, physical, social, and pretend. Pretend or fantasy play is considered particularly important in terms of social, emotional and intellectual growth (Hewes, 2006; Paley, 2004; Pellegrini & Galda, 1993). When children engage in pretend play with others, they must imagine things other than they are. This kind of play requires problem solving and gives children the opportunity to experiment with relationships and to develop social skills (McCain et al., 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009; Singer & Lythcott, 2004). Although the direct mechanism is not clear, there appears to be a strong connection between pretend play and cognitive development (Bergen, 2006; McCain et al., 2007). However, the critics of the research on play-based learning cite concerns over methodology, lack of clear definitions and the absence of causal evidence connecting play to development (Roskos & Christie, 2004). This lack of clear evidence and pressure to improve learning outcomes has led to the reduction of the amount of time devoted to play in ECE programs in favour of time spent on skill acquisition (Bergen, 2006; Hewes, 2006; Miller & Almon, 2009; Roskos & Christie, 2004).

Consensus on Curriculum. Within the literature there does seem to be a consensus that curriculum standards of some sort are necessary. If appropriate and written properly, they can provide a shared view of what children should be learning and can provide consistency in the transition to formal schooling (Bennett, 2005; Kendall, 2003). However, appropriate expectations for young children have yet to be defined (Bodrova, Leong, & Shore, 2004; Falk, 2010; Kendall, 2003). Key recommendations include that program standards cover: (a) a broad range of learning areas including physical, social and emotional, and cognitive domains; (b) are comprehensive; (c) are specific but flexible to allow for different rates of learning; and (d) are evidence based. There should be clear distinctions between programming and outcome standards and if possible to determine whether or not they are being met by the children involved (Bodrova et al., 2004; NAEYC, 2009).

These recommendations are often accepted in theory but are not always apparent in the curriculum document or in the day-to-day functioning of the programs. For example, it is

widely understood that children grow and learn at different rates; however children who are not meeting expectations may be thought of as falling behind and may be put under pressure to catch up to their peers (Brown, 2007; Goldstein, 2008). It can be difficult, even for those responsible for designing curriculum to balance what is considered developmentally appropriate with the demands for school readiness based on academic skills expected in many jurisdictions (Brown, 2007; Kendall, 2003).

Assessment in ECE. Tied closely to curriculum expectations, approaches to assessment will vary a great deal depending on what is considered to be important and what children are expected to learn. Assessments aligned with the pre-primary tradition tend to be based on the achievement of benchmark expectations (Bennett, 2005). These assessments are often focused on specific isolated skills, which make the tests relatively easier and faster to administer. Reliability and validity can readily be established allowing the results to be used for comparative purposes, either against established criteria or other jurisdictions (Betts, Pickart, & Heistad, 2009; Falk, WichlerleOrt, & Moirs, 2007). Unfortunately, reliability and validity are not always established, especially if the tests are locally created and/or if there are not clearly agreed upon testing protocols (Lindsay, Marineau, & Lewis, 2004; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2006). There can also be questions as to whether the skills and knowledge being assessed provide the most salient indicators of growth and development (Betts et al., 2009; Hirsh-Pasek, Kochannoff, Newcombe, & de Villiers, 2005).

The advantages of holistic assessments are that they provide a more complete picture of what the student knows and can do. Multiple types of assessments including observations, portfolios and performance tasks completed over time, can reveal more information about both the product and process of learning (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2005). The literature around holistic assessments supports their value to teachers, students and parents in terms of the benefits for learning and better communication about learning between all parties (Carr, May, & Podmore, 2002; MacDonald, 2007). However, completing multiple assessments can be more time consuming, and it can be difficult to establish consistent, widely accepted descriptions of appropriate development (Karelitz, Parish, Yamada, & Wilson, 2010; MacDonald, 2007).

While there are many different approaches to assessment, there are a number of general principles that should be considered. Given that development, especially in early

childhood, is not a linear process, a child's ability in any specific domain can vary a great deal from one time to the next and can be context dependent (Feldman, 2010; Strickland et al., 2004). Therefore assessment should take place in a variety of settings and on numerous occasions (Bagnato, 2006; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2006; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004). It is also believed that the most accurate results of a child's capabilities are obtained by observing the child while they are engaged in their normal everyday activities and that assessments based on continua of development including a wide range of domains are believed to provide a more thorough understanding of the growth and learning of the child (Karelitz et al. 2010).

Early learning in Ontario. While the specific goals of an ECE program can influence how elements such as pedagogical approach, curriculum, and assessment practices are operationalized, there is general agreement that these are the qualities that are most likely to create programs that are beneficial to young children. It is not surprising then that these elements were among the recommendations included by Dr. Charles Pascal in his 2009 report *With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario*. Acting as Special Advisor to the Premier of Ontario, Pascal was asked to make recommendations on changes to the learning in the early years in the province. Previously, most children in English school boards attended Junior and Senior Kindergarten ½ days or every 2nd day. Based on recommendation from Dr. Pascal, the government introduced full-day Kindergarten for four- and five-year olds. Implementation of the Full-Day Early Learning - Kindergarten Program began in 2010. The program is intended to give all students a strong start in school but is also intended to provide support and intervention for the up to 25% of students that may not be as ready to learn as their peers when they start Grade 1. The program is intended to be inquiry based and child-centred and is delivered by certified teachers and Early Childhood Educators working together as educator teams in the classroom. While the emphasis is on inquiry and learning through play, the curriculum is based on the pre-existing Kindergarten expectations (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). A variety of assessment strategies are recommended, with the emphasis placed on observing the child in their regular daily activities and using multiple sources and opportunities to make judgments about the child's growth.

The program is still relatively new with full implementation completed in the fall of 2014. There has been limited research to date however; two evaluations have been completed based on the first two years of the program. While early indications are that the program would appear to better prepare children for Grade 1; the authors of the studies from Queen's University urge caution citing limitations to the study in terms of accessing data and the preliminary nature of the results (Vanderlee, Youmans, Peters, & Eastabrook, 2012). All participants in the study agreed that having two educators in the classroom "supports optimal pedagogy" (p.49). However, there was a concern that the roles of the ECE within the educator teams were not clearly defined, a fact that was exacerbated by the lack of joint planning and discussion time for the teacher and ECE. While the research found that many educator teams and schools were embracing the play-based, child-centred philosophy of the FDELKP, "many administrators, parents, and even teachers continue to favour, push for, and even demand more academic teacher directed approaches, especially in relation to literacy and numeracy" (p. 46). In terms of assessment and evaluation, many teams were using innovative approaches to gather data on student achievement including observation, collection of artifacts and recording information with technology. The teams believed that this was an effective way to assess the students and share information with parents although the practice was time consuming and, therefore, it was important again, that there were two individuals in the classroom. A further concern about the program involved the physical space in some FDELKP classrooms and the effect this might be having on the emotional climate in the class. This issue was a result of increased class sizes due to the presence of two educators in the classroom. This concern was expressed by at least 25% of the participants. Over-crowded classrooms made it difficult to implement the play-based nature of the program and were thought to make friction and behavioural problems more likely and to "contribute to emotional exhaustion and limit optimal engagement and learning" (p. 51). It was further noted that there seemed to be a great deal of variation in how the program is being implemented.

Summary. This section provided background information about approaches to ECE which range between a Pre-primary approach that focuses on cognitive skills and school readiness and a Social Pedagogical approach which tends to focus on the whole child. The characteristics considered important in the provision of quality ECE experiences were

reviewed, including the need for a play-based, child-centred approach. In theory, Ontario's FDELKP is based on the recommended best practices, however, as stated; there is a great deal of variation in how any particular program will be implemented. More time and research will be needed to determine if the program will live up to its promise of providing the best start for young children in school.

Beliefs, Knowledge, and Practice

As stated in the discussion of students at-risk, there are many different understandings of what it means to be ready for school and as well as different understandings of being at-risk. Indeed the concept has been described as a social construct that can vary with context and is influenced by many factors such as culture and institutional and political forces. It is therefore dependent on both the individual and shared beliefs and understandings of what is important for children to know and learn (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006). Decision-making within schools is based on all of these factors but is highly influenced by the beliefs and understandings of the individuals involved (Stanovich & Jordan, 1998). The following section will explore the research regarding how knowledge and beliefs influence practice as well as the impact of reaching, or not reaching shared understanding.

Beliefs influence practice. As stated previously, regardless of the policies and theoretical basis behind the structure of the ECE programs, what actually happens in the classroom has much to do with the individual delivering the program (Fang, 1996; Tierney, 2006). According to Fang (1996), traditional research into teaching has been based on what is observable, specifically teacher's actions and the results in terms of student achievement, and has been based on trying to determine cause and effect that could be empirically measured. More recently, the focus has shifted from studies on teacher behaviour to an investigation of the influences that cause an individual to teach the way they do. Research has shown that teachers' approaches to teaching and their day-to-day decision-making is influenced by their own knowledge base as well as the beliefs they hold about the process of learning (Fang, 1996; Isenberg, 1990; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Tierney, 2006). However, research on teachers' knowledge and beliefs and the impact of these on practice has been complicated by issues of definition and methodological approach (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992). For the purposes of this study beliefs about teaching will be defined as: "tacit, often

unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and the academic material to be taught” (Kagan, 1992, p. 65) while knowledge is understood to be “belief that has been affirmed as true on the basis of objective proof or consensus of opinion” (p. 73).

Beliefs influence teaching in a number of ways. For example, Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, and Lloyd, (1991) found that a teacher’s beliefs about the reading process were directly related to how they approached teaching literacy skills. Teachers that believed reading was strictly a matter of understanding the author’s message were more likely to use a skills based-approach while teachers that held more constructivist views, and considered reading an interactive process between author and reader were more likely to focus on comprehension that took the student’s experiences and background knowledge into account. In her meta-synthesis of research on assessment practices Tierney (2006) found that teachers’ beliefs influence their assessment practices but also influenced how the teachers themselves learned during professional development opportunities. Teachers with a more teacher-centred approach expected to be taught in a more traditional way and were less willing to direct their own learning.

Stanovich and Jordan (1998) found that teachers’ beliefs about inclusion of at-risk, ESL and students with exceptionalities in their classrooms impacted their actions in the classroom as well as their interactions with colleagues and parents. They described the differing beliefs and assumptions about the nature of the learning and behaviour problems as being on a continuum between “within the student” (pathognomonic) or a “result of interaction between the pupil and the instructional environment” (p.222) (interventionist). These differing beliefs were related to different practices depending where along the continuum a teacher’s belief could be placed. Teachers who were more pathognomonic, believing the problem was within the student, tended to use fewer interventions with the students, had less interaction with the resource teacher, and minimal interaction with parents, while interventionist teachers provided more interventions before making referrals, interacted effectively with support staff, and had frequent contact with parents.

Knowledge influences practice. The decisions teachers make in their practice are also based on knowledge (Tierney, 2006; Vartuli, 1999). While the distinction between beliefs and knowledge when it comes to teaching is not always clear (see Richardson (1996) and Kagan (1992) for more information) knowledge in this case is taken to mean the

information teachers and ECEs have gained through their personal experiences as well as their training both at the pre-service level and ongoing. This would include, for example, understanding of child development, theories of learning and teaching, and curriculum.

As stated, a key feature of the FDELKP is the presence of both teachers and ECEs in the classroom. The knowledge base of these two groups has traditionally been quite different. While teachers' knowledge has generally been seen to include pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of curriculum, and educational philosophies, the "knowledge base of early childhood teachers...has been influenced by developmental psychology and construct of childhood based on philosophical view such as child-centredness" (Hedges & Cullen, 2005, p. 67). This is evident in Ontario where the two groups of professionals are regulated by different governing bodies: the Ontario College of Teachers and the College of Early Childhood Educators. In Ontario, teachers must hold a valid teaching certificate which requires four to five years of post-secondary education, at least one of which is focused on education. This provides them with general knowledge of curriculum theory, curriculum documents, instructional strategies and assessment practices. There is no current requirement for specialization in early learning although additional courses in the area are encouraged in order to teach in Junior Kindergarten (JK) and Senior Kindergarten (SK) classrooms. ECEs must have completed a two-year diploma program or a three to four year degree program. These programs are focused more specifically on early childhood development (Ontario, 2010a). This different background and training may lead to diverse views of teaching and learning, and in relation to this project, different interpretations of what it means for a child to be at-risk. Although limited by small sample size, one study did show that differing types of education as well as years of experience (ECE vs teacher certification) did result in both differing beliefs and practice in early childhood classrooms (Vartuli, 1999). When assessing teachers' beliefs and practices in developmentally appropriate practices⁶, Vartuli found that "teachers with early childhood certification had significantly higher reported belief scores and observed practices than did teachers with elementary education certification" (1999, p. 510).

⁶ The term developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) describes a framework of best practices for teaching young children described by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). It includes recommendations that align closely with social pedagogical approach described above. See NAEYC (2009) for more detail.

School culture, school efficacy and shared understanding. While beliefs and knowledge have a significant impact on teaching practice they are not the only, or at times, the most important factor. Stanovich and Jordan (1998) found that teacher's beliefs about inclusion influence their teaching (see above); they also found that these practices could be influenced strongly by the culture of the school. When they reviewed teacher beliefs, they also examined the beliefs of the school principal and the school as a whole with regard to the pathognomonic/interventionist continuum. Two main findings were that teacher's identification along the continuum was a predictor of teaching practice (therefore beliefs and attitudes impact teaching practice) and that the school culture, in particular, the beliefs of the principal, may override teacher beliefs and attitudes. When it comes to effective practices, interventionist school norm leads to more effective teaching practice regardless of the teachers' own beliefs. In a later study focused on teacher practices specifically with regard to the inclusion of students with exceptionality, Jordan and Stanovich (2004) found that three elements were involved: "teachers' beliefs about their roles and responsibilities for the students with disabilities, teachers' sense of their efficacy, and the school norm or collective beliefs of the school staff about inclusion and inclusive practices" (p. 25). While all three elements were considered important, they found that when there was a high degree of agreement within the staff, this consensus created a norm of behaviour that was very influential on teacher practice.

As stated above, differing backgrounds, experiences, beliefs, and school settings lead to variation in ideas about teaching in general and understandings of students at-risk in particular. While this variation is not necessarily problematic, there is evidence to suggest that schools are more effective when there are shared understandings and common goals. Creemers and Reezigt (1999) used the term vision to explain the link between educational goals and educational means (practice) and found a strong connection between a shared sense of vision within a school and student achievement. Similarly, in their study of preschool teachers, McGinty, Justice and Rimm-Kaufman (2008) found that teachers' sense of collegiality (level and type of collaboration, including the sharing of educational goals) and community were significantly and positively related to both job satisfaction and classroom quality.

Kurz and Knight (2004) explored the relationship among teacher efficacy, collective teacher efficacy, and goal consensus all of which have been found to be strongly connected to school achievement when studied separately (e.g., Creemers, & Reetzigt, 1999; Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000). Guskey and Passaro (1994) define teacher efficacy as “teachers’ belief or conviction that they can influence how well students learn, even those who may be difficult or unmotivated” (p. 628) while collective teacher efficacy is understood to be shared belief in efficacy that is part of the group’s culture and the concept of goal consensus is the degree of shared goals, beliefs and values among the members. The authors found that a relationship does exist between the three constructs but that collective teacher efficacy was most highly related to goal/consensus/vision (2004).

System expectations. As stated, concepts of school readiness and what it means to be at-risk can be context specific. While school norms will have an influence so too will the institutional and political structure within which the schools are situated. Teachers can and will be influenced by these structures (Tierney, 2006), however a number of points of tension between what teachers and ECEs believe and the expectations of the education system in which they are involved can develop (Keys, 2007; Wood & Bennett, 2001). In terms of readiness for school, system expectations tend to concentrate on academic skills while teachers often cite appropriate behaviour and attitude as more important (Blair & Diamond, 2008; Hemmeter et al., 2006; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Teachers who believe strongly in play based learning can be at odds with systems that encourage more direct instruction and can often feel pressured to alter their practice when faced with the burden of meeting too many expectations (Ranz-Smith, 2007).

Similarly, there is evidence that classroom teachers rely on their own judgment about student achievement more often than formalized assessments (Meisels, DiPrima Bickel, Nicholson, Xue, & Atkins-Burnett, 2001) and that this judgment can more often than not be accepted as accurate (Bailey & Drummond, 2006; Meisels et al, 2001). However, while teachers may understand and accept current opinion about the benefits of formative styles of assessment they may be obligated to adopt whatever protocols are required within their education system (Tierney, 2006). Teachers may also feel the need to adjust their teaching and assessment practices in the face of the pressure of high stakes testing (Hollingworth, 2007).

In terms of working relationships in the classroom, although a spirit of cooperation has been encouraged in the legislation governing the FDELK program, (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a) concern has been expressed over the division of responsibilities between teachers and ECEs (Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario, 2010) and as to whether or not the two groups will be seen as equal partners (Mahon, 2010). While many classroom teams have developed positive and productive working relationship, lack of clarity in their roles has led to difficulties in some schools (Vanderlee, Youmans, Peters, & Eastabrook, 2012).

It is clear from this review of the literature that the decisions educators make in their day-to-day practice are influenced by their training, and their own personal knowledge and beliefs (Fang, 1996; Pajares, 1992; Stipek & Byler , 1997; Vartuli, 1999). However, these decisions can also be influenced by the setting within which they teach, particularly leadership provided by the principal as well as school norms, or collective understandings. The expectations of the school system and the broader context of community and culture can also have an impact on schooling in general and the concept of at-risk more specifically. While differences in understanding are not necessarily problematic, they can create areas of tension.

Summary. In this section four areas of the literature were examined: 1) interpretations of school readiness and what it means to be at-risk; 2) early identification and intervention in terms of at-risk students; 3) approaches to early childhood education/Kindergarten, and 4) the connection between educator beliefs and practice. Interpretations of what it means to be at-risk range from a focus on school readiness to a more holistic focus on the whole child. Similarly, the ways of identifying which children might be at-risk vary a great deal. It is generally agreed that early intervention is an important way to improve long-term outcomes for students at-risk; therefore many jurisdictions have instituted early childhood programs to provide support for those who might be at some disadvantage. However, just as the interpretations of at-risk vary, so too do the approaches to early childhood education programs. Programs and their elements can be seen as being on a continuum between the Pre-primary approach which is more concerned with school readiness and the Social Pedagogical approach which focuses on the development of the child as a whole. Finally, it is recognized that the beliefs and knowledge

of the individuals making decisions about who is at-risk are just as important as the policies and programs in place, therefore to understand the elements that might influence who is at-risk it is important to examine the connection between beliefs and practice for educators.

The following section will present the conceptual framework used in the study including a description and rationale for its use.

Theoretical Perspective/ Conceptual Framework

It is widely agreed that a significant percentage of young children are at-risk for early school failure and that supporting these students can mitigate long term negative outcomes (Heckman, 2008; McCain et al, 2011). The purpose of this study was to explore how decisions are made with regard to choosing which students will be identified as at-risk. The main goal of the project was to gain insight into how these elements vary within and between the multiple levels of the education system. In this section I will explain the understanding of the term at-risk used within the context of the study. I will then describe the conceptual framework for the study, which is based on understanding the multi-layered nature of the education system viewed through the lens of complexity theory.

Students at-risk. As described in the review of the literature, there are many interpretations of the term at-risk. While some focus on cognitive skills (Simner, 1987, 1995), others take a more holistic view of the child and include socio-emotional growth and physical development (Blair & Diamond, 2008). Further, there are many factors that can contribute to a child being at-risk. These include biological issues within the child as well as circumstances within the child's environment. Some views of at-risk will consider the larger picture; others focus more on the characteristics presented by the child. As mentioned, for the purposes of this project the term at-risk was placed within quotes the first time it was used to acknowledge the fact that the term is very open to interpretation. Whether or not any individual child may or may not be deemed to be at-risk can depend very much on the personal view of the individual making the judgement. Given that one of the purposes of the study was to explore beliefs and understandings around young students at-risk, I felt it was important to keep the interpretation as open-ended as possible and so, I did not impose a specific definition during the data gathering phase. However, the main focus of the project involved the prediction and prevention of early school failure, therefore the term was

generally used in reference to students who are in danger of falling significantly behind their peers academically.

Complexity theory. Given the nested nature of the school system, (students within classrooms, classrooms within schools, schools as part of school boards and then as part of the provincial system), and the many influences and interactions that are part of such a system, it was believed that complexity theory would provide a useful framework with which to explore the elements that would influence the identification of students at-risk. In this section I will provide a brief history of the evolution of complexity theory and illustrate how it has been used in educational research.

Complexity science, known to some as complex system theories, and dynamic system theory (Kuhn, 2008; McMurtry, 2008) is a relatively new area of study. As early as the 1800's it became clear that traditional scientific methods based on Newtonian physics and Euclidian geometry were not sufficient to explain growth and change in complex biological systems. As described by Davis and Sumara (2012) complexity theory evolved in response to the "recognition that there is a class of phenomena that cannot be understood in terms of simple cause-effect dynamics" (p.30). However, it was not until the middle of the 20th century that the term complexity as an area of study came into use (see for example, Weaver (1948) in which he discusses problems of simplicity, of disorganized complexity, and of organized complexity). The term was initially used mostly in a descriptive sense to discuss self-organizing, adaptive systems such as "ant colonies, brains, cities, [and] cells" (Davis & Sumara, 2012, p. 31). As Davis and Sumara go on to explain, it was at this point that figures based in traditional physics and geometry "were gradually replaced by images drawn from fractal geometry (e.g., scale independence, surprising detail) and the structural dynamics of biology (e.g., ecosystemic organization, dynamic interdependences)" (p. 31).

Toward the end of the 20th century the focus turned from description to a focus on the structures and dynamics occurring within the systems. The predominant metaphor of the nested systems evolved into one that featured "recursive processes within cycles of development and growth" (Davis & Sumara, 2012. P. 31). Since 2000, as Davis and Sumara explain, complexity theory has become more pragmatic; rather than describing complex systems, or explaining how they grow and change, efforts are more concentrated on how to "trigger them into being, to support their development, and to sustain their existence" (2012,

p.31). With this change, networks emphasizing the interactions between and among levels have become the more common image.

Complexity described. Definitions and descriptions of complexity theory vary widely to the point that some, such as Kuhn (2008) would describe it as an “umbrella description” rather than a systematically articulated theory. However, there are a number of commonalities. To begin with, complex systems are understood to be self-organizing; they are in a constant state of change in an effort to achieve equilibrium or balancing of initial conditions (e.g., Byrne, 2005; Davis & Sumara, 2012; Shoup & Studer, 2010). This balancing is a dynamic, non-linear process based not just on the actions of the separate parts of the system but on the interactions between the parts. The parts are themselves dynamic and adaptive, giving rise to the idea of a structurally nested system (Davis, Sumara, & D'Amour, 2012). While the system may be nested, this does not necessarily imply a top-down structure because it is the interactions between the parts that are most of interest. As Byrne states, “Nesting is not hierarchy. Determination runs in all possible directions, not just top down. All these levels potentially have implications for all other levels” (2005, p. 105). Therefore, “a complex system is not just the sum of its parts, but the product of the parts and their interactions” (Davis & Simmt, 2003, p. 138).

Haggis (2008) illustrates the use of complexity theory applied to individuals (see Figure 1 for a visual representation of the case). The subject (Will) of Haggis' case study on experiences in higher education is represented by the smallest white circle; the black lines represent the interaction between the various elements that make up Will's personality such as sense of self and emotional experience. Will is constituted by the interaction between these elements. He is further influenced by interactions with his family, but at the same time his family is influenced by “interactions with Will's ‘personality’; the way he interacts with his children, his behaviour in relation to his work, the language he uses with his partner, etc.” p.171. Both Will and his family are also influenced by the larger community within which they live (e.g., conversations and meeting with friends, interactions at the supermarket, and community norms in terms of acceptable behaviour). “Similarly, the interactions which involve Will, his family and his local community are partly constituted by, and partly constitute, the interactions of larger systems of interaction such as ‘Scottish working class’, or ‘British society in 2007’” (p. 171). The emphasis here is on the interacting elements

between and among the levels (represented by the nodes and lines) that influence the individual.

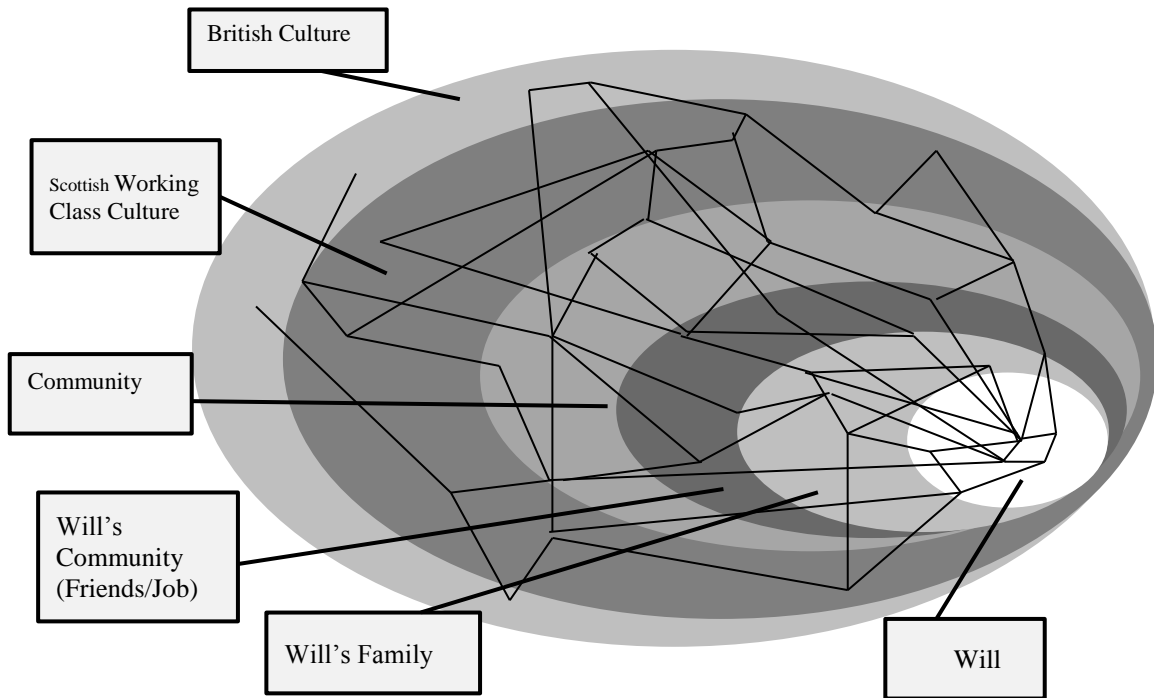


Figure 1: Adaptation of dynamic system abstraction from Haggis 2008.

Complex systems are constrained by initial conditions, but can evolve, or **emerge** in response to feedback from external and internal forces (Shoup & Studer, 2010). This emergence has also been described as learning, “where *learning* is understood in terms of ongoing, recursively elaborative adaptations through which systems maintain their coherences with their dynamic circumstances” (Davis & Simmt, 2003, p. 138). As Mason states, “given sufficient degree of complexity in a particular environment, new (and to some extent unexpected) properties and behaviours emerge in that environment” (2008, p. 37). Davis and Simmt (2003) describe a number of conditions that are necessary in order for emergence, or learning to occur. These conditions are not separate or discrete but are interrelated and found within multiple levels of complex systems. They include: (a) internal diversity, (b) redundancy, (c) decentralized control, (d) neighbour interactions, and (e) enabling constraints (randomness and coherence).

Internal diversity can be seen as the need for there to be variation within the system which allows for new ideas and a wider range of novel responses to arise. In any situation

members will contribute in different ways and the degree of diversity will determine what responses are possible (Davis & Sumara, 2010; Mason, 2008). While variety is important, there must also be a level of similarity or **redundancy**. This is not in the sense of being unnecessary or superfluous but in the way which ensures that members have common ground such as shared vocabulary, expectations and experience. Redundancy allows for interaction among agents but also allows members to compensate for the weaknesses of other members (Davis & Simmt, 2003).

In a complex system, there must be a level of freedom in which evolution can occur, this does not mean a lack of rules, rather the rules “determine only the boundaries of activity, not the limits of possibilities” (Davis & Simmt, 2006, p. 311). This **decentralized control** is necessary to allow for **neighbour interactions**. In order for emergence to occur, “agents within a complex system must be able to affect one another’s activities” (Davis & Simmt, 2003, p. 155). These interactions include individuals but also connections between ideas and understandings; “these neighbours that must “bump” against one another are ideas, hunches, queries, and other manners of representation” (p. 156).

For emergence to occur there must be a balance between **randomness**, in terms of disruptions that push the system to adjust and adapt, and **coherence** (Davis & Simmt, 2003). Coherence, in this case, is used to describe that which allows the system to maintain a sense of identity or purpose and has also been thought of the “constraints external to that particular systemic level” (Hetherington, 2012, p. 52). The term **enabling constraints** is used to describe the balance between randomness and coherence (Davis & Simmt, 2003; 2006; Mason, 2008) and has been described as a “set of limiting conditions that is intended to define the field of play in collective engagement” (Davis & Sumara, 2010, p. 859). Much like the rules in sports, they define what cannot be done and therefore allow for endless possibility by permitting everything else (2010).

Schools and classrooms as complex systems. As Morrison has stated, “Schools exhibit many features of complex adaptive systems...indeed schools both shape and adapt to macro- and micro-societal change, organizing themselves, responding to, and shaping their communities and society (i.e., all parties co-evolve)” (Morrison, 2008, p. 22). Similarly, Davis and Sumara, believe that “complexity/systems thinking has reached a place where it can be of great use to educators – who are after all, simultaneously concerned with multiple

levels of organization (e.g., individual learners, classrooms, schools, school districts, society) co-specifying dynamics (e.g., between teachers and learners, between knowledge and action) and complex associations (e.g., among people, among ideas)” (2012, p. 32).

To illustrate, a number of authors have described the elements of complexity theory as they apply to the classroom (e.g., Davis & Simmt, 2003, 2006; Stanley, 2009). In order for emergence to occur in the form of collective learning, there needs to be a variety of ideas, and opinions presented (diversity), however there also needs to be enough common ground in term of shared language, experiences, and levels of understanding (redundancy) to facilitate discussion. Davis and Simmt liken this to Vygotsky’s (1978) “zone of proximal development” (ZPD) in that, if the ideas being shared by individual members are either too simple or too advanced for other members, collective learning will not take place (2003).

The classroom is bound by elements such as the school structure and curriculum (coherence), however, teachers can support randomness (disruptions) by allowing choice in terms of topics and materials. Similarly, student-centred approaches and collaborative learning can promote neighbour interactions, especially if the students are allowed multiple opportunities and ways to represent and share their learning. The interactions here are not just students talking to each other but as Davis and Simmt (2003) put it “the neighbours that must “bump” against one another are ideas, hunches, [and] queries” (p. 156). The level of structure in the classroom can also impact emergence; too much control through top-down management can stifle creativity and learning while shared and negotiated control (decentralized) allows for a greater level of interaction (Davis & Simmt, 2003; 2006; Stanley, 2009). As Stanley (2009) suggests, teachers can use the elements of complexity science to enhance learning in the classroom;

...rather than thinking about learning as linear and sequential, teachers could be encouraged to imagine it as a web of playful possibility, where their role is to outline the “playing area,” allowing for connections and insights to arise through shared class activities. When the classroom is thought about and organized in this way, it is the interactions among students that propels learning forward. (p.2)

Complexity in educational research. While the components of complexity can be applied to learning in the classroom, they can also inform the process of research in educational settings. The following are two examples: Haggis (2011) argues that when

conducting research within complex systems the researcher's task is "(1) observe and note conditions (initial, historical, present, and interwoven with other systems), and (2) observe and note what emerges from such conditions" (p. 192). While the researcher might recognize a relationship between conditions and emergent properties these should not be viewed in terms of causality based on the assumption that emergence is the result of multiple interactions. In her longitudinal study of learning in higher education, Haggis addressed the issue of an apparent lack of understanding between students and teachers. This lack of understanding was observed in terms of expectations in their courses, assessment issues, as well as key content ideas. As suggested by complexity theory, it was necessary to look at the issue as a system of interactions in and between multiple levels. Haggis describes these levels as different types of context including: "the dynamic system which is the focus of analysis, the group(s) or institution(s) within which the focus system is imbedded, [and] the larger group(s) or culture(s) which contain the previous two systems" (p.193). In this particular study each student was considered the dynamic system; the educational institutions in which they were enrolled provided the second level and the wider society the third.

By tracking the students over a number of years Haggis (2011) was able to provide insight into the factors that lead to the success or lack thereof for each student. While these, of course, varied a great deal from one student to the next there were commonalities such as the fact that although students seem to be making an effort, they were often approaching their learning at a superficial level. There was also a general sense of "being in the dark" when it came to the expectations of higher level learning classes. Haggis states that these results are supported by other research and that it is often an expectation that students work things out for themselves at this level of learning.

In the second example, Davis, Sumara & D'Amour (2012) used complexity theory to inform their investigation of how school districts allocated resources in a major initiative intended to improve learning in the province of Alberta, Canada. In this case the focus was the district level of the education system, but, again they were most interested in the interactions between and among the components of the system. While their study concentrated on the type of network dominant in the district (centralized, distributed, decentralized, and fragmented), they assumed the districts were themselves complex systems and were looking for evidence of "learning" (transformation). Their findings indicated that

even though each district embodied a different type of network, there were high levels of interaction within each district but very little between districts. Also, the Ministry of Education, responsible for education within the province, was not seen as an active part of the learning community. The authors suggest that both of these findings represent missed opportunities for the sharing of learning and knowledge.

Challenges to complexity. Complexity theory has been criticized because it is essentially a descriptive theory and therefore lacks predictive qualities (Morrison, 2008). However, many researchers (e.g., Davis & Sumara, 2005, 2008, 2010; Kuhn, 2008; Morrison, 2008) would argue that given the multiple interactions and forces acting upon and within complex systems such as individual, classrooms and school systems, it is often difficult, if not inappropriate to attempt to predict specific outcomes. That said, research guided by complexity theory can provide insight into the elements that promote change and growth.

A complexity based framework. In approaching the current project, consideration was given to other theories, particularly Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological system's theory (2005). While Bronfenbrenner's theory is also based on a nested view, seeing the child at the centre influenced by the environment within which they are raised, it does place the focus on the child. Complexity theory, on the other hand, allows for and encourages the consideration of multiple levels and particularly the interactions between and among the levels. For example, as will be explained in the methods section, particular attention will initially be given to the differences between school boards involved and elements that would influence which students would be determined to be at-risk within those boards.

As stated, the education system can be seen as a complex system in a constant state of flux in the form of policy changes and reforms. These reforms are based on the need to maintain equilibrium by balancing the sometimes competing goals of achievement, accessibility and accountability (Shoup & Studer, 2010). In Ontario, the FDELKP is one such reform intended to improve student achievement and reduce the achievement gap by providing early learning experiences to all children and the opportunity to identify students that may be at-risk in order to provide them with extra support. However, there is little agreement as to how to identify which student might be at-risk. Using the elements identified by Davis and Simmt (2003) as a framework, I will explore the understanding of at-risk

students in the education system and particularly in the context of FDELKP classrooms. Below is a visual representation of the conceptual framework (Figure 2).

The figure is intended to show the various levels of the school system and the interactions between elements and individuals within each level. The boxes to the left identify the level represented by the circles which illustrate the “nested” nature of the system (e.g., classrooms within schools, schools within school boards, school boards within the provincial school system). The white boxes represent the elements and individuals within each level that may have an impact on the identification of at-risk students. For example, the curriculum for the FDELKP (and other grades) is determined by the provincial Ministry of Education; students may be identified as being at-risk if they fail to meet these expectations. Also at this level are the provincial assessments; as will be seen assessment and tracking within schools is often tied to school improvement plans based on improving scores on these assessments.

The arrows between the boxes are meant to indicate potential interactions. The arrows are double headed to emphasize the fact these are interactions rather than cause and effect relationships and to illustrate that this is not intended to depict a purely top-down process. For example, teachers are obligated to address the curriculum expectations dictated by the province in their classes; however their approach to teaching can have a great deal of influence on how the curriculum is received by students. Similarly, school administrators must implement their boards' early identification protocol, but, how they choose to allocate resources within their school can influence which students are assessed and receive support.

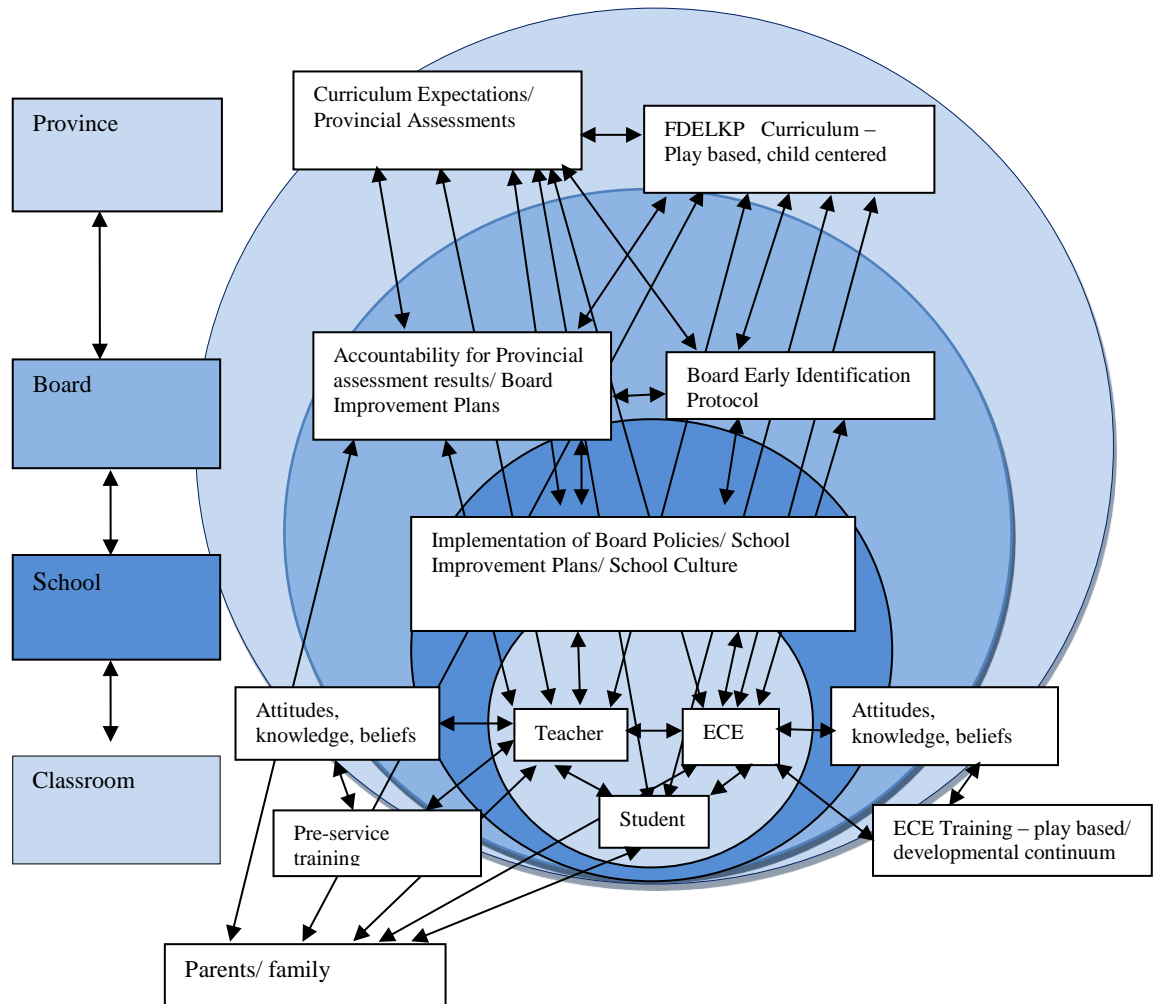


Figure 2. Concept Map of Theoretical Framework.

In terms of using complexity theory as a way of understanding the elements that might influence who is being identified as at-risk initial connections included:

- What differing views about students at-risk are there within the classroom and system (internal diversity)?
- What similarities or common ground exists between these views (redundancy)?
- How much freedom/discretion exists around the identification of at-risk students (decentralized control)?
- What rules form the boundaries of who is identified at-risk (organized randomness)?
- What opportunities allow for the sharing and discussion of who is identified at-risk (neighbour interactions)?

These ideas will be explored further in the analysis section.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter a review of the literature was conducted. Findings indicate that there was a wide variation in the conceptualization of what it means to be at-risk. These range from a lack of school readiness in terms of cognitive skills to a more holistic view of the whole child and overall development. Just as the view of at-risk varies, so too do approaches to early identification and intervention. Currently, due to an emphasis on accountability, early identification has focused on early literacy. At a system level, the view of at-risk as well as the approach to early identification is tied directly to the purpose and goals of the early childhood education/Kindergarten program in place. As was seen in the literature, on a broad level, programs range between those based on the Pre-primary approach with a focus on school readiness and the Social Pedagogical approach which is concerned with the development of the child as a whole. In Ontario, the FDELKP is intended to be play-based and child-centered and therefore would be toward the Social Pedagogical end of the spectrum. However, there are concerns about how it is being implemented. Most salient in terms of this project is the question of how current assessment practices will be reconciled with the philosophy of the program. Findings also indicated that combined with the expectations within a particular system or program, it is the beliefs and knowledge of the individuals involved that can influence practice.

In the last section of the chapter, a description and discussion of the theoretical framework based on complexity theory used to guide the study was presented. This began with a brief history of complexity theory and a description of the key elements involved and was followed by a discussion of how complexity theory applies to the education system. Examples of educational research employing complexity theory were described. From these examples it would appear that it is the interactions between the elements being observed that are of most interest. Finally, a concept map was included to illustrate how complexity theory was applied to this study. The following chapter will review the methodology used in the project.

Chapter 3 – Research Methodology

The purpose of this research project was to investigate the elements that influence the identification of at-risk students within the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program in Ontario. While it is agreed that a significant number of children begin school less ready to learn than their peers and that early intervention can mitigate longer-term damage (Janus & Offord, 2007), there is much less agreement on how to determine which students should be considered at-risk and what kind of support to offer. I believed that a clearer understanding of the elements involved would provide insight into how children are identified as well as which children might receive extra support and/or attention when they begin to struggle. The following overarching research question and four sub-questions were addressed in this study: What are the elements influencing who is identified as at-risk in the Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program in Ontario? 1. What are the system requirements and/or expectations for assessing and identifying at-risk students? 2. What assessments are being carried out at the school and classroom level and how are they being used to identify students at-risk. 3. What are the beliefs and knowledge surrounding the assessment and identification of at-risk students at the various levels of the school system? 4. To what extent are the conditions present that would allow for the emergence of a shared understanding regarding the identification of at-risk students and what it means for a student to be at-risk?

This chapter explains the study's research methodology and is organized into the following sections: (a) rationale for research approach, (b) participant selection, (c) summary of information required, (d) overview of research design, (e) data collection methods, (f) methods of data analysis and synthesis, (g) ethical considerations, (h) issues of trustworthiness, (i) potential limitations, and (j) overview of participants. A brief summary concludes the chapter.

Rationale for Research Approach

Researching issues in educational settings can be very difficult because of the nested nature of the system; individual students in classes, classes within schools, schools within communities. The systems are also dynamic, context driven and integrated with changes at any one level impacting on the others (Sammons, 2010). Given the complex, multi-layered nature of the school system, there are many elements affecting the assessment and identification of at-risk students. These include policy decisions at a number of levels (e.g.,

provincial curriculum guidelines, board special education plans), as well as the personal opinions and beliefs of individuals at all levels of the system. Understanding these many elements and the context in which they exist is best understood through a qualitative research approach. "Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world... qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). According to Mason (1996), the aim of qualitative research is "to produce rounded understandings on the basis of rich, contextual, and detailed data. There is more emphasis on 'holistic' forms of analysis and explanations in this sense, than on charting surface patterns, trends and correlations" (p.4)

Case study approach. When a deeper understanding of a situation is of interest, research is often conducted in the context of a case study. "Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied" (Stake, 2005, p. 443).

The choice of what constitutes a case, especially within a complex multi-layered organization such as a school system, is not always easy (Stake, 2005). As Hetherington states:

Part of the problem in defining the case in complexity-theoretical research stems from the open, unbounded nature of complex systems perspective, and relates to the problem of complexity reductions. Choosing boundaries to set around a case entails focusing in on particular aspects while excluding other aspects and therefore reducing the complexity of the case (2012, p. 79).

However, Hetherington argued that case study could be used as an approach rather than a methodology and used this approach to study the introduction of a particular curriculum program. In this study Hetherington used complexity theory to explore how the program was implemented and identified each school as a case. Within the school, Hetherington focused on the various nested groups (individuals and classes, teachers and teaching teams), with an emphasis on the interactions between the groups as well as the school as a whole. Byrne (2005) also argued that when combining complexity theory and case study, the focus should be on interactions rather than a strict application of boundaries. He noted that "a system of interest at any point in time is defined by observation and action. Boundaries depend on what we are looking for and at" (p. 105). Following the models of

Hetherington and Byrne, the current study uses a lens of complexity theory within a case study approach.

In this project, the focus could have been the practices with an individual classroom, or within individual schools or school boards. In the context of a multiple-case study, it could have been a comparison of classrooms or schools. However, the particular interest in this study was the protocols school boards mandated in response to government policy, and how they were implemented and understood at the various levels of the school system. Therefore it was decided to treat each of the two school boards involved as separate cases. The goal of a case study approach is to provide a richly described, in-depth view of the situation being studied; therefore a smaller number of cases are suggested (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). In this study, two boards were chosen to allow for deep exploration of potential different contexts and to provide for opportunities for comparison and/or contrast.

Within case study research, evidence can take a number of different forms including both qualitative and quantitative. Yin outlines six major sources of evidence including: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations and physical artifacts (Yin, 2009). For the purposes of this study, data were collected through document analysis, interviews, and artifacts. Each of these methods will be discussed further in the section on data-collection methods. Within each case, information was gathered at the board, school and classroom level based on the idea that at each level the individuals might be able to contribute slightly different insight into the topic. Board level personnel would possibly have a broader understanding of the board policies and may be able to contribute insight into why they were chosen. At the school level, the role of individuals in the implementation of policies becomes more apparent. Although obligated to implement provincial and board policies, principals can influence the level of support specific programs and protocols are given through practical elements such as scheduling (Fullan, 2001). In the classroom, it is the teachers that have the key role. Their beliefs and attitudes about children and how they learn can have a major impact on who is considered to be at-risk (Bailey & Drummond, 2006; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Understanding the differences and similarities in the beliefs and understandings at the various levels of the school system and how they impact which student are identified as at-risk is the main purpose of the project.

Summary of Information Required

This qualitative case study focused on identifying elements that might influence the identification of students at-risk for early school failure in the FDELKP. In seeking to identify these elements and understand how they might influence which students are determined to be at-risk and which students might receive extra support, one main question with four sub-questions were explored. The information needed to address these questions was guided by the literature review and conceptual framework, as discussed in Chapter 2. Falling into three broad categories, the information can be classified as contextual, demographic, and perceptual.

Contextual information allows for an understanding of the research setting. Specifically, it depicts the culture and environment within which the study is taking place. In this case, it begins with the provincial school system in Ontario, and then the school boards, communities and individual schools in the study. Demographic information describes the participants involved in the study, including their gender, age, and experience with the FDELKP as well as their level of education. Finally, perceptual information provides the participant’s perceptions related to the subject of the inquiry. The information required to provide the context, demographic details, and the perceptions of participants, as to answer the specific questions is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Overview of Information Needed

General Information Required for Study

Type of Information Required	Information Required	Method
(a) Contextual	Provincial rules and regulations as well as school board policy regarding the early identification of students at-risk. Provincial and school board policy relating to the FDELKP.	Document Review Interview

(b) Demographic	Descriptive information of the school boards and schools involved, including relative size, location, student population as well as statistical information regarding provincial assessment scores and socio-economic status of families.	Website review
	Information pertaining to the participants’ position within their school board, gender, age, years of experience in their current position, other relative work experience, education level, additional qualifications, and any preparation for the FDELKP.	Demographic Form (see Appendix C)
(c) Perceptual	Participants’ description of early identification and assessment protocols within their board and school as well as their perceptions of the characteristics of students who might be at-risk for early school failure.	Interview

Information Required to Answer Research Questions

Question	Information Required	Method
<p>Research Question 1 <i>What are the system requirements and/or expectations for assessing and identifying at-risk students?</i></p>	<p>Board policy relating to early identification.</p> <p>Participants’ understanding and perceptions of what assessments are required by their school board and school. Examples of practice such as, Kindergarten registration forms, board and school-wide tracking systems, intervention protocols.</p>	<p>Document review</p> <p>Interview</p>
<p>Research Question 2 <i>What assessments are being carried out at the school and classroom level and how are they being used to identify students at-risk?</i></p>	<p>School implementation of board protocols.</p> <p>Participants’ descriptions of the assessments they complete in their school and classroom and their understandings and perceptions of how these assessments are used to identify students at-risk.</p> <p>Examples of practice such as: assessments, tracking forms,</p>	<p>Review of Artifacts</p> <p>Interview</p>
<p>Research Question 3 <i>What are the beliefs and knowledge surrounding the assessment and identification of at-risk students at the various levels of the school system?</i></p>	<p>Participants’ descriptions of the characteristics they believe are most salient in the identification of students who might be at-risk.</p>	<p>Interview</p>

Research Question 4

To what extent are the conditions present that would allow for the emergence of a shared understanding regarding the identification of at-risk students and what it means for a student to be at-risk?

Participants’ description of discussions they may have had with colleagues and/or administrators relating to which students or types of students they considered to be at-risk. Participants’ perceptions regarding general agreement within their school as to which students were considered to be at-risk.

Interview

Overview of Research Design

In this section I will describe the research design and the steps taken to complete the study. An overview is presented in Figure 3, followed by a discussion of the data-collection methods, and data analysis techniques. While this is presented as a step-by-step process, in reality the steps are highly interrelated and far from distinct, and the processes of analysis and synthesis involved are quite iterative. For example, while the literature review informs many of the steps in the process, it is also ongoing throughout the project.

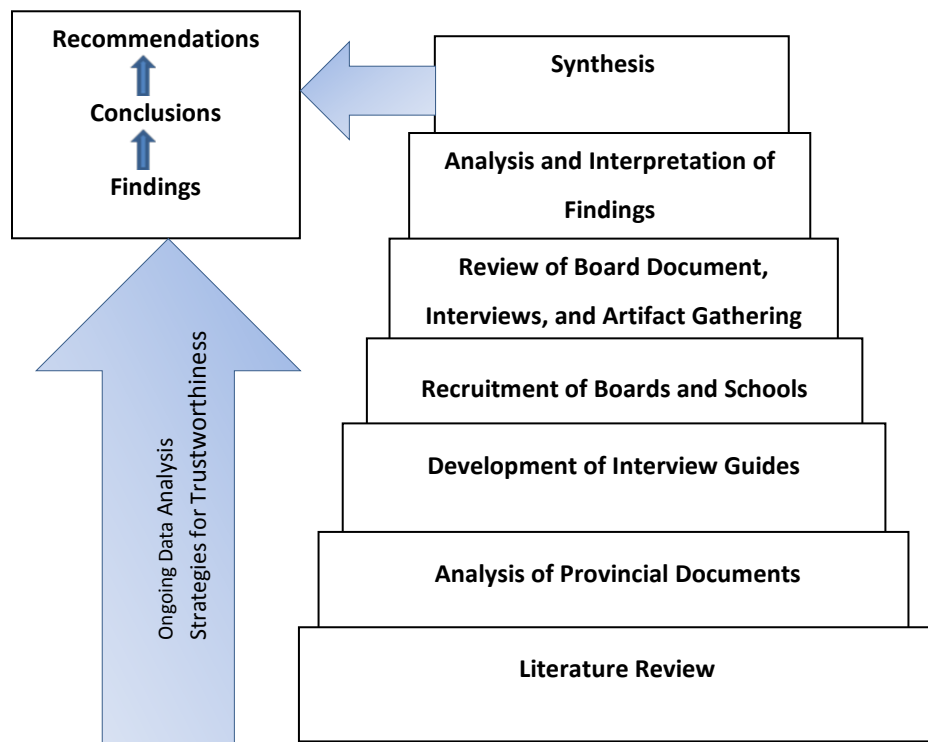


Figure 3. Overview of Research Design

Description of Steps in the Research Design

Step 1 – Literature review. A review of the literature was conducted to identify current research and develop a more complete understanding of the issues related to the topic. Several key themes were identified including: different interpretations of school readiness and what it means to be at-risk; early identification and intervention in terms of at-risk students; approaches to early childhood education/Kindergarten, and the connection between educator beliefs and practice. The literature review continued throughout the project as new ideas and theme emerged, especially during the analysis and synthesis stages.

Step 2 – Analysis of provincial documents. Provincial documents and regulations were reviewed to establish current policy with regard to early identification and to the FDELKP.

Step 3 – Development of interview guides. Interview guides were created for various positions of proposed participants (board administration, school administration, and teachers and ECE).

Step 4 – Recruitment of school boards and schools. Ethics approval was sought from a total of eight school boards. Schools were then recruited within the two boards that granted approval for the project.

Step 5 – Review of board documents, interviews, and artifact gathering. A total of 23 interviews were completed within two different school boards. Information was gathered from board websites regarding relevant protocols. Artifacts, such as assessment forms and tracking sheets, demonstrating current practice were gathered during interviews and school visits.

Step 6 – Analysis and interpretation of findings. Interview data were read repeatedly. Initial coding schemes were established and then reviewed and refined during analysis. Artifacts were reviewed with the same coding themes in mind. The analytic process will be expanded upon in a subsequent section.

Step 7 – Synthesis of findings. The data were analyzed both within and between the two cases. The synthesis of findings was then used to establish conclusions and create recommendations.

Participant Selection

According to the Ontario Education Act, every school board must have a clearly stated protocol for the early identification of students that might be at-risk. The sample to be drawn from in this study would therefore be all English-language school boards in Ontario. Sampling of boards was intended to be purposeful. Efforts were made to ensure that there was some variation between the boards in terms of size (larger/ smaller), location (urban/ rural) and type of assessment protocols (two different approaches/ methods). Variation is desirable based on the assumption that if participants are chosen based on key differences, a more complex view of the phenomena being studied will result (Collins, 2010; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011).

As with the choice of school boards, sampling of schools and classrooms was intended to be purposeful. One school within each board was to be chosen. Within each school, two classrooms were to be the focus of the school level phase, for a total of four classrooms, including schools and classrooms that vary in terms of size. As the FDELKP is being phased in over a number of years, it was hoped that schools that were at different stages of implementation could be included.

In reality, the choice of board, schools, and classrooms became more a sampling of convenience as it came down to which school boards within a reasonable travelling distance would grant permission for the project. The steps taken to obtain permission to conduct research as well as the recruitment of schools and individual participants will be explained in the following section.

Recruitment of boards and schools. In total, eight school boards in the province were contacted. Following the protocol each board had outlined on their website, requests were made for approval to conduct research within the board. Of the eight, one board did not respond, three boards declined permission, one board indicated they would review the request for the fall, and one board granted permission but too late to be included in the project before the end of the school year. The two remaining boards, one public and one Catholic, granted permission. In one of those two boards (with the pseudonym Cedarview DSB), two principals expressed interest in the project when it was presented at a board meeting; those schools were therefore included in the research.

Within the other school board that granted permission, the expectation was that I would approach the school principals to ask if they would be willing to have their school participate. A list of schools offering the FDELKP was obtained from the board website, and phone calls were made in an attempt to arrange meetings with the principal. In most cases, it was suggested either by the secretary or principal that I send information about the project via email which I did (see Appendix D). One principal did agree to meet with me and subsequently agreed to have his school participate. Some of the principals declined participation, others did not respond to the request or to the follow-up emails. Although I had participation from only one school in the board, the total number of seven classrooms between the two boards was considered sufficient for the purposes of the project.

Recruitment of individual participants. When I received notification of approval to conduct research, I requested advice from the contact person as to who would be the most appropriate individuals at the board to interview for the project. Particularly, I was interested in speaking to whoever was responsible for and/or most knowledgeable about the FDELKP and about Special Education procedures, given that the early identification protocols were part of their mandate. Recruitment letters were sent to these four individuals (see Appendix E); all agreed to be interviewed. At the time of school recruitment, the principals were asked if they would agree to be interviewed. They were also asked to suggest another individual, particularly, the person most responsible for Special Education and/or support for the FDELKP. Recruitment letters were sent to these individuals (see Appendix D). These individuals also agreed to be interviewed. The principal was also asked to pass on recruitment letters to the Kindergarten teachers and ECEs working in the FDELKP. In total, four board level administrators, three principals, two SERTs and one Student Support Teacher (SST), seven teachers and six ECEs agreed to be interviewed for the project (see Appendix F for teacher and ECE recruitment form).

Overview of Participants

Figure 4, below, provides an overview of the participants (with pseudonyms) and their position within their school board. Under the umbrella of the province, the names of the two school boards appear with the names of the administrators from each board. Below the boards are the names of the school(s) included as well as the names of the school administrators from each school (principal (P) and SERT/ SST). The final level provides the

names of the teachers and ECEs from each classroom included. This is followed by a description of the participants in each school board.

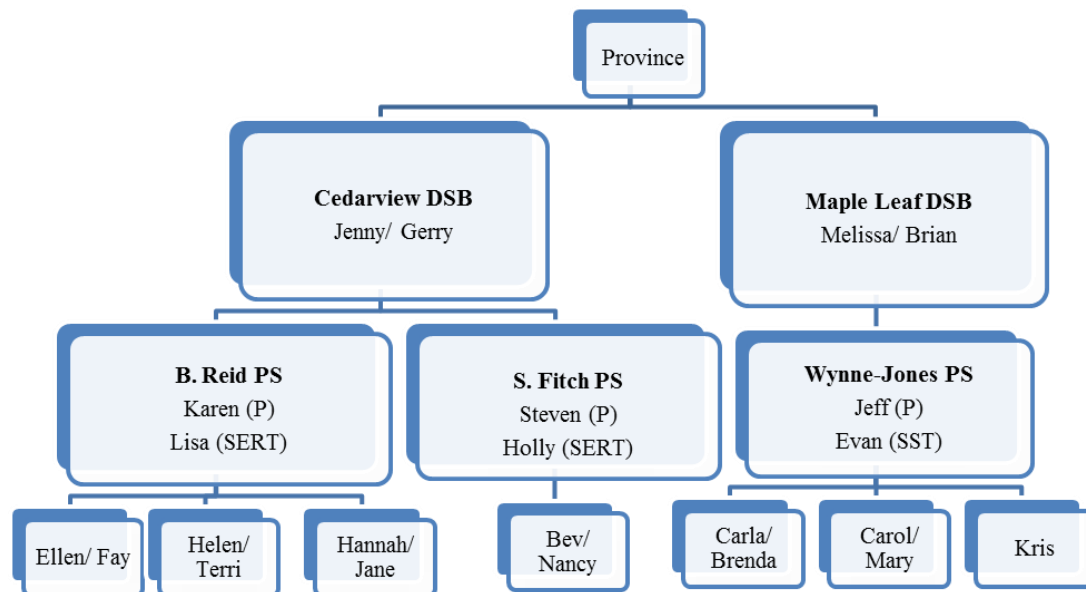


Figure 4. Overview of Participants

The demographic information pertaining to the 14 participants from Cedarview DSB and the 9 participants from Maple Leaf DSB is presented in Table 3 and Table 4 respectively. The table rows have been shaded to indicate the various levels, i.e., the board administrators are the darkest shading followed by the school administrators; the classroom educators (teachers and ECEs) are the lightest shading. The teachers and ECE are grouped according to their classrooms. In Table 3 the school administrators and classroom educators have been grouped by school. The tables provide information regarding the position held by each participant as well as their gender, age, years of experience in their current position, and years of additional relevant experience. The level of education, additional education and preparation for the FDELKP are also indicated for each participant. These demographic variables are discussed in the subsections that follow each table.

Cedarview DSB. As indicated in the overview, participants from Cedarview DSB included two administrators at the board level, a principal, a SERT, three teachers and three ECEs from B. Reid PS, and a principal, SERT, one teacher, and one ECE from S. Fitch PS.

Table 3

Demographic information for participants from Cedarview DSB – Administration (board and school

Pseudonym	Position	Gender	Age Range	Years in Current position	Addition Relevant Experience	Education	Other Qualifications	Preparation for FDELKP
Jenny	Board Admin.	F	55+	4	DI coach, Nursery school facilitation	B. Ed.	Reading Specialist, Religion, Spec Ed, PQP I, II	Ministry presentations Was Lead on board PD
Gerry	Board Admin.	M	50-54	6	26 yrs in education, 16 in admin.	M.Ed.	Spec Ed, Religion, Computers SO, PQP,	Workshops, also focus group

B. Reid Public School

Karen	Principal	F	45-49	15		B.Ed.	Primary Specialist, SO, PQP	None
Lisa	School Admin (SERT)	F	45-49	1	25 yrs teaching	B.Ed.	Primary Specialist, Spec. Ed. Specialist	None
Ellen	Teacher	F	30-34	4	2 yrs teaching , 5 years EA	B.Ed.	Spec. Ed. P 1 Religion P. 1 TA Diploma	None
Fay	ECE	F	40-44	2	6 yrs daycare	ECE diploma		Board workshops
Helen	Teacher	F	40-44	1	Spec. Ed. teacher, ESL teacher	B.Ed.	Reading, Spec. Ed	1 day PD workshop
Terri	ECE	F	40-44	2	20 yrs daycare	B.A. ECE diploma		Ministry info session, board workshops
Hannah	Teacher	F	25-29	1	1.5 yrs teaching, ECE experience	B.Ed, M.Sc. in Teaching	ECE diploma, Primary P 1, Intermediate ABQ	None
Jane	ECE	F	25-29	2	1 yr other, daycare	B.A.,ECE, diploma		None

Pseudonym	Position	Gender	Age Range	Years in Current position	Addition Relevant Experience	Education	Other Qualifications	Preparation for FDELKP
S. Fitch Public School								
Steven	Principal	M	40-44	4	21 yrs	B. Ed.	PQP	None
Holly	School Admin (SERT)	F	50-54	15	Child & Youth Worker	B. Ed.	Spec. Ed Specialist, Reading Specialist, Deaf P 1	None
Bev	Teacher	F	45-49	2	4 yrs Kindergarten 22 yrs. teaching	B. Ed.	Spec. Ed. P. 1, Reading Specialist, French P.1, Primary	Workshops
Nancy	ECE	F	40-44	2	10 yrs EA, 5 yrs.	B.A., ECE		Workshops

Note: Please see Appendix G for explanations of the abbreviations used in the chart.

Description of Participants from Cedarview DSB.

Position. Two individuals at the administrative level in the board were interviewed; Jenny described her role as a curriculum consultant with responsibilities for the FDELKP, Gerry was the Principal of Special Education. At the school level, there were two principals, two SERTs, four teachers and four ECEs.

Gender. In terms of gender, there were two males, one board administrator and one principal (2 of 14); all other participants were female (12 of 14).

Age. The age of participants ranged from 25 years to 55+. The most frequently recorded age range was 40-44 years (5 of 12), the second most frequent was 45-49 (3 of 12).

Years in current position. Most individuals indicated they had been in their current position between one and four years (11 of 14). However, many had experience in similar positions, such as the same role in other schools or a teaching in Kindergarten or ECE positions before the FDELKP was implemented.

Additional relevant experience. The number of years of experience noted by the participants ranged from one to 26. The majority of participants (9 of 14), indicated that they had 15 or more years of total experience (current role combined with relevant experience).

Education. All board administrators, school principals, SERTS, and teachers had completed a Bachelor of Education. Two of ten had also completed Master’s degrees. All the ECEs had completed an ECE diploma; three of the four had completed a Bachelor of Arts as well as, or as part of their ECE diploma.

Other qualifications. Many participants (10 of 14) indicated that they had other qualifications. The board administrators and principals had completed the Principal Qualification Program (PQP). Many of the administrators and teachers had some Special Education qualifications (7 of 10); four had qualifications targeted at teaching in the primary grades.

Preparation for FDELKP. Less than half of the participants indicated that they had had any specific preparation for the FDELKP. Six of the fourteen had attended workshops provided by the board; two attended presentations by the Ministry of Education.

Maple Leaf DSB. Participants from Maple Leaf DSB included two administrators at the board level, and a principal, a SST, three teachers and two ECEs.

Table 4

Demographic information for participants from Maple Leaf DSB

Pseudonyms	Position	Gender	Age Range	Years in Current position	Addition Relevant Experience	Education	Other Qualifications	Preparation for FDELKP
Melissa	Board Admin.	F	40-44	1.5	Teaching	B.Ed. MA in progress	Reading Specialist, Spec. Ed. Specialist, PQP Part 1/ 2	None
Brian	Board Admin.	M	40-44	1	11 yrs teaching, District Autism Resource Teacher	B Ed., MA	Spec. Ed. Specialist , ABQ, Intermediate, Senior	None
Wynne Jones Public School								
Jeff	Principal	M	35-39	5	8 yrs teaching	B. Ed	Spec. Ed.	None
Evan	School Admin (SST)	M	55+	1	25 yrs teaching, 10 in admin	B. Ed	Spec. Ed	None
Carla	Teacher	F	30-34	1	8 yrs teaching, ECE and Daycare / some in K	B. Ed	ECE degree, Spec. Ed Part 1	None

Pseudonyms	Position	Gender	Age Range	Years in Current position	Addition Relevant Experience	Education	Other Qualifications	Preparation for FDELKP
Brenda	ECE	F	50-54	2	30 yrs in the field, taught ECE at college level.	ECE diploma		Workshops
Carol	Teacher	F	45-49	24	Spec. Ed. teacher, former K teacher	B. Ed	Spec. Ed	Lead on early learning team at board level
Mary	ECE	F	40-44	1	EA, Nursery School, Daycare	ECE diploma, B.Sc.		None
Kris	Teacher	F	40-44	1	20 yrs at board office for 8 years in Spec Ed	B. Ed	Spec. Ed	None

Note: Please see Appendix G for explanations of the abbreviations used in the chart.

Description of Participants from Maple Leaf DSB

Position. Two individuals at the administrative level in the board were interviewed; Melissa described her role as Supervising Principal of Special Education. Brian said he was a Special Education Coordinator and leader of the Early Learning Team. At the school level, there was one principal, one Student Support Teacher, three teachers and two ECEs.

Gender. In terms of gender, there were three males, one board administrator, the principal, and the SST (3 of 9); the other six participants were female.

Age. The age of participants ranged from 30 years to 55+. Again, the most frequently recorded age range was 40-44 years (4 of 9).

Years in current position. Many individuals indicated they had been in their current position for only one year (4 of 9). As in Cedarview DSB, many had experience in similar positions, such as the same role in other schools or a teaching in Kindergarten or ECE positions before the FDELKP was implemented.

Additional relevant experience. The number of years of experience noted by the participants ranged from one to 30. Many of the participants (4 of 9), indicated that they had 20 or more years of total experience (currant role combined with relevant experience), one

board administrator indicated she had extensive teaching experience but did not specify the number of years.

Education. The board administrators, school principal, SST, and teachers had completed a Bachelor of Education. One had a Master's degree another was in the process of completing a Master's of Education. The ECEs had completed an ECE diploma.

Other qualifications. Many participants (7 of 9) indicated that they had other qualifications. The board administrators, principal, SST, as well as the three teachers had some Special Education qualifications (7 of 9).

Preparation for FDELKP. Two participants indicated that they had had specific preparation for the FDELKP in the form of workshop. One teacher had previously worked at the board level and had been involved in the Early Learning Team.

Data Collection Methods

Within the case study framework and to provide context and background information, I used multiple methods of data collection including document analysis, interviews and artifact gathering. One of the main advantages of using multiple methods within complex systems is that a variety of different methods and components will provide a "richer evidence base and were therefore likely to prove more fruitful in promoting new understandings and contributions to knowledge" (Sammons, 2010, p. 698). A further advantage is that the weaknesses and biases of individual methods can be mitigated or eliminated by the use of more than one method. Multiple data sources can improve the validity of results providing triangulation when they converge (Greene, 2001; Johnson & Onwuegbuze, 2004). Multiple sources and types of data can also provide fresh insight when results point to divergences or differences in interpretation of the situation (Greene, 2001). It was believed that by collecting multiple forms of data from different levels of the school system, (i.e., board, school and classroom), a more rich and complex insight could be gained regarding the research topic.

As stated, data collection methods included a review of provincial and board level policy documents as well as interviews and artifact gathering. Each method of data collection used and how it was carried out for this project is described below. Many of the steps were ongoing and interrelated, for example, the initial review of documents influenced the interview questions, and the interview process prompted further searches for documents.

Therefore, for clarity and ease of reading the sections are divided by method rather than how they were carried out chronologically in the project.

Document analysis. According to Bowen, “as a research method, document analysis is particularly applicable to qualitative case studies” (2009, p. 29). The various uses of document analysis include: giving the researcher insight into the research setting, raising questions that need to be asked, providing additional data, allowing the researcher to see changes that have occurred over time, and allow the researcher to verify findings through triangulation (2009; Rapley, 2007). Document analysis can be an efficient method and cost effective form of data collection, with many documents readily available, especially through the internet. Collecting data from documents is also an unobtrusive method that avoids issues such as reactivity that can occur during methods such as interviews (Bowen, 2009).

While document analysis has much strength as a form of data collection, there are also a number of limitations involved. Documents may not contain sufficient detail and/or background information to answer the research questions; others may not be readily available (Rapley, 2007). Further, the selection of documents may be biased in terms of availability from the organization as those available are likely to represent current policies. Selection of documents may also be subject to biased selectivity and reporting bias – reflecting the possible bias of the author (Bowen, 2009; Yin, 2009). Efforts were made to mitigate these weaknesses by doing a thorough search of the Ministry of Education and board websites for any documents that might pertain to the project.

Rapley states, “exploring a text often depends as much on *focusing on what is said* - and how a specific argument, idea or concept is developed - as well as *focusing on what is not said* - the silences, gaps or omissions” (2007, p. 125) and as Merriam says, “documents often contain insight and clues into the phenomena” (2002, p. 13). By analyzing provincial and school board documents it should be possible to discover trends and gain insight into goals and values considered important by these governing bodies.

Review of provincial documents. Documents reviewed included the Ontario Education Act, which outlines regulations related to the identification of students at-risk, and those with exceptionalities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000; 2007) as well as the draft Kindergarten curriculum that defines the program guidelines and learning expectations for each student (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b). As mentioned, a search of the Ministry

of Education website was conducted to identify any other documents which might be potential sources of data. A checklist of key search terms is appended (see Appendix H).

Review of board documents. While the provincial governments are responsible for the education system, school boards must interpret and enact provincial policies. How they chose to do so reveals local attitudes and priorities. School boards in Ontario are mandated to have in place special education plans that include early identification of students at-risk for learning difficulties (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000). However, these procedures vary a great deal from one board to the next. Many districts focus their assessment and identification efforts solely on early literacy while others include dimensions of numeracy and/or social and emotional development (Near North District School Board, 2011; Ottawa Carleton District School Board, 2011). A search of each board's website was conducted for documents likely to reveal information related to early identification and assessment. These included: Special Education Plans, Early Literacy and Numeracy Initiatives, and Board Improvement Plans. (See Appendix I for the website review guide).

Interviews. Interviews were chosen as a method of exploring the participants' experiences, beliefs and understandings around early identification in the FDELKP. According to Kvale (2007), "the qualitative interview is a key venue for exploring the ways in which subjects experience and understand their world" (p.11) and as Seidman, (2006) explains, "Interviewing provides access to the context of people's behaviour and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behaviour" (p. 10). A distinct advantage of using interviews as a research method is that participant responses can be clarified immediately during the interview process and can be expanded upon through follow-up questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). However, the quality of the data gathered through interviews can be influenced by a number of factors. These include the clarity of the interview questions and the ability of the researcher to ask follow up questions for further clarification (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Also, some interview participants may be more willing and able to contribute relevant information in response to the interview questions (Kvale, 2007). Further, it is recognized that it is very difficult to assess beliefs with direct questions (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992). In response to this, Jordan and Stanovich (2004) found that it was possible to infer teachers' beliefs by analyzing their responses to semi-structured interview questions. The questions and probes allowed the

teachers to discuss situations in their classes in a way that revealed perceptions, intentions, and reasoning behind their actions. Jordan and Stanovich's interview method was used as a model for interview questions aimed at eliciting beliefs. As described in sections below, concerns over the quality of the data gathered were taken into consideration throughout the design, implementation, and interpretation stages of the project.

Development of interview guides. To insure that all research questions are answered it is essential that care be taken in the creation of interview questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Kvale, 2007). As suggested by Bloomberg and Volpe, a number of interview questions were created to address each research question. The questions were first tested by brainstorming all possible answers and then were revised to be sure that each directly answered the research questions. See Appendix J for the relationship between the interview questions and the research questions. The interview questions were also reviewed by my committee members as well as colleagues familiar with both Kindergarten and early identification procedures. Their comments were used to confirm and/or again revise the interview questions to produce the final interview guides (see Appendices J, K, and L).

Participant interviews. Interviews were conducted with board personnel that are responsible for and/or knowledgeable about protocols intended to assess and identify students at-risk (e.g., school superintendents, learning support teachers, curriculum coordinators). All participants signed consent forms before the interview process began (see Appendices M, N, and O). The focus of these interviews was to identify protocols used board-wide for the assessment and identification of at-risk students. The rationale behind the choice of protocol and how it is incorporated into board wide planning was also explored.

Interviews were conducted with the person in each school who was most responsible for the administrative issues surrounding the assessment protocol. In each case, the principal of the school suggested the individual responsible for Special Education - the Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT) in two schools and Student Support Teacher (SST) in the third. In the target classrooms, interviews were conducted with teachers and ECEs.

All the interviews were conducted in private, at a time and place convenient to the interviewee. For the board level personnel, two of the interviews were completed over the phone. For all of the school level personnel, the interviews were conducted at their school. With the permission of the interviewee, all interviews were audio-recorded. The interviews

lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. Please see Appendices J and K for the interview guides for the school administrators and teachers and ECEs. Participants were also provided with a debriefing form following the interview (Appendix P).

Artifact gathering. Artifacts were gathered in the schools and in the target classrooms to provide evidence of practice and were used to confirm or disconfirm evidence gathered through interviews. Evidence of practice at the school level included methods of tracking student progress, assessment materials and schedules dedicating time for assessment and discussion of results. Similarly at the classroom level, evidence included recording and tracking systems of individual students as well as whole class progress, as well as specific assessments used. See Appendix Q for a list of the items gathered. Each item is described in the analysis chapter.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Creswell and Plano Clark describe the stages of analysis: “For both quantitative and qualitative data analysis, researchers go through a similar set of steps: preparing the data for analysis, exploring the data, analysing the data, representing the analysis, interpreting the analysis, and validating the data and interpretations” (2011, p. 204). These steps are often sequential when dealing with quantitative data, however, they often happen “both simultaneously and iteratively in qualitative research” (p. 204). This section explains how the data were prepared and explored, resulting in the findings described in the next chapter. An explanation of the analysis and interpretation process is also included.

Preparing the data for analysis entailed organizing the documentation and transcribing interviews. Line and page numbers were added to the transcripts to facilitate analysis. During the transcription process, notes were made of themes and connections to the

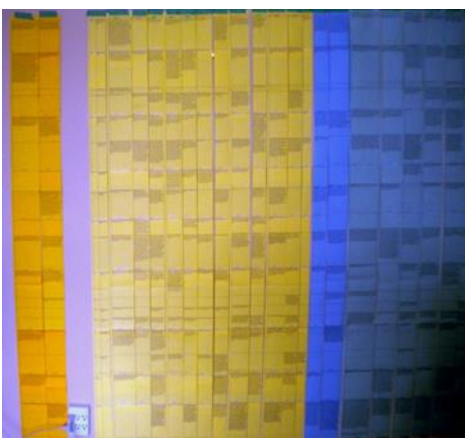


Figure 5. Individual participant passages sorted by code

research questions that began to emerge. From these notes, an initial set of codes was created.

The purpose of exploring the data is to gain a general overview or understanding, which was accomplished by reading through data, creating memos and refining the initial codes where necessary (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The transcripts were printed and then coded by hand using highlighters and margin

notations (Mertler, 2014). All interviews and documents were read multiple times before, during, and after coding to establish a deep understanding of the material and stronger connection to the experiences of the participants.

The highlighted sections of data were then digitally copied and pasted into spreadsheets grouped by code. During this process, some codes were collapsed and others added; notes were kept regarding the reasoning behind these decisions. To allow for analysis the spreadsheets were printed in two formats. The first presented each participant's coded passages grouped by code. This spreadsheet was taped to a wall to provide ready access and allow for cross checking (see Figure 5). The second set of spreadsheets grouped all passages related to a specific code on a separate sheet (see Figure 6).

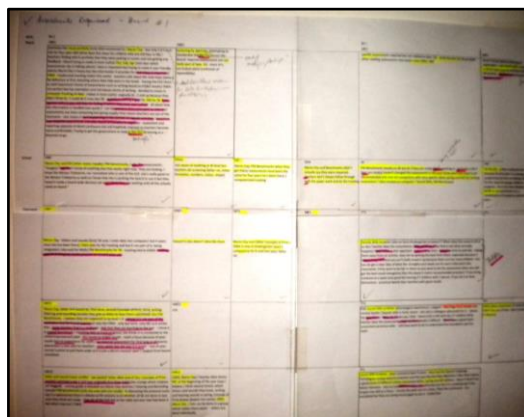


Figure 6. All participant passages grouped by code

To facilitate comparisons within and between levels of the school system and allow for cross-case comparison, the data were summarized first keeping the levels (Board personnel/school administration/teachers/ECE) as well as the physical locations (each board and school) separate. As the analysis progressed, the themes continued to evolve as they emerged from the data; the codes and themes were expanded and collapsed accordingly. The final set of findings is presented in Chapter 4 as two separate case studies, one for each school board.

The findings were then interpreted relative to my experience, the pertinent literature, and the research questions. This was followed by a further discussion of the findings interpreted through the conceptual framework which was guided by complexity theory. This analysis and synthesis of the findings are presented in Chapter 5.

Ethical Considerations

With any research project it is essential to consider the ethical issues that might arise and to take all steps necessary to insure that the well-being of the research participants is protected. The researcher must inform the participants of the purpose of the study and explain any potential risks. It was not anticipated that involvement in the project would result in any negative consequences for the participants; however a number of safe-guards,

including informed consent, confidentiality, and data storage, were employed. The following is an explanation of how each safe guard was used.

Informed consent. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the project. The initial invitation to participate in the project explained the purpose of the study and stressed that involvement was completely voluntary. The consent form reiterated both of these ideas. The form was reviewed before the interview and again it was noted that the participant could withdraw at any time, could refuse to answer any question, and was free to ask for clarification and/or discuss any concerns they might have about the project with the researcher.

Confidentiality. The rights and interests of the individuals involved in the project are of prime concern to the researcher. All names and identifying characteristics were changed in order to maintain confidentiality. Individuals, as well as the schools, and school boards were given pseudonyms. Descriptive characteristics, such as test scores, and student populations have been rounded to prevent the identification of the schools and boards involved.

Data storage. All data, including digital interview files, computer files, transcripts, memos and notes, have been securely stored and accessible only to the researcher and her supervisors.

Issues of Trustworthiness

“Qualitative research is intended to approach the world ‘out there’ (not in specialized research setting such as laboratories) and to understand, describe, and sometimes explain social phenomena “from the inside” (Gibbs, 2007, p. x). The concept of trustworthiness is used to determine the inherent value of qualitative research. Used in this way, trustworthiness can be discussed in terms credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). What follows is a discussion of each of these constructs, as they apply to this study.

Credibility. The credibility (or validity) of a research project is based on “whether the findings are accurate and credible from the standpoint of the researcher, the participants, and the reader” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 86). Credibility can be affected by both the design of the project and the interpretation of the data (Mason, 1996). Careful consideration was given to the research design. Both the research questions and the methods were based on a thorough and critical review of the literature. Thought was then given to the choice of a

qualitative approach, case study design, and data collection methods which were well suited to the purpose of the study, and the conceptual framework. The multiple methods of data collection, providing multiple sources of information that can be compared and cross-referenced (triangulation) further enhance the credibility of the findings (Yin, 2009).

Various strategies were used to improve the validity of the interpretation of the data. First, researcher assumptions and biases have been stated. Secondly, transcriptions were carefully prepared and checked. Further, the purpose of transcription is to “capture faithfully the respondent’s view of the world” (Gibbs, 2007). To insure that the interpretation of the interview was accurate, transcripts were emailed to each participant. The participants were asked to review the transcript to confirm its veracity and to suggest any changes and/or clarify their responses. Most participants responded confirming the interpretation of the interview. One participant made a few grammatical corrections.

Dependability. In qualitative research there is a requirement that the findings are consistent and dependable with the data collected (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Efforts to minimize errors and biases will improve dependability. Yin (2009), suggests that this can be accomplished by being extremely methodical about the research process particularly in data collection and analysis phases. A clear chain of evidence that links the questions asked with the data collected and the conclusions drawn should be apparent. This includes documenting and explaining the decisions made and steps taken throughout the study as well as creating and using a well thought out interview protocol. Journal notes and memos were kept during the project and were used to describe the process of data collection, transcription, coding and analysis in an attempt to provide the above-mentioned chain of evidence.

Confirmability. Qualitative researchers expect that the personal experiences and world view of the individual researchers can have an impact. As Denzin and Lincoln put it, “All research is interpretive; it is guided by the researcher’s set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied” (2005, p. 22). It is important that a researcher understand their own beliefs, values and biases because they influence not only how we chose to conduct research but also the questions we consider are worth asking and the way we look at the results (Kuhn, 1996). As with dependability, confirmability can be improved by stating biases and by providing a clear train of evidence to show how data can be traced back to its origins (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The personal statement outlined earlier

describes the assumptions and presumptions that guided this project. A clear chain of evidence was maintained through careful data management, and regular rechecking and cross-referencing during the data analysis and interpretation stages. In addition, I sought advice and frequently discussed the research process and the findings with my supervisor and colleagues.

Transferability. Qualitative research hopes to provide insight into social situations that are similar to those being studied. The degree to which the findings of this study could be applied in other contexts such as the elements influencing early identification in other schools or school boards is an indication of the transferability of the study. The use of detailed, or thick, rich descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the case study context, participants, and processes as have been provided in this project, allows a reader to decide for his or herself whether the findings are relevant.

Potential Limitations

An essential step in any research process is to recognize and attempt to mitigate any factors that might limit or weaken the study. Careful thought has been given both to elements inherent to all qualitative research as well as those specific to this project.

Researcher bias. As stated, all research is guided by the researcher's beliefs and feelings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and to improve the quality of the research it is important those feelings and beliefs are examined for any potential impact. To identify possible areas of difficulty, I engaged in many periods of reflection questioning beliefs about the topics involved as well as the research process. I recognized that my experiences as a mother of a child who struggled early in school and as a teacher who attempted to help students with similar difficulties have influenced my thinking. Many discussions with colleagues in the field of early education as well as my supervisors and others involved in educational research helped clarify and deepen my own understandings and how these beliefs guided the projects.

Recruitment issues. As mentioned above, there was an attempt to recruit boards and schools that varied in terms of location and size by applying for approval to conduct research in both urban and rural boards that were also larger and smaller geographically. One of the boards covered a somewhat larger geographic area, however neither contained highly populated urban centres; the schools involved were similar in enrollment numbers and were situated in smaller urban settings. Despite the similarities the two boards did have different

early identification protocols and it was felt that there was sufficient variation to provide a range of understandings and experiences for the research project.

Time constraints. Practical issues, particularly the need to minimize the interruption to classroom and school routines, as well as the distance to the research sites, meant the time spent with each participant and opportunity to become familiar with the school setting were both somewhat limited. In an attempt to mitigate this factor, I tried to gather as much information as possible during each visit. I spent what time I could in the classrooms and during breaks in the staff room so that the participants could become more comfortable with me and I could glean a deeper understanding of the school culture.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a description of the research methodology used in this study. Qualitative case study approach influenced by complexity theory was used to explore both practice and understandings around the identification of students at-risk in the FDELKP in the province of Ontario. Permission to conduct research was granted by two school boards. Methods of data collection included analysis of provincial and school board policy document, a total of 23 interviews of personnel at the board, school and classroom levels, as well as artifact gathering. The processing of the data as described in the chapter included coding of the documents and the artifacts, as well as transcribing and then coding the interviews. The material was read and reread multiple times to achieve familiarity and to facilitate the analysis and interpretation stages. As was described in the chapter, efforts to improve the trustworthiness of the project included careful thought given to the research design, reflection on the possible impact of researcher bias, as well as attention to detail in terms of the preparation and analysis of the data.

Chapter 4 – Findings

The purpose of this research project was to investigate the elements that influence the identification of at-risk students within the Full-Day Early Learning - Kindergarten Program in Ontario. This chapter presents the key findings that were gathered through the analysis of provincial and school board documents as well as interviews conducted with 23 individuals at board, school and classroom levels in two different school boards. A qualitative case study approach was used so that comparisons could be made between and among the various level of the school system.

I begin by presenting a description of each board and the policies and programs that influence early identification in the boards. I then present the themes that emerged during the participant interviews, including the characteristics participants found most concerning when it came to identifying at-risk students, understandings and beliefs around assessments used to determine which students were considered to be at-risk, and which students were receiving extra support. The theme names are phrased from the point of view of the participants being interviewed with “we” used as a collective term; “they” refers to the students.

Where relevant, artifacts gathered during the school visits are described in text boxes. To protect the anonymity of the individuals involved, pseudonyms have been used for the names of the boards and schools involved as well as for the individuals interviewed.

Case Studies

School boards are responsible for producing Special Education Plans that detail the protocols for early identification; these plans are available to the public and, in the case of the two boards included in the project, are published on the boards' websites. In order to protect the anonymity of the school boards involved, the information from the websites has been paraphrased rather than quoted. Early identification protocols are also described based on information gathered during interviews as they provide different perspectives and understandings of the protocols. In a number of cases the assessments and protocols identified by individuals are not the same as those described in board policy. To provide an overview and reference point, the demographic information for both school boards included in the study, namely Cedarview and Maple Leaf District School Boards, is presented in the table below. The remainder of the chapter presents the findings for the two case studies. Each board is described in general terms followed by an explanation of the board protocol and

then the four themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview data; each theme is further organized into a number of sub-themes.

Table 5

Board Demographics

	Cedarview DSB			Maple Leaf DSB	Province of Ontario	
Board Enrollment (in thousands)	15			21		
Number of schools in the board offering the FDELKP 2011- 2012	4			11		
	B. Reid PS		S. Fitch PS	Wynne-Jones		
School Enrollment	350		400	250		318
Grades	JK-8		JK-8	JK-8		
#FDELKP classes in school	3		1	3		
#Students in class	21	21 18	20	28	28 20	
% of students achieving level 3 or 4 on the Grade 3 Assessment of Reading, Writing, Math						
Board and Provincial Averages	70	80 70		60	70 60	66 76 68
School averages	80	90 80	95 100 100	60	60 40	
% of students in lower-income households	2		10	30		16.5
% of students who receive special education services	10		20	15		14.2
% of students whose first language is not English	<1.0		1	1		23.4

Note: To protect the anonymity of the boards and schools, the board populations have been rounded to the nearest thousand, the school populations to the nearest 50, and the percentages to the nearest 5.

Cedarview District School Board

Description of board and schools. Cedarview is a moderately sized school board in Ontario and is located close to a large urban area. The board contains approximately 40 schools; 10 secondary schools and 30 elementary schools and has a population of approximately 15,000 students. During the research time period, four of the 30 elementary schools were offering the FDELKP. The two schools included in the project were in smaller communities but were within 30 to 50 kilometers of mid to large sized cities. It was a second year of implementation for both schools. The four classes included consisted of JK and SK students with class sizes varying from 18-21.

Within the school board, the percentage of students achieving level 3 or 4 (achievement that meets or exceeds provincial standards) on the Grade 3 assessments of reading, writing, and mathematics were slightly higher than provincial averages. Achievement levels of both schools were higher than the board averages and much higher than provincial averages. In the case of B. Reid Public School, the percentage of students from lower-income households was much lower than provincial averages; the school was described as being in an affluent community by a number of participants. The percentage of students from lower-income households was also lower at S. Fitch Public School. The percentage of students who receive special education services was lower than the provincial average at B. Reid but higher at S. Fitch. Both schools had much lower percentages of students whose first language was not English when compared to provincial averages.

Early identification protocols. According to the Special Education Plan on the board website, when they begin school in the board, the learning abilities and needs of each student are established. Teachers of Junior and Senior Kindergarten are expected to track the skills required for early learning using a handbook created for the purpose of early identification which includes a Kindergarten intake form as well as a form which can be completed if a child is considered to be at-risk (See Figure 7 for a description of the Student Profile Checklist). This form can be completed based on concerns expressed by parents, and/or concerns of teachers based on observations or discussions with parents. The indicators that a child might be at risk include distractibility, difficulty following directions, weak verbal skills, or difficulties with fine or gross motor skills. Poor social skills, behavioural difficulties and lack of interest in other children or classroom activities may also be indicators that a child may be at risk. There is recognition that some students will need various levels of plans in place to support their learning while other students may need more formal support from Special Education Services.

The Student Profile Checklist was provided by Holly, the SERT at S. Fitch. The profile is a comprehensive checklist where the level of development in the areas of language, mathematics, social/ emotional/ behaviour as well as gross and fine skills can be recorded. Instructions on the profile indicate that it should be completed for any child in Junior and Senior Kindergarten that might be considered at-risk or in need of enrichment.

Figure 7. Student Profile Checklist

A number of pilot projects are described in the early identification document. These include a pilot project for primary assessment and intervention in which a group of Grade 1 teachers collected assessment data in a portfolio. The data was intended to be used for tracking and classroom planning. The same portfolio is featured elsewhere in the board's Special Education Plan and on their website. One of the stated purposes of the portfolio is to reduce the wait time for professional assessments JK to Grade 4 students; however, the description of the portfolio refers to Grade 2 and Grade 5 teachers. It is unclear as to whether the portfolio is intended to be used in the Kindergarten program. A second pilot project was described which targeted Kindergarten literacy and was supported by Speech and Language Pathologists.

Board personnel described another pilot project that emerged from the recommendations from a consultation process that included a variety of stakeholders such as community agencies, teachers, principals, special education consultants and parents, seeking to anticipate possible issues arising from the implementation of the FDELKP. An enhanced Kindergarten registration program was seen as a way to promote parental involvement, improve communication between home and school and ease the transition for all students beginning school. One facet of this program was to have individuals from community agencies that provide support services to young children with special needs such as CCAC at Kindergarten registration. This was aimed at making information available to parents as well as making it more likely that parents might share concerns with the school. The ultimate goal was to make sure students that might need services were identified as quickly as possible.

Another aspect of the pilot project ongoing at the Cedarview board was an orientation day for both parents and children where they engaged in learning activities similar to those used in the Kindergarten classroom. Following the orientation day, participants took home a bag of learning materials they could use at home with their children over the summer. Also, there was a program which involved having students visit the school a number of days during the summer. The aim was to make students more comfortable with the transition to school. While the program was available to all students, some parents were more strongly encouraged to enroll their children if the teachers and/or principal thought the child might need extra time to adjust.

Karen, the principal of B. Reid, described yet another pilot project, in this case a community agency responsible for providing mental health services to children and youths, comes into the school once every two weeks to observe in the Kindergarten classrooms. The goal was to identify students that might be in need of support for behavioural issues.

Similarly, according to Steven, the principal at S. Fitch, early identification happens informally long before students begin school. He watches as young children visit the school with their siblings and takes these opportunities to observe their behaviour and independence skills. At registration, if the student is comfortable with the idea, he will sit down with them and ask them to draw or colour. The principal also referred to the enhanced Kindergarten registration as well as the student/parent Kindergarten orientation day and summer pilot projects described by board personnel. He considered these to be increased opportunities to observe the students in the school setting.

When asked to describe the protocols used by the board to identify students that might be at-risk, Jenny, a board administrator with responsibilities for the FDELKP, mentioned a portfolio and then described mandatory literacy assessments including subtests of the Observation Survey created by Marie Clay, the Ontario Writing Assessment (OWA) and the PM Benchmark reading assessments. These assessments were completed at specific times of the year; results are entered into a computer data base so that progress can be tracked. In contrast, Gerry, a board administrator with responsibilities for Special Education, discussed working with community agencies to facilitate the transition of students with diagnosed special needs into school but was not familiar with the early identification protocol described on the website or those being used in the schools and did not feel it was part of the Special Education department mandate:

I can't really comment on that part myself too much because I know that there are screeners in place that the teachers do, we don't mandate that. The Spec. Ed department does not say, "Every child must be screened to this tool." So I really can't comment, now curriculum, if you spoke to them that would be more their piece.

All of the teachers as well as the school principals and SERTs discussed the literacy assessments outlined above although there was some confusion around which students should be assessed with PM Benchmarks and the level of achievement considered acceptable. Only one of the ECEs interviewed was aware of the assessments required;

however all of the ECEs believed that assessment was the responsibility of the teacher. As Fay, at B. Reid put it, “there are some things that only the school board teacher does. It’s not part of my job description to do assessment but I do observations.”

Summary. As required, Cedarview DSB had a clearly defined early identification protocol. The protocol included a description of the elements that might contribute to a child being considered at-risk. A number of pilot projects before and during the implementation of the FDELKP were undertaken to facilitate the identification of and support for students that might be at-risk for early school failure. There were varying understandings of the board protocol and some lack of clarity around who was actually responsible for assessment and ongoing tracking of struggling students.

The following section describes the four main themes which emerged from the interview data from the participants at Cedarview. The themes include which students were generally considered to be more likely to be at-risk, understandings around what assessments were required by the school board, what assessments teachers and ECEs were using in the classroom, and what type of supports were being provided for students who might be struggling. Each theme is further divided into several sub-themes.

Who is at-risk. To explore beliefs around at-risk students as well as attitudes toward current early identification protocols, participants were asked to describe students that they might consider to be at-risk. This included students who would be identified with the current assessment protocol as well as those that could be overlooked in the assessment but still be of concern. The four main sub-themes that emerged from these discussions are described below.

Will I have a friend? The concerns noted most frequently by participants were in the area of social and emotional development, particularly behaviour difficulties and social skills. Both board administrators were concerned with the students who did not appear to be ready for school emotionally and/or physically. Examples included those that were not engaged or did not appear to be interested as well as some who had toileting issues. Administrators at both boards as well as Steven, the principal of S. Fitch, noticed a higher frequency of behaviour issues since the inception of the FDELK program:

We are seeing a lot more extreme behaviour across the system and when I talk to my colleagues too, it’s basically across the province. When it comes to some of these little

ones, I don't know whether it is anxiety or what is going on but we're seeing with a lot of high, high needs behaviour where they are safety risks and this sort of stuff. We are seeing more of that now as well compared to when we were running our other model.

They also discussed the idea that some issues that didn't seem as significant when students were only there half-days or every other day, now appeared to be more problematic with full time attendance.

School principals and SERTS were also concerned about readiness in general and behaviour problems but considered social skills especially important. Steven, the principal of S. Fitch, indicated that he began to look for signs of potential problems as early as possible. He would watch for children who might have difficulties in terms of attention to task, independence skills or exhibit behaviour issues with their parents. "It's not usually around literacy issues or numeracy; it's usually around the readiness for school, playing, sharing, those kinds of things, behaviour."

Similarly, teachers noted that it was behaviour that was noticed first, especially lack of compliance; however, social skills and peer interaction were also considered important indicators. Hannah, a teacher at B. Reid noted, "So we are watching to see that they are starting to form some sort of friendships because oftentimes if they are not ready to talk to their peers that translates into them not really being able to participate in activities." The

Hannah and Jane provided a letter sent to parents of students in their class early in the school year describing the daily routines and schedule. The letter also explained that the focus for the beginning of the year was learning routines and rules as well as skills needed for learning. Later in the year the focus would change to include math and language.

Figure 8. Letter to parents from Hannah and Jane

ECEs also strongly believed that social skills and social emotional development in general were the most important factors when identifying children that might be at-risk. Difficulties with communicating with peers and making friends and inability to follow basic routines or focus appropriately during circle time were considered indications of potential problems. Any behaviour that removed the child from the group was problematic and social skills in particular were seen as essential to future success both emotionally and academically. See Figure 8 for a

description of the letter Hannah and Jane sent to parents to describe these priorities. A similar letter was sent to parents from Helen and Terri.

Academic seems to glare at you but my philosophy has always been that if you can't function in a group and can't get along with your peers then you are not getting it, you are not in a good place for the rest of the school system. (Terri, an ECE at B. Reid)

Are they getting support at home? Family life and parental involvement in the identification process was commented on by many participants. When asked to think about students who might be at-risk, both the principal and the SERT thought of students who were not being supported at home. Holly, the SERT at S. Fitch also mentioned family circumstances she believed might contribute to a child being at-risk, including children who might not have had much exposure to literacy and socio-economic factors such as those from single parent families and those with a lack of resources. According to Helen, a teacher at B. Reid, "usually it's not what it happening at school, it is what is happening at home that's the problem."

The influence of parents in both facilitating and hindering the identification process was mentioned by many participants. They described how parents whose children have more obvious physical and/or development difficulties often seek help long before their child enters school. According to Lisa, the SERT at B. Reid, many parents do whatever they can to support the school system and actively advocate for services for their child; paying for services and assessments and cooperating with behaviour modification programs were among the examples given.

However, parents were also seen as an impediment to the identification process; board personnel, school administrators, teachers and ECE all noted that sometimes parents are not fully aware of what constitutes typical development and so it is often the school that is the first to raise the issue. Several participants noted that this was particularly true of first born and/or only children. Karen, the principal at B. Reid, gave the following example:

The parents didn't take things very well so then I brought the parents in without any of the teachers and just sat down and said, "He's an only child, what have you noticed?" And worked through it that way and introduced very gradually the idea of

the IEP and getting some help and we've come such a long way in the last two months but it took so long to get there because they had no idea.

Karen felt that although they looked for difficulties early on, many issues such as speech and language difficulties were not identified as early as they could be especially if the parents had not recognized the problem. She, along with several other participants, suggested that family doctors might have a larger role to play here as she believed parents are more likely to listen to their doctors than teachers.

Participants believed that some parents may realize something is wrong but may not be willing to admit that their child might have a problem. Jane, an ECE at B. Reid noted, "Parents seem to be the big setback at times." They may not disclose all pertinent information when registering their child and/or may refuse to sanction the identification process. The importance of communication with parents was stressed by many participants; working as a team and making sure that parents have the information they need, and understand the expectations of the Kindergarten classroom.

Is school a girl thing? A number of teachers noted that boys were often more likely to be at-risk. Ellen, a teacher at B. Reid, noted, "[it's] usually boys, I think that would be my first thought, they are usually the ones we need to keep an extra eye on." Although not stated explicitly by some participants, it was clear by their use of "he" that they were describing specific boys that came to mind when asked to discuss children that might be at-risk.

Are they making the grade? While social and emotional skills were mentioned most often, some participants also discussed students who might not be meeting academic expectations. This was particularly true in reference to Senior Kindergarten students. Academic skills such as letters, shapes and numbers were considered important as well as the ability to print their names and recognize print in general.

Summary. When participants were asked to reflect on which students they might consider to be at-risk, the characteristics which emerged included children that may not be receiving support at home, as well as boys being a concern were more than girls. While academic skills and school readiness was mentioned by a few individuals, the characteristics noted most often were poorly developed social and emotional skills as well as difficulty with behaviour expectations.

Assessment expectations. As well as being asked to describe students at-risk, participants were asked to discuss the assessments they were expected to complete in order to track student progress. Many participants felt that the assessments required by the board were helpful in determining the level of progress the child had made toward the specific skill, however, a number of concerns were also expressed. The following section presents four sub-themes that emerged from those discussions.

Are the assessments a good fit? Included in the concerns was whether or not the boards' assessments were consistent with philosophy of the FDELKP. Although she felt that the information about the students gathered through the assessment was valuable, Jenny, an administrator with responsibilities for the FDELKP, recognized that the assessments as they were currently being completed did not really fit with the play-based approach to learning as they were opposite to the developmental continua approach originally recommended for the program. She also questioned the goals set for the PM Benchmarks assessment at the SK level...

The board is asking that by the end of SK they be at level 5, that is what we are aiming for, and that is fine but with all these assessments, how can you tell a child, if they are not at level 5 by the end of Kindergarten they are a failure already?

Teachers noted differing opinions about which students should be assessed with the PM Benchmark reading assessment and mentioned that it was not an expectation that matched the curriculum. Hannah, a teacher at B. Reid, noted discussion at a recent Professional Development day, "there was some debate when we were at PD whether all the SKs had to be done or whether just the SKs we thought were ready... we do it but I don't know whether it is mandatory." Helen, another teacher at B. Reid, stated, "We also have PM Benchmarks, so the expectation for our board, I believe they are supposed to be at between level 1 and level 4 ... I know it isn't part of the curriculum but our board expects it." Like Jenny, they believed that the assessments and tracking procedures may be putting too much pressure on 4 and 5 year olds and were not necessarily consistent with the goals of the classroom. Hannah notes:

So it seems a little bit contradictory because our whole first term we comment on social and personal and then we do a letter assessment that we enter the data in for, so it kind of seems a little bit odd.

The schedule of assessments and as well as the time and work involved in the assessments was discussed by a number of teachers. While most considered the information gained of value, they found the administration of the assessment, particularly the OWA, a challenge. There were concerns that they might be targeting instruction to the assessment, “teaching to the test” and did not feel that pulling the students out of their normal routine for the assessments was the best way to determine their level of achievement.

Additionally, it was believed that other areas of learning were being missed such as oral language and phonemic awareness and that issues such as fine motor difficulties could easily be overlooked. A concern connected to this was that a current focus for intervention and improvement was mathematics. While the goal of improving in this area was included in the School Improvement Plan (SIP), there was currently no assessment to provide tracking information.

The not – so – squeaky wheels. One of the board personnel interviewed believed that their staff and teachers were very knowledgeable and efficient at identifying students that might be struggling. However both board personnel believed that if students had not already been identified before starting school and/or had more moderate issues they might be missed or fail to get the support they need. It was felt that the teachers and ECE may be more focused on the higher needs students (the squeaky wheels). Karen, the principal of B. Reid, shared the concern that students with more moderate difficulties might be overlooked.

Classroom teachers and ECEs also thought that it was the borderline students or those with moderate difficulties that might be missed, especially if teachers are too busy focusing on those with higher needs. One teacher also felt that there would always be some students that get missed; because there are so many needs that not everyone will get the help they should. Helen, a teacher at B. Reid, believed that the administration was more concerned with helping older students in need rather than focusing on early intervention but felt this might be short-sighted.

They are so concerned with the upper grades; the fact that the little boy in grade four is only reading at the Kindergarten level or not reading at all, and I total understand that that would be the number one concern even though you can just see the writing on the page for this little boy going along, he’s going to be that boy in grade four but it’s the time, everyone is so swamped.

Do they just need more time? A number of participants noted that given the complex nature of development in early childhood it is often difficult to determine the role that maturity plays in deciding when and if a child should be considered “at risk”. While Lisa, the SERT at B. Reid, recognized the difficulty of distinguishing the normal course of development from possible problems or delays, she believed that children might be missed if teachers were attributing delays to lack of maturity, and therefore assuming students just need more time to grow. “I’m sure in some schools there are teachers that chalk it up to maturation which I think is the worst excuse in the world. [The] milestones are out there...when 27 of them are doing that and one of them isn’t for x amount of months, it’s pretty obvious.” She felt this was especially true if the teacher was not good at recognizing high needs children and felt that any child not progressing along the developmental continuum should be investigated.

However, several teachers discussed the idea that determining who might be at risk at this early stage in schooling was difficult because there was such a range in terms of developmental levels. Bev, a teacher at S. Fitch, said that some children are just not ready and that it was important to wait until the child was comfortable at school before making any decisions about their abilities.

Bev also pointed out that some issues are more likely to become obvious later such as difficulties with higher level thinking skills, and those that take longer to actually diagnose including reading and writing disabilities, less severe forms of autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). She noted that even with great programs, there would always be a group that struggle with expectations.

Will they be ready? There was a general sense of pressure to be sure that the students were “ready” for Grade one. In terms of interventions, it was considered important to make sure issues were identified as quickly as possible so that available supports and resources would be in place by the time the student reached first grade.

One teacher did not feel this was an issue and believed that the FDELKP has likely been beneficial in preparing the students:

I think that any gains that we have in the full day early learning program you may not see until grade 3, right now it's hard to see what kind of difference it makes, What we can say, is that last year when our group left and it was the first ones to have full day,

that first group we had more readers and writers than we have ever had in the past. I could not believe I have actually moved a JK up to grade 1. (Bev, a teacher at S. Fitch)

Others were less positive and felt the play-based environment was less likely to lead to successful transitions:

I just worry about going from two years of play to then going to grade one where they are sitting at a desk for 80% of the time. I see a great decrease with that so I have a hard time with that. I think my job is to prepare them for grade one and I personally, I know research says it does, but I personally can't make that connection yet. (Ellen, a teacher at B. Reid)

Jenny, a board administrator with responsibilities for the FDELKP, had a further concern about pressure on students to achieve. She reiterated her feeling that the benchmark levels of achievement on board assessment may not be appropriate and was concerned about the use of data generated through the assessment. She said that the board was attempting to make the student and class level scores available quickly through computer tracking so that teachers and the principals could use the information for planning. However she noted that the information had to be "handled properly" and that using the data for planning sometimes lead to principals putting excessive pressure on teachers to improve test scores.

Summary. Participants expressed a number of concerns about the assessments required by their school board and the identification of students at-risk. Several individuals questioned whether the assessments were appropriate given the wide range of normal development at this age level and whether they were consistent with the philosophy of the child-centred, play-based approach. Connected to this were concerns that the play-based program itself might make some students less ready for Grade One. It was also felt that a number of children who might be at-risk would not be identified including quieter children, those with more moderate difficulties, those with difficulties not specifically assessed. The difficulty of distinguishing "normal" development from at-risk characteristics was also raised.

Assessments in the classroom. As well as discussing the assessments required by the board, participants were also asked about what other assessments were used in the classroom. The three sub-themes that emerged are outlined in the following section.

How do we really know they are learning? While all the teachers said they completed the board assessments they indicated that this was only a small part of how they determined what students were learning. Most teachers stressed the use of observation and anecdotal notes as the main tools for assessment. Ellen, a teacher at B. Reid, stated, "It's really a lot of teacher observations of things we see when we are doing small group activities or large group activities – abnormal behaviour and whatnot. It's really up to us to bring that

Helen provided assessment sheets for individual and whole class tracking. The assessments indicated the level of achievement of independence (e.g. dressing) and listening skills as well as participation.

attention to the program." Teachers also described a variety of other methods of assessment including a checklist of basic skills used by a number of teachers, photos of work, tracking of behaviour issues at the classroom and school level (See Figure 9 for a description of this type of assessment).

Figure 9. Description of assessment samples.

Generally the ECEs indicated that they took more of a developmental approach to student

progress with an emphasis on behaviour and social and emotional growth while the teachers focused more on academic growth. In all cases the ECEs referred to the use of anecdotal notes in terms of recording progress. Any concerns about a student were discussed with the teacher who then followed up with referrals to the SERT if necessary. One ECE did mention helping the teacher with assessments by playing games with the student and observing specific "look-fors" each week. This individual noted that while the teacher completed the required literacy assessments, the information was not used on the students' report cards. "A lot of anecdotal other than the specifics, the OWA and Marie Clay which are the specifics; we don't use them a lot for our report cards. They are just something you have to do because the board says." (Jane, an ECE at B. Reid)

Looking At the whole child. While the board assessments were generally considered the teacher's responsibility, knowing the whole child was very much a team effort. Many participants noted the importance of there being a teacher and an ECE in the classroom. "Two sets of eyes" was mentioned frequently, as providing a more thorough understanding of each student's strengths and needs. It was also felt that the differing backgrounds of the two professionals contributed to seeing the whole child as illustrated in the following quotes:

We're very much a team, the teacher and I...I look at the social a lot more than a school board teacher who would look at the assessment, such as does he know his letters and numbers? Whereas I am, well he is not even able to make friends. (Fay, an ECE at B. Reid)

If we notice something that we think is a bit off, we will bounce it off each other and say, "What do you think, and how do you think we should handle that?" So I think it is a huge benefit to have two people that come from different backgrounds. (Terri, an ECE at B. Reid)

I have the academic background and she's got the preschool background so it's different kinds of things. She can pick up on what they might be lacking in that I wouldn't even think about, where as I pick up the academic. So it works really well in that sense. So then we are looking at the whole child not just one component. (Ellen, a teacher at B. Reid)

Are There Other Ways? Resources that would be helpful in the identification of at-risk were mentioned by a number of participants. The Nipissing District Developmental Screen was being used informally during the registration process; both board administrators felt this process should become more formalized. Gerry stated:

There is an attempt across our board to standardize the use of the Nipissing, we are not there yet but there certainly is interest and I think some will to move forward in that direction so that everybody would be using that screening tool.

Karen, the principal of B. Reid, also asked her teachers to use a different screen to assess language and number skills, "The Marie Clay is a board-wide decision, the screen that we use is from Nelson (Trehearne, 2000), that's my choice, I just think it is a good idea."

Several teachers mentioned a resource from their local Health unit (produced with support from the provincial Ministry of Health) which described social and emotional issues students might have, it presented warning signs as well as support in terms of what help might be available and where to find it. Teachers felt that this was an important tool especially if one was new to teaching.

Summary. Participants described a variety of assessments used in conjunction with those required by the board. The Nipissing District Developmental Screen and a mental health resource from the local Health Unit were mentioned by a number of participants. Most

participants stressed the importance of using ongoing observations with ECEs focusing more on developmental elements and teachers focusing more on academic issues. There was a strong belief that the combination of a teacher and ECE in the classroom provided a more complete picture of the child.

Interventions. Identifying children that might be at-risk is really only the first step, without remediation/extra support their difficulties are likely to continue and/or become more severe. As discussed earlier, it is often very difficult to separate identification protocols from intervention strategies because the interventions are often a part of the longer term identification process. Deciding which children will get support can be an indication of which difficulties are considered most important. This can be a challenge when resources are limited. A number of points were raised when participants discussed the interventions available. In the following section the three sub-themes that emerged when the participants were asked to discuss the provision of interventions in their schools are presented.

Are we on the same page? Karen, the principal of B. Reid, strongly believed that everyone involved in the Kindergarten program at the school was in agreement that the focus of early identification and intervention must be social and emotional skills. She along with a number of other staff members said that this philosophy was influenced by a teacher who was currently on leave. This individual believed the main goals for Kindergarten should be that the child enjoys coming to school and has at least one good friend by the end of the year. Lisa, the SERT at the school, described how the staff discussed concerns about students during weekly primary division meetings, and monthly meetings with her. She also said the teachers were quick to come to her with concerns or questions. Steven, the principal of S. Fitch, however, felt that the focus of discussion of at-risk students was more intermittent, and generally concerned the behaviour and social skills of specific students rather than the broader concepts of who should be considered. This was supported by Holly, the SERT at that school.

Classroom teachers and ECE also mentioned frequent meetings with their school SERT to discuss concerns as well as frequent and ongoing discussion within the classroom; again the focus is on the individual students rather than the concept of at-risk.

Who is getting help? Interventions were discussed in terms of universal preventative types as well as those targeted at specific individual problems. Universal interventions

included the enhanced Kindergarten registration and Welcome to Kindergarten pilot projects described earlier as well as Roots of Empathy and Helping Hands⁷. The Roots of Empathy program was mentioned by the principal and one ECE, although it was apparently being offered in all Kindergarten classes by the ECEs who had been trained to deliver the program. One ECE mentioned the Helping Hands program which was aimed at teaching social skills and was offered by a Student Support Teacher.

Support from outside the classroom was provided by the SERT and was generally targeted at academic skills and more extreme behaviour difficulties. Karen, the principal of B. Reid Public School, indicated that the results of the literacy assessments were used to identify children who needed support from the SERT and were also used to plan for the following year. The planning of classes was considered quite important and there was an effort made to ensure a heterogeneous mix of achievement levels as well as taking into account the social and emotional needs of specific children. To identify students who might be at-risk the SERT asked teachers to create a list of students in October and then again in June. She follows-up on these students with assessments and creates informal IEPs as necessary. Ellen, a teacher at B. Reid, provided this example: "I have three kids that I am concerned about, I just don't feel that they are 100% ready for grade 1 yet and she is taking them for an extra 30 min once a week to work on the extra letters and sounds."

As at B. Reid, Holly the SERT at S. Fitch, not only provided support in terms of interventions for students that might be struggling but was also instrumental in determining when a child might be considered at risk by providing consultative advice to teachers. Holly did describe using the data from literacy assessments required by the board for intervention planning purposes although she admitted they were in the early stages of using the information effectively. Although the computer tracking of data made the information readily available teachers did not always enter the data when they were supposed to meaning the data was not always complete.

⁷ The program is intended to promote the development of empathy, emotional literacy, and pro-social behaviours, as well as to reduce levels of bullying, aggression and violence. The program is based on visits by a local infant and parent every three weeks during the school year. A trained instructor, usually a teacher or other staff member, guides the learning with a focus on how the baby grows and changes over time and learns from his or her environment. The Helping Hands program was delivered by Student Support teachers within the board and was also aimed at teaching social skills.

Individual interventions were implemented on an ongoing basis by the teachers and ECEs. Although support for academic issues was mentioned, those targeting social skills and behaviour difficulties were discussed more frequently. Terri, an ECE at B. Reid, gave an example of helping students at the play centres with social situations and conflict resolution. Helen, the teacher in the same classroom provided the following comment, "We do a lot of language building so that they have the language to tell the other child, I keep bringing it to social skills more than language because it seems that's the concern."

There was concern expressed by a number of participants that some students might not get the help they need in a timely fashion or at all because of limited time and resources. Long waiting lists for services such as Speech and Language and Occupational Therapy was a particular concern.

Summary. Interventions included universal programs as well as those aimed at prevention. At B. Reid there was clear agreement that the emphasis should be social and emotional skills. Although SERT time was largely allotted in response to weaknesses identified through board literacy assessments in both schools, there was also some support in terms of consultation for other issues. Concerns over lack of support and resources, especially long wait times for out-of-school assessments were mentioned by many participants.

In the follow section information and findings related to Maple Leaf District School Board are presented.

Maple Leaf District School Board

Table 5, presenting the demographic information for both school boards, has been repeated here for ease of reference. A description of the board is followed by an explanation of the board protocol. As with Case One, information from the board's website describing their early identification protocol has been paraphrased rather than quoted to protect the anonymity of the board. The early identification protocols are also described based on information gathered during interviews as they provide different perspectives and understandings of the protocols. Again, the assessments and protocols identified by individuals are not always the same as those described in board policy. The four themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview data are then presented with each theme organized into a number of sub-themes.

Table 6

Board Demographics

	Cedarview DSB	Maple Leaf DSB	Province of Ontario
Board Enrollment (in thousands)	15	21	
Number of schools in the board offering the FDELKP 2011- 2012	4	11	
	B. Reid PS	S. Fitch PS	Wynne-Jones
School Enrollment	350	400	250
Grades	JK-8	JK-8	JK-8
#FDELKP classes in school	3	1	3
#Students in class	21 21 18	20	28 28 20
% of students achieving level 3 or 4 on the Grade 3 Assessment of Reading, Writing, Math			
Board and Provincial Averages	70 80 70		60 70 60
School averages	80 90 80	95 100 100	60 60 40
% of students in lower-income households	2	10	30
% of students who receive special education services	10	20	15
% of students whose first language is not English	<1.0	1	1

Note: To protect the anonymity of the boards and schools, the board populations have been rounded to the nearest thousand, the school populations to the nearest 50 and the percentages to the nearest 5.

Description of board and school. Maple Leaf is a moderately sized school board in Ontario and is located close to a mid-size city. The school included in the project was in a smaller community approximately 20 kilometers from a mid-sized city. The board contains approximately 60 schools; 10 secondary schools and 50 elementary schools and has a population of approximately 20 000 students. During the research time period, 11 of the 50 elementary schools were offering the FDELKP. It was second year the program was offered at Wynne-Jones Public School. Two of the FDELKP classes were made of up JK and SK students with 28 in each. The other class was a split grade SK/grade one with 20 students.

Within the school board, the percentage of students achieving level 3 or 4 on the Grade 3 assessments of reading, writing, and mathematics were slightly lower than provincial averages. Achievement levels at Wynne-Jones were similar to the board averages in terms of reading, lower than board and provincial averages in writing and much lower than board and provincial averages in mathematics. The percentage of students from lower-

income households was almost twice as high as the provincial average. The percentage of students who receive special education services was similar to the provincial average while the percentage of students whose first language was not English was much lower.

Early identification protocol. The board's Early Identification Procedures and Intervention Strategies plan describes the steps involved in gathering data and sharing information so that children in need of assistance could be identified and supported as they begin school. This includes a variety of assessments focusing on literacy, readiness, speech and language, and phonological awareness. Specific processes are also in place to ease the transition to school for students who have developmental or physical disabilities, autism, those who are deaf/ hard of hearing, and those who have been receiving speech and language services prior to entering school. Beginning in the fall of the previous year transition meetings are held with the agencies, parents and/or daycares involved to establish needs and create an action plan.

Melissa, a board administrator shared the board's tiered intervention approach which included the FDELKP (See Figure 10).

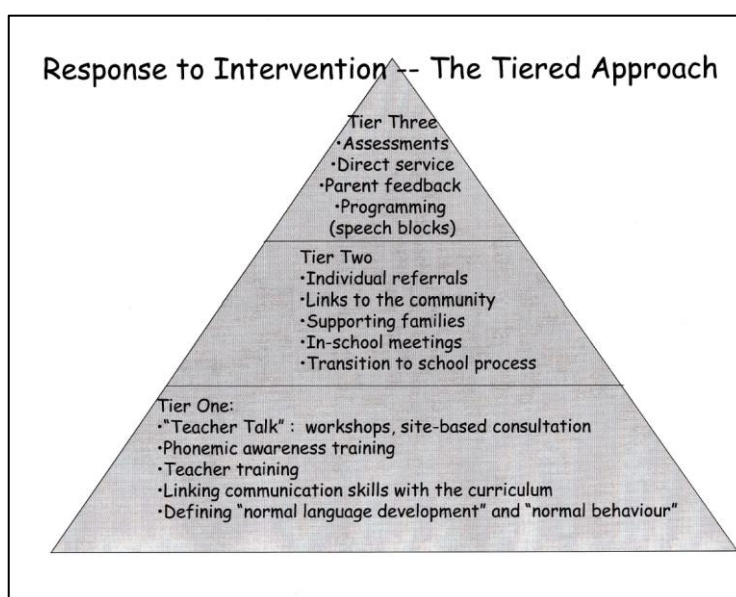


Figure 10. Tiered intervention in Maple Leaf DSB

As in Cedarview District School Board, Maple Leaf DSB has a number of pilot projects aimed specifically at promoting success in the FDELKP. Board personnel described similar enhanced Kindergarten registration programs. This board had also created a multi-disciplinary team of individuals charged with the role of providing support for the FDELKP classrooms and teachers. This team provided both consultation services and blocks of direct classroom support centred on behaviour issues as well as speech and language difficulties. They also had the ability to refer students to other agencies when necessary. Although one of the board personnel did not consider this a pilot project, he did admit that the future of the

team was unclear especially in light of the increased number of schools that would be offering the FDELKP over the next couple of years. The interventions provided by this team will be discussed in a later section.

Both board administrators also described a number of literacy based assessments teachers were expected to complete including the Sound Skills Screener as well as the DRA or PM Benchmark reading assessment. Although, Melissa, a board administrator involved in Special Education, described these as assessments completed on all children, she stated that they were not directly related to Special Education and did not fall under her portfolio.

Jeff, the principal at Wynne-Jones also described the Sound Skills Screener and PM Benchmarks as required assessments and indicated that there was computer tracking of the results. He mentioned the assessments used to be recommended and now are compulsory with a very specific dates/schedule. The Student Support Teacher (SST) at the school did not describe the literacy assessments but rather referred to the EDI as a way to provide baseline information for students. While the teachers all described the required assessments, the ECEs in school 3 were not aware of the protocols for early identification or assessments required and did not feel it was part of their job. Mary, an ECE at Wynne-Jones, stated, "I don't do any of that, I don't know what is required."

Summary. As required, Maple Leaf DSB had a clearly defined early identification protocol. The protocol focused on transition planning for students with identified special needs and gathering data on the literacy skills and progress of all students. A number of pilot projects before and during the implementation of the FDELKP were undertaken to facilitate the identification of and support for students that might be at-risk for early school failure. There were varying understandings of the board protocol and again, some lack of clarity around who was actually responsible for the ongoing assessment and ongoing tracking of struggling students.

The following section describes the four main themes which emerged from the interview data from the participants at Maple Leaf. The themes include which students were generally considered to be more likely to be at-risk, understandings around what assessments were required by the school board, what assessments teachers and ECEs were using in the classroom, and what type of supports were being provided for students who might be struggling. Each theme is further divided into several sub-themes.

Who is at-risk. To explore beliefs around at-risk students as well as attitudes toward current early identification protocols, participants were asked to describe students that they might consider at-risk. This included students that would be identified with the current assessment protocol as well as those that could be overlooked in the assessment but still be of concern. The four sub-themes that emerged from these discussions are described below.

Can they do school? Readiness in terms being able to conform to the behaviour expectations of the classroom was a main theme in the Maple Leaf board. Brian, a board administrator and member of the early identification team, said his board preferred to describe the students as needing support to participate successfully rather than use the term at-risk. He noted that referrals to the team had been almost entirely the result of behaviour difficulties on the part of the students. Jeff, the principal of Wynne-Jones, also included significant behaviour difficulties as one of his main concerns. Evan, the SST at Wynne-Jones, believed that students most at-risk were those who had trouble with the behavioural expectations of the school setting...

The kids that aren't able to follow the school routine. They can't do school, whatever that is. They are the kids who are more active than others; they are more emotional than others, kids who are less compliant than others, kids who have unique personalities, individuals.

As expressed by many others, the classroom teachers and ECEs at Wynne-Jones were concerned about students who were not able to meet the behaviour expectations of school, especially those who had difficulty following routines and explicit instructions, those who were non-compliant and those who had trouble paying attention.

One suggestion for the increase in behaviour issues was the design of some classrooms. This was especially true in classrooms not originally designed for Kindergarten that were being converted for the FDELKP. For example, transitions can be more difficult if coats and shoes are kept in the hall and bathrooms are not in the class. Lack of space was also an issue. Brian, a member of the early intervention team, said:

I think that the physical space makes a big difference. When you have 28 little people and at least two adults and sometimes more in a regular classroom that can be very crowded and that can have a big effect and I really feel like the physical space is an issue in a lot of places and has an impact on the kids and it also has other impacts.

Evan, the SST at Wynne-Jones agreed; referring to the three classrooms in the school he said, "You have 75 children in an area that maybe should accommodate 35 kids that age. Regardless of how many adults you put in there it still doesn't reduce the pressure and the stress that is part of that situation." Carla, a teacher at Wynne-Jones also noted that space was an issue, and said that it made it especially difficult to deal with behaviour issues in a discreet way.

Readiness in terms of overall development was also discussed. Oral language development was considered very important by a number of participants and by the board in general which was why the early identification team included a Speech and Pathologist. Fine motor difficulties were also a concern.

Are they being supported at home? It was felt that difficult family situations, including disruption and/or those who had been involved with the Children's Aid Society would contribute to a child being put at risk. Other participants stressed the importance of working together with parents and making sure they felt welcome in the classroom.

Is school a girl thing? Brian, a board administrator and member of the early identification team, noted that the majority of referrals had been boys (approximately 10:1 ratio). Evan, the Student Support Teacher at Wynne-Jones, also believed the boys were more likely to be at-risk than girls: "It's always more boys... Because school is a passive activity, girls do that better than boys."

Are they making the grade? The characteristics that most concerned Jeff, the principal of Wynne-Jones, were lack of school readiness in terms of academic skills such as knowledge of letters, sounds, numbers, and use of print. The teachers and ECEs at the school were also concerned about academic skills in terms of students not making the gains expected.

Summary. When participants were asked to reflect on which students they might consider to be at-risk, the characteristic noted most often was readiness in terms of being able to meet the social, emotional and behaviour expectations of school. To a lesser extent, concerns were expressed about children that may not be receiving support at home and those with weaker academic skills. It was also felt that boys were more often of concern than girls.

Assessment expectations. As well as being asked to describe students at-risk, participants were asked to discuss the assessments they were expected to complete in order

to track student progress. The following section presents the four sub-themes that emerged from those discussions.

We do the board assessments, but. Many participants felt that the assessments required by the board were helpful in determining the level of progress the child had made toward the specific skill, however, a number of concerns were also expressed.

Are the assessments a good fit? Concerns around the pressure created by the assessment levels and the inconsistency between academic expectations and the philosophy of the FDELKP were expressed by Evan, the Student Support Teacher at Wynne-Jones:

We have these ridiculous charts that say at the end of SK you will read at a PM 7 well we know that some kids don't read until the end of grade 3 and we know that some kids read before they even get to school so those kinds of restrictions creates a whole lot of pressure. That tension about making sure you get the academic part covered and then you have to figure out how play fits in, so you have these two diametrically opposed notions competing with each other in the classroom.

The teachers at Wynne-Jones also had concerns about the assessments. Although the data from the assessment was helpful, the design and schedule of the assessments did not allow the teacher to observe the target behaviours in multiple settings or as part of their everyday activities and therefore was not always an accurate indication of their abilities. “[By] taking them away from an activity, you may not be getting the best from them, especially because it takes a long time and you can't really break it up because there are too many children.” (Carla, a teacher at Wynne-Jones) Another concern was the time involved in completing the assessments. The tests often needed to be completed one-on-one and required a quiet setting to be done effectively. This meant that the teacher's time was focused on one individual student leaving the ECE to attend to the 27 others.

It was also felt by some teachers that oral language was an area that was missing from current assessment protocols. One teacher mentioned that not all teachers had the knowledge base and/or ability to observe oral language development effectively and recognize when there might be a problem. Similarly, difficulties with fine motor skills might be overlooked as there was not enough time in the program devoted to this type of foundational skills.

The not-so-squeaky wheels. The board personnel talked about the need to continually reassess and determine which children were being missed and refine the registration process to catch them as early as possible. Both board administrators interviewed felt that it would be the quieter children with more moderate difficulties that would be overlooked with the current identification protocol. Brian, one of the administrators said, “it is quite possible that children who are quiet, passive or more docile but are struggling with the curriculum may not be referred or referred as quickly as students where the behaviour is high.”

Again it was the students with more moderate difficulties who might be overlooked. Brenda, an ECE at Wynne-Jones, said:

There are so many with behaviours that those quiet little ones who just won't ask for help when they need it and they are so compliant that you pick up their stuff and it's “Wonderful job” and move on but it wasn't really a wonderful job.

Kris, another teacher at Wynne-Jones, mentioned that some behaviour issues may not be identified as early as they could be as it is “sometimes hard to put your finger on what the issue is and where it is coming from.” An issue that is masked by the specific classroom setting could surface in a class where the teacher's management skills are not as strong.

Do they just need more time? As mentioned by a number of other participants, Jeff, the principal of Wynne-Jones, noted the difficulty in distinguishing whether a characteristic or behaviour represented a potential problem or was part of the normal range of maturity at this age. He recognized that they would not necessarily “catch every kid that is going to need intervention in JK and SK.” He felt that because early development is so dynamic, there were some children that needed to be “watched for a bit more.” Kris, a teacher at the same school, also recognized that while it was important to intervene early, some problems, such as some learning disabilities, may not be apparent until later in a child's academic career. The issue of maturity was also raised by Brian, the member of the early intervention team, who felt that children whose birthdays occurred later in the year making them relatively younger than their peers were more often at-risk.

Will they be ready? Several participants discussed the idea of students being ready for Grade 1 and the pressure that can be felt by teachers to balance this with the play-based program. Brenda, an ECE at Wynne-Jones noted:

There were lots of conversations around what's required and what's not required and what expectations have to be met for their report cards and what has changed and are we including everything in the play-based learning that they need to have to be ready to go on to Grade One.

Kris, a teacher at Wynne-Jones, felt the FDELK program provided more time and that therefore the students would be more ready,

I like you can do a play based approach and I feel like you can take the children's lead with some structure, I feel like you can take that time, you've got twice the amount of time, to get them to where we want them to be. Grade 1 I do find that many of children, especially in this school, they are coming in and they are not where we want them to be starting in grade 1. So we get this content piece and we want them writing sentences by the time they leave and we want them reading at this level PM before they leave and I feel that if I force these children to start writing they are going to shut down. They need to explore more before we expect them to do that.

However, she also mentioned that the design of the program may not prepare students for a more structured academic setting:

I do have colleagues that have had full day Kindergarten at their school for a while and they have said that the grade ones are coming with great ideas and strong oral skills and their sound skills are solid but they are butterflies. They are all over the place, and I am not saying that it is right or wrong, I love inquiry learning but I always feel that I have to prepare my students with what they will be faced with next year.

Summary. Participants expressed a number of concerns about the assessments required by their school board. Many questioned whether the assessments were consistent with the philosophy of the child-centred, play-based approach and whether they provided an accurate picture of the students' abilities. Connected to this were concerns that the play-based program itself might make some students less ready for Grade One. It was also felt that a number of children who might be at-risk would not be identified including quieter children, those with more moderate difficulties, those with difficulties not specifically assessed. The impact of the wide range of developmental levels and the difficulty of distinguishing "normal" development from at-risk characteristics was also raised.

Assessments in the classroom. As well as discussing the assessments required by the board, participants were also asked about what other assessment were used in the classroom.



Figure 11. Brigance Inventory of Early Development.

The following section outlines the three sub-themes that emerged.

How do we really know they are Learning?

Teachers at Wynne-Jones reported using the required assessments including the Sound Skills Screener for all students and PM Benchmark assessment with the stronger SKs and that they used the results to create working groups in the class. A variety of other assessments were mentioned including commercially available

Carla, a teacher at Wynne-Jones provided a sample of a concept and skills screener which includes checklists and space to comment on early literacy, numeracy, writing, and fine motor skills, as well as personal interest and involvement in small and large group activities.

screeners such as the Brigance (Figure 11) and continuums such as First Steps for Writing as well as checklists such as the one described by Carla in Figure 12.

Figure 12. Description of an assessment checklist.

Looking at the whole child. As previously stated, the ECEs generally believed that assessment was the responsibility of the teacher although they all discussed completing observations of behaviour and social skills. If they were concerned about a student they would mention it to the teacher who would then follow-up if they agreed there was an issue. Mary, an ECE at Wynne-Jones, was familiar with the continuum discussed below and had used it with some students to determine the level of development of some social skills. Brenda, an ECE at Wynne-Jones, expressed the concern that she did not understand the referral process and therefore was not always clear when and how to point out problems. Having two individuals in the classroom and, especially having both teaching and ECE background was considered very important in getting a complete picture of the students' strengths and needs.

Are there other ways? Brian, a member of the early intervention team, referred to a developmental continuum that had been created by several school board members which cross-referenced the specific expectations in the FDELKP curriculum document with developmental domains and skills outlined in the Continuum of Development included in the

ELECT framework (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007). The document had been reviewed by other professionals including Occupational Therapists and Speech and Language Pathologists. While still in draft form, the document was being used in most FDELKP classrooms at least for reference. Kris, a teacher at Wynne-Jones, had been involved in both the creation of the Developmental Continuum and the early intervention team; she stressed the value of looking at the whole child. Use of this continuum on a trial basis was mentioned by other teachers as well as ECEs.

Another screening tool was mentioned by Melissa, a board administrator with responsibilities for Special Education:

We are currently looking at some early intervention tools with our community partners for early intervention for students with mental health issues. So what is actually coming up in our board, is some training through...our community mental health provider for children and looking at four pilot schools actually in our Full-day Early Learning program in-school teams being trained on I think it is called CANS which would provide an opportunity to screen early for mental health concerns for children who are either in early learning or prior to coming into school as well.

Summary. Participants described a variety of assessments used in conjunction with those required by the board. A developmental continuum, created by individuals in the board with support from an number of agencies, was mentioned by a number of participants. Most participants stressed the importance of using ongoing observations with ECEs focusing more on developmental elements and teachers focusing more on academic issues. There was a strong feeling that the combination of a teacher and ECE in the classroom provided a more complete picture of the child.

Interventions. The following section outlines two sub-themes that emerged when the participants were asked to discuss the provision of interventions in their schools. As mentioned, identification and intervention strategies are often integrated into an ongoing and iterative process. While it is essential that students who are considered at-risk be given support to improve longer term outcomes, it is often difficult provide support of all those in need. A number of points emerged around the theme of interventions.

Are we on the same page? Jeff, the principal at Wynne-Jones, believed strongly that the staff had frequent discussions about individual students as well as the general idea of at-

risk students. He felt that they used the data they collected in their planning and that there was widespread understanding and acceptance of the early intervention focus employed in the school.

So we have lots of discussions around what are the risk factors we can identify early on and how do we address them. We also have lots of discussions around importance of early intervention and how we see that impact later learning because we need to be very transparent with our staff about why we make the decisions we make around student support...However, there is an understanding in our school that we are working on early intervention because we are hopeful that even those students who may present eventually with perhaps a learning disability will be better served if we intervene earlier and it may not be as profound when they hit Grade Five.

Evan, the SST, described team meetings in which they discussed specific students. Both the teachers and the ECEs described frequent and ongoing discussions about specific students that might be at-risk in the classroom. Teachers also mentioned discussions during staff meetings where they celebrated students that had made gains and shared information as students moved from one grade to the next. There was the opportunity several times a year to bring forward names of at-risk students to the principal and SST during in-school leadership teams. One teacher felt there was opportunity to discuss which students might get support; another said they had no input into these decisions. The ECE mentioned that they knew that there were team meetings where students might be discussed; however, they were not part of these meetings.

Who is getting help? As discussed previously, an early intervention team was created to provide support for students in the FDELKP. Brian, a member of the team, describes who the team is intended to help:

If students already have some sort of diagnosis or identification either through a hospital or through the school process they might be served by one of our multidisciplinary teams like our autism team or our team for students with developmental disabilities. But we are also looking at students who either do not have any diagnosis or students who there is still a lack of clarity around that diagnosis or students who are just at-risk. We take any student who is not going to be served by another team.

Brian also described the services they offer:

We offer both consultation and some direct service to students. We've offered both Speech and Social Skills blocks which would be a block of three weeks, 20-30 min. a day, every day to students in a three week block and most of the students and the schools we been working with have been getting two of those three week blocks. It's sometimes been in groups and sometimes one-on-one. So that is the direct service, as well as the Speech assessments, the indirect service is consultation. We've done classroom recommendations, we've done specific ideas and strategies, student specific stuff, reinforcement plans, behaviour safety plans, we also done classroom recommendations and in one particular case it made sense more instead of doing a block with different students in the class, we just worked directly in the class supporting the teacher and re-establishing routines in the classroom. We are fairly flexible on how we can work with a school or a classroom.

In deciding which students should receive extra support from within the school, Jeff, the principal at Wynne-Jones, referred to the assessment required by the board and explained that the data tracked through the computer database was accessible by individual students as well as classroom and school trends. In September they refer to the previous year's data to check on students who are not meeting benchmark levels. They repeat this process in the spring. Interventions are provided in 8 week cycles by the in-school Student Support team which consist of the Student Support Teacher and a team of EAs. He said that the SST would work directly with individuals or the EA would take a group of students. He further explained that the school focus is very much on the early grades, JK-3.

We try to put all of our eggs in that basket around early intervention in JK to 3 because we know we are going to catch some kids in one and two that we didn't catch in JK or SK and we will still be able to put intervention plans in place.

Of particular concern were fluency levels in Grade 1 and consolidation of phonemic awareness skills for all SK students but it was recognized that the highest needs must be targeted first.

Evan, the Student Support Teacher, also described cycles of intervention but indicated that his focus was not the youngest children:

I work mainly with remedial situations and I really don't do anything with the very young kids so the youngest kids I work with at this school would be grade two and up, so I'm between grade 2 and 6 right now.

He said that interventions were directed by the teacher based on needs they had identified. He would provide the support and track the progress over a six week cycle and then decide on next steps for the students. Students with higher needs or those that did not respond to intervention would be referred for other services or assessment. He also mentioned referring a number of students to the new board early intervention team.

All of the teachers at Wynne-Jones referred to the support provided by the board's early intervention team, however, different opinions were offered on the type and level of support provided for interventions from within the school. While one teacher, Kris, discussed meetings to decide on where EA support would be given and said that a group of her students would be getting a block of intervention time, another insisted that no support from outside the classroom.

These Kindergartens are not receiving any SST time currently, I have been in other schools in this board where the SSTs do give the Kindergarten classes some time and are available to help out but in our school I haven't seen that happen. (Carla, a teacher at Wynne-Jones)

In terms of using assessments to drive instruction, the teachers described a focus on teaching and learning pathways. Topics for the pathways were decided upon by the school driven by provincial assessment results. Each division chose their pathway tasks based on areas of need, one each for math, reading and writing. While the strategies involved in each task could be individualize, all students would be working on the same task at the same time.

Jeff admitted that due to lack of resources not all children that were identified as being behind would receive extra support as it was necessary to target students with the largest gaps between achievement and expectations. It was noted by Melissa, the administrator involved in Special Education, that with the introduction of full time Junior and Senior Kindergarten more children with needs would be in the system for a longer period of time. Services would need to be in place to support these children. It was suggested that strengthening links to community agencies would help accomplish this. There was also a need for more improved mental health services, as well as case management type services to

deal with the more complex family situations such as those involving volatile children and/or difficulties communicating with families. The future of the intervention team was uncertain at this point in time, with Melissa referring to it as a pilot project and it was suggested that the team would be hard pressed to meet the needs of the students as more schools within the board offered the FDELKP each year. Jeff expressed the same concern over the ability of the early learning team to provide the same level of services, which he considered very important, once more schools were involved.

Summary. Interventions included universal programs as well as those aimed at prevention. A new early intervention team was created by the board to provide support for the FDELKP classrooms. In terms of individual interventions, there were clearly differing opinions as to which students were being targeted for support at the school level. While the principal stated the emphasis was on the early primary grades, the Student Support Teacher stated he only worked with Grade 2 and up and mostly the older grades. Similarly, while one teacher indicated there was some support for struggling students in her class, another said there was no support from outside the classroom. Concerns over lack of support and resources, especially long wait times for out-of-school assessments were mentioned by a number of participants.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter the key findings from the two case studies were presented. In seeking to explore the elements that influence which students might be identified as being at-risk, participants were asked to discuss assessment and identification practices, both those required by their school board and those used in their classroom. They were also asked to reflect on what characteristics they considered most important when deciding a student might be at-risk. The findings were then presented as themes that emerged during the participant interviews; each theme was further divided into sub-themes.

The themes were similar in both cases although the main ideas varied somewhat. In both school boards the introduction of the FDELKP led to increased attention to kindergarten registration processes. However early identification processes within the schools required tracking and assessment of literacy skills. In describing which characteristics were of concern when thinking of students at-risk, most participants cited social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties. Other concerns included family structure and support from home. In

terms of assessment in the classroom, the completion of the required assessment was considered the teacher's job. However, both teachers and ECEs concentrated more on ongoing observations and anecdotal notes to determine student progress. Interventions for students at-risk were more often provided for students with academic difficulties. Nevertheless, there was also some support for behaviour difficulties in terms of consultation from SERTS in Cedarview and the early intervention team in Maple Leaf DSB. The similarities and differences in the findings between the two cases will be explored in the cross-case analysis presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 – Analysis, Interpretation, and Synthesis of Findings

The purpose of this research project was to investigate the elements that influence the identification of at-risk students in the Full-Day Early Learning - Kindergarten Program in Ontario. As has been stated, students who struggle early at school often continue to lag behind their peers and are at-risk for poorer long-term outcomes (Heckman, 2008; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2008); early intervention is an effective way to support at-risk students and achieve more positive outcomes (Heckman, 2008; Sutherland, Lewis-Palmer, Stichter, & Morgan, 2008). However, the processes of early identification and intervention vary a great deal and are not always clear (Underwood, 2012). A qualitative case study approach was adopted with the goal of providing insight that might be used to direct policy and practice. Based on the premise that school systems are complex, multi-layered organizations, a theoretical framework grounded in complexity theory was used to both guide the study and to provide a lens through which the results were analysed.

The following overarching research question and four sub-questions were addressed:

What are the elements influencing who is identified as at-risk in the Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program in Ontario?

1. What are the system requirements and/or expectations for assessing and identifying at-risk students?
2. What assessments are being carried out at the school and classroom level and how are they being used to identify students at-risk.
3. What are the beliefs and knowledge surrounding the assessment and identification of at-risk students at the various levels of the school system?
4. To what extent are the conditions present that would allow for the emergence of a shared understanding regarding the identification of at-risk students and what it means for a student to be at-risk?

Cross-Case Analysis

While the last chapter presented the findings in terms of the two case studies and themes that emerged during the analysis of the data, the purpose of the current chapter is to interpret and further analyze the data as they apply to the research questions. As was discussed previously (see Chapter 3 for a description of the methodology and theoretical framework), the nested and interrelated nature of complex systems makes it difficult to

establish boundaries. It is therefore not always simple to define what a “case” might be. However, as was argued by Hetherington (2013), I believe it is possible to maintain the spirit of complexity thinking within a case study approach. In this study each school board was considered a case.

The cross-case analysis is presented using the research questions as a framework. The discussion will explore the similarities and differences between the boards relative to the themes that emerged during analysis and how these relate to identification of students as at-risk. The findings will be situated within the existing literature and will then be explored in the context of the overarching research question through the lens of complexity theory and the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 2.

Research question 1. What are the system requirements and/or expectations for assessing and identifying at-risk students? An important step in understanding the elements that might influence which students would be considered to be at-risk is to examine the pertinent policies and procedures dictated by the school boards. Research question one was aimed at identifying said policies and procedures. The similarities and differences in the protocols used by the two boards are described below. This discussion is based on both the review of the boards’ policies on their websites as well as the perceptions of individual participants.

Board policy. As required by provincial legislation, both boards had early identification protocols as part of their Special Education Plans; these were listed on each board’s website. These plans indicated steps to insure successful transitions for students with exceptionalities who were already identified. Both board plans also described tracking student progress with a variety of assessments with the aim of identifying students that might need extra support once they started school.

Cedarview DSB’s protocol clearly defined the term at-risk, listing a broad range of characteristics in a number of domains including physical, academic, social, and emotional development. The multifaceted nature of Cedarview’s protocol indicates that the board’s priorities are aligned with the Social Pedagogical tradition which tends to favour looking at the whole child in terms of development (Dickson, 2005). Tracking and assessment suggestions within the Maple Leaf DSB protocol focus more on readiness for school as well as early literacy; this would suggest that the board’s focus tends more to the Pre-Primary end

of the continuum in terms of goals (2005). In terms of identifying students who might be at-risk this would put the focus more on early literacy elements within Maple Leaf, where as a broader range of risk factors would theoretically be considered in Cedarview.

Policy and practice. When participants were asked to discuss early identification, school administrators from both boards described enhanced Kindergarten registration processes. These were aimed at recognizing which students might need extra support and encouraging parent involvement by enhancing the parents’ understanding of the school system and of services that might be available. According to the participants, these procedures would make it more likely that students with developmental delays and more obvious speech and language problems would be identified as long as parents took advantage of the program and were forthcoming with information.

Other participants, including the board administrators tied more closely to the

The School Improvement Plan at S. Fitch contains goals for literacy, math, and school climate. The literacy goal was aimed at one specific area of weakness identified in the previous year’s grade three and six EQAO test scores. The math goal was to focus on the three part lesson. The school climate goal involved training teachers to use restorative justice circles for resolving issues.

Figure 13. Description of School Improvement Plan from S. Fitch.

FDELKP, the school administrators and teachers in both boards described screeners that targeted early literacy skills and assessments of reading. The assessments of reading were described as being only for those students who showed readiness for this assessment however benchmark levels of achievement were mentioned for the end of Senior Kindergarten. In both boards there was lack of clarity around what level students needed to reach and therefore some confusion around which students would be considered at-risk if they did not meet

the levels. Assessments at Cedarview included writing while those at Maple Leaf included phonemic awareness. Tracking of these assessments was part of the schools’ overall assessment strategy of skills used for school improvement. This was demonstrated, at least in part, by School Improvement Plans from both boards. See Figures 13 and 14 for descriptions of

The SIP for Wynne-Jones includes goals for reading, writing and math. There references within the reading goal to the Sound Skills Screener and PM Benchmarks and to including sound skills as part of reading instruction. SST support was indicated for the reading and writing goals.

Figure 14. Description of School Improvement Plan from Wynne-Jones.

plans from S. Fitch (Cedarview DSB) and Wynne-Jones (Maple Leaf DSB).

Overall, in terms of both boards' policies and assessment expectations, students with pre-existing issues would likely be recognized as being at-risk, especially in light of the enhanced Kindergarten registration. In principle, Cedarview's approach is toward the holistic/ Social Pedagogical approach while Maple Leaf places more emphasis on a literacy/ Pre-primary approach. However, despite Cedarview's inclusion of a wider range of characteristics in their definition of at-risk, it is clear that the main focus for those not already identified formally or informally as at-risk was on the identification of students that might be lacking the requisite early literacy skills.

Existing research clearly supports the boards' attempts at early identification and intervention in general as this is considered essential for improving long-term outcomes (Falk, 2010; McCain, Mustard, & McCuaig, 2011). The dichotomy observed at the board level between the Pre-primary and Social-Pedagogical approach is also supported in the existing literature (Dickson, 2005). The focus in practice on literacy reflects common practice (Bailey, & Drummond, 2005; Epstein et al., 2004; Lindsay, & Martineau, 2004) but is also problematic given the little predictive value that has been reported (eg. LaParo & Pianta, 2000; Meidels & Atkins-Burnett, 2006; Vervaeke, McNamara, & Scissons, 2007). While there is some evidence of a connection between early academic skills and later academic success (Duncan et al., 2007; Janus & Offord, 2007), the narrow focus may be missing key elements that are important for academic success. Specifically, interpersonal skills and work related social skills have also been found to be predictors of academic success, a trend which continues well into the later grades (McClelland, Morrison, & Holmes, 2000; Romano et al., 2010; Soles, Bloom, Heath, and Karagiannakis, 2008). Furthermore, the focus on a few academic skills may cause a narrowing of the curriculum toward the skills that will be tested (Hollingworth, 2007; Suppovitz, 2009).

The focus on a narrow number of literacy skills using benchmark targets and conducted on a fixed schedule is also contrary to that outlined in the FDELKP (Ontario, 2010b) which emphasizes ongoing assessment of all domains of development based on observations of normal classroom activities. The use of this type of assessment with benchmark levels does not take into account the fact that children at this age vary a great deal in how and when they develop (McCain, Mustard, & McCuaig, 2011). Placing the emphasis

only on literacy may also result in less attention being paid to other important skills and areas of development such as those in the social, emotional, physical and creative domains. In fact, a more wide ranging, holistic assessment was suggested by the Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning (2006) as well as by Pascal (2009) both of whom recommended that assessment be based on developmental continua. Support for ongoing assessment based on developmental continua has also been expressed by others (e.g. Bagnato, 2006; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2006; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004) who argue that any assessment of young children must be sensitive to the variable nature of development at this age.

Summary of question 1. The system requirements and/or expectations for identifying at-risk students include efforts to identify as many students as possible before they begin school. Generally these would be students with specific disorders or obvious issues that would require extra support in the classroom. These efforts are supported by enhanced Kindergarten registration programs including efforts to involve parents. Once children enter the school system the emphasis shifts to identifying students that may lack a narrower range of early literacy skills. This practice is common according to the literature but has limited support in terms of predictive validity to future academic success and is counter to both expert advice and the goals of the FDELKP.

Research question 2. What assessments are being carried out at the school and classroom level and how are they being used to identify students at-risk? While school boards are responsible for enacting provincial guidelines according to their own local priorities, how they are implemented at the school and classroom level can depend on the individual involved. Exploring the assessments completed at the school level and how they were used to identify students that might need extra support helps to uncover consistencies and/or inconsistencies between policy and practice. Differences and similarities in practice between the two cases (Cedarview and Maple Leaf District School Boards) will be discussed in the following section.

Assessments in the schools and classrooms. Teachers from both boards indicated that they did complete the board assessments but used other evaluation techniques to gain a complete picture of the students' strengths and needs. Teachers and ECEs in both boards relied more on observation and anecdotal notes than on the board-required assessments. One ECE from Cedarview went as far as to say that the board assessments were only completed

as a formality. It was clear from the responses of most ECEs in both boards that they believed these assessments were the responsibility of the regular classroom teachers however assessment in general was seen as a team effort with teachers more responsible for academic elements and ECEs more concerned with developmental factors.

Many other assessments were described by participants from both boards; these varied from classroom to classroom rather than differing between the boards. In both boards, there was discussion by a number of participants about the use of assessments that might be more general and based on developmental continua. In Cedarview, the use of the Nipissing District Developmental Screen® was discussed in terms of its use as part of the registration process although this appeared to be voluntary on the part of parents; however interest was also expressed in having its use become more standardized across the board. In the case of Maple Leaf DSB however, a more concerted effort at assessment along a developmental continua was being made through the creation of a continuum that attempted to connect curriculum expectations to developmental stages. This could lead to a more holistic type of assessment based on progress rather than meeting benchmark levels. This was a project that involved many individuals at various levels of the board as well as outside agencies demonstrating that this idea was considered of value.

There was also concern over mental health issues in both boards, and many participants made references to resources that would help with the identification of mental health issues. In Cedarview a main resource was a document that listed possible signs of difficulty and suggestions for responses and resources; Maple Leaf school board was intending to train some teachers in the use of a screening tool for mental health problems. It was recognized in both boards that the training and experience of the teachers and ECEs in the classroom would have a great deal of impact on their ability to decide when a child might be experiencing difficulties in the area of mental health but also in all domains of development.

Summary. In general, although the actual required assessments for tracking purposes in both boards tended to be focused on literacy, the assessments used in the classroom by teachers and ECEs were focused on a much broader range of characteristics. In terms of students at-risk this would suggest that a wider range of characteristics would be considered especially if the trend toward the use of developmental continua is followed.

The fact that teachers relied on their own judgement rather than formalized assessments is consistent with evidence in the literature (Meisels et al., 2001) although, as mentioned below, there is mixed evidence as to whether or not these judgements are accurate. Research also shows that the different training teachers and ECEs receive informs their practice with those trained in early childhood education engaging in practices that are more developmentally appropriate (Vartuli, 1999) including a focus on development in terms of assessment.

In contrast to the assessments required by the boards, the use of a variety of assessments, especially those used while students are engaged in normal everyday activities, is supported in the literature (Bagnato, 2006; Karlitz, Parrish, Yamada, & Wilson, 2010; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2006; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004). Further, this practice is more consistent with assessment practices outlined in the FDELKP as well as those recommended by the Best Start Expert Panel (2006) and Pascal (2009).

Identification and intervention in the schools. As discussed in the review of the literature identification should be very closely tied to intervention. The decision as to which students are provided with support is a further indication of which characteristics are considered most important in determining who is at-risk. Therefore it is important not only to look at the assessments being used but also what support is available for struggling students and the processes involved in providing these interventions.

In both boards, board level participants and school principals believed that the enhanced Kindergarten registration was leading to increased and/or earlier identification of the more significant speech and language, and developmental delay issues. There was the recognition, however that not all these issues would come to light before the students started school. In both boards, concerns about students with issues such as these, that might require support of outside agencies, were discussed with the Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT) or Student Support Teacher (SST) who would then make the appropriate referral.

Support at the board level for interventions was more evident in Maple Leaf due to the presence of the early learning intervention team. While the team dealt with a variety of issues, they were most focused on behaviour and speech and language difficulties. There was a recognition that resources were limited and therefore only the more severe cases of behaviour difficulties were dealt with by the team.

A somewhat different emphasis was apparent in Cedarview with whole-school programs such as Roots of Empathy and Helping Hands in place to provide a more proactive method of support for social and emotional growth. Specific interventions for social skills and conflict resolution in the form of classroom support were mentioned as was planning future class structure to insure students were with the peers that would most support their needs.

In terms of academic interventions, these were usually tied to the assessments required by the board which were focused on literacy. In both cases, there was support provided by the SERT/ SST although the level and type of support differed from school to school. In Cedarview, there was general agreement that the SERT was readily available to provide both consultation and small group intervention, while the level of support from outside the classroom was less clear in the case of Maple Leaf.

Summary. Identification of issues that were not noted before the start of school was dependent mostly upon the teachers' recognizing the issue and making recommendations to the SERT/ SST. The SERT/ SST would then decide if support could be provided in the school or if the student should be referred for services from the board or outside agencies. Interventions supported at the board level varied somewhat between the two boards. The emphasis in Maple Leaf was on behaviour and speech and language while Cedarview concentrated more on proactive teaching of socio-emotional skills. These interventions demonstrate that the boards' priorities are not solely focused on early literacy as would be indicated by the assessments required. In terms of academic issues, interventions were very much tied to the required literacy assessment. These were generally provided by the classroom teacher with support from the SERT in the case of Cedarview. It was less clear if there was support from the SST in Maple Leaf.

As stated, early intervention is widely supported in the literature as a way to mitigate the longer term consequences of early school failure (Bernhard et al., 2006; Falk, 2010; Heckman, 2008; Janus & Offord, 2007; McCain et al., 2007; Wylie, Hodgen, Ferral, & Thompson, 2006; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). This is also consistent with the goals of the FDELKP which include providing support for students that may not be ready for Grade 1 (Ontario, 2010b). The FDELKP is intended to be a holistic program which includes all area of development which lends support to Cedarview's emphasis on social skills. Authors

including McClelland, Morrison, and Holmes (2000), Romano et al. (2010) and Soles, Bloom, Heath, and Karagiannakis (2008) argue for the importance of social skills both in terms of positive peer interactions and academic success.

Summary of question 2. Participants indicated that while they did complete the assessments required by their school board, this was only one part of a more comprehensive process. A variety of assessment strategies were described, however, the emphasis in the classroom was on observation with teachers focusing more on academic skills and ECEs focusing on social and emotional development. The focus on a wide range of developmental domains and the use of observation, especially while students are engaged in everyday activities, is supported in the literature and is consistent with the goals of the FDELKP. Although the board-required assessments tended to focus on early literacy skills, the interventions available in both boards were more wide-ranging but both the emphasis and process varied somewhat between the boards. In both cases, the teacher was instrumental in terms of nominating students that might be at-risk.

Research question 3. What are the beliefs and knowledge surrounding the assessment and identification of at-risk students at the various levels of the school system? While the policies and procedures enacted by the boards and schools establish general expectations and guidelines for the identification of at-risk students, actual practice can be greatly influenced by the individuals involved. Individual understandings about which characteristics might be of most concern when it comes to identifying students at-risk can influence their interpretation of policy and practice. To explore these concepts, participants were asked to think about students they would deem to be at-risk, both those identified through board assessments and those that might be missed, and describe their characteristics.

Beliefs and knowledge about who is at-risk. The most frequently noted concern from participants in Cedarview was related to students' social and emotional well-being, particularly those who were not able to form friendships and interact successfully with peers. Participants from Maple Leaf also mentioned social and emotional elements; however it was students who presented behaviour problems and did not appear to be ready to conform to the behaviour expectations of schools and classrooms that were of most concern. While students who were not achieving academically were also of concern this was not mentioned as often as social and emotional difficulties in either board. In both boards, participants believed that

boys were more likely to be at-risk than girls although this was more strongly evident in comments from Maple Leaf where it was noted that the number of boys to girls being referred to the early learning team was 10 to 1.

Family situations were thought to put some children at-risk by participants in both boards. This included families experiencing stress for some reason such as low socio-economic status, and/or disruptions such as divorce. It was also noted; especially from participants in Cedarview that parental understanding of school expectations, and/or willingness to accept that their child might need support could influence both whether a child might be at-risk as well as whether or not they might receive support. Specifically, parents could facilitate the identification process by accessing assessments privately or hinder the process by refusing to give permission for assessments or withholding pertinent information.

It was also noted by participants from Maple Leaf DSB that the classroom structure may be putting more students at risk. It was suggested that overcrowding and placing children in a space not specifically designed for young children (i.e., bathrooms and coat hooks outside the class making supervision difficult) may be contributing to an increase in behaviour issues.

Summary. A view of at-risk based in the socio-emotional domain is represented by concerns over social skills and peer interaction expressed by the participants in Cedarview and by readiness in terms of behaviour in Maple Leaf. The fact that academic delays as well as issues in the child's life that might impact their learning was also raised would make it likely that a wider range of characteristics would be considered in terms of identifying which students might be of concern.

That there are varying notions of who is at-risk is an issue that has been raised in the literature (LaParo & Pianta, 2000). While the focus on academic and cognitive skills has been the more traditional view (Janus & Offord, 2007; Simner, 1995) there is evidence to show that teachers in particular are more concerned about social and emotional skills as was found in this study (Blair & Diamond, 2008; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). This was evident in a study by Lin, Lawrence and Gorrell (2003) who found that Kindergarten teachers put more emphasis on the social aspects of learning although it was apparent that younger teachers put more value on academic skills than did older teachers. The authors speculate that this may represent evidence of the increased "concern about student

achievement at all levels, including the strong concern about teaching reading more effectively in kindergarten through third grade” (p. 235). The view that the risk may come not from within the child but arise through interactions with larger social and economic issues such as family structure has also been suggested in the literature (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006).

The connection between early social and emotional skills and later academic success was discussed earlier and is supported by many (Bayat, Mindes, & Covitt, 2010; Blair & Diamond, 2008; Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006). Similarly, it is consistent with the research that there was less concern over academic skills in view of the fact that the predictive value of early academic skills for later academic success may be limited (LaParo & Pianta, 2000; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2006). Janus and Duku (2007) found that family structure did indeed impact students' readiness to learn with those from single parent families being more at-risk.

The literature is consistent with this study's finding that teachers were more often concerned about boys being at-risk than girls. In a study that analysed referrals for special education, Lloyd, Kauffman, Landrum and Roe (1991) found that boys were more often referred than girls (69% of the referrals were boys). While the Lloyd et al. study found academic reasons were the most common cause for referrals, others have suggested that behaviour, especially externalizing behaviour, may have an influence on teachers' perception of academic abilities. Bennett, Gottesman, Rock, and Cerullo (1993) found that teachers' judgements of academic skills were influenced negatively by behaviour they considered unacceptable and that the effect was more pronounced for boys. Similarly, Childs and Mckay (2001) found that boys from low SES families began school at a disadvantage because teachers perceived them as more distractible and difficult to teach. In this study it was found that low SES itself was not a main risk factor, rather it was a type of parenting associated with low SES that made it more difficult for boys to adapt to school routines. Although the predictive quality of low SES on later academic success became less valid after Grade 2, the labels placed on the specific boys early in their school careers did appear to 'stick' (p. 304).

There is also support in the literature for the participants' concerns about the possibility of classroom structure creating risk. In particular, similar concerns were noted by Vanderlee, Youmans, Peters, and Eastabrook (2012) in their evaluation of the

implementation of the FDELKP. They noted that “one of the biggest concerns for educators and parents was the amount of classroom space for implementing FDELK program” (p. 50). Over-crowding and large class sizes made it difficult to arrange the classroom in a way that supported play-based learning, and was thought to contribute to emotional exhaustion and limit optimal engagement and learning.

Beliefs and knowledge about assessment and identification. A number of other concerns were expressed by participants from both boards in connection with the identification process in general. First, there were questions around whether or not the teachers and/or ECEs were able to recognize the signs of delays in normal development and therefore might miss students that need support. Secondly, the long waiting times for services in these areas was noted with the emphasis on making sure supports were in place for Grade 1, implying that that is when “real” learning starts. This is interesting considering students are still expected to meet certain benchmark levels of early literacy in both Junior and Senior Kindergarten. Finally, a number of ECEs stated that they did not know the protocols involved in referring students for help outside the classroom. Because they were not always sure which students might be eligible to receive extra support, they may have been less likely to recommend a child for referral.

Questions around whether the assessments required by the boards were consistent with the philosophy of the child-centered, play-based FDELK program were raised by individuals in both boards. It was also believed that the assessments and especially the subsequent interventions would only support the most severe cases and those whose behaviour was most disruptive. Concerns were also expressed that the assessment missed other key areas of concern; math was mentioned by participants in Cedarview while oral language and fine motor skills were identified by participants in Maple Leaf.

Summary. Participants in both boards expressed a number of concerns around the identification and assessment processes. Generally, there was a feeling that many students that could be at-risk were being missed either because of a lack of knowledge on the part of the individual teachers and ECEs, a lack of resources, and/or because the assessments required were too narrow in focus.

Evidence in the literature is mixed in terms of whether or not teachers and ECEs are able to accurately judge student performance and recognize the range of normal

development. Two studies investigating teachers' ability to identify the reading levels of their students showed that teachers were often mistaken in their assessments; they were especially likely to over-estimate the abilities of lower achieving students (Bates & Nettelbeck, 2001; Madelaine & Wheldall, 2005). Bates and Nettelbeck (2001) note that this is concerning as it suggests that low-achieving students may not receive the extra support they need to improve their skills. Another study focused on teachers' ability to recognize which students might be at risk for speech and language impairment showed very low accuracy in teachers' judgements with both over identification of students (those not in need of further assessment) and under identification (a failure to recommend students that are indeed at risk) (Antoniazzi, Snow, & Dickson-Swift, 2010). This is a concern both in terms of wasting resources as there are often long wait lists for speech and language assessments and missed opportunities to provide support for students. One study did show that teachers' judgement of student learning was just as accurate as formal standardized assessment if they used performance type assessment (Meisels et al., 2001). However, this was limited to specific curriculum expectations and would not indicate knowledge of development in broader range of domains, especially in the younger children.

Contrary to the studies on reading assessment and in support of Meisels et al. (2001), a meta-analysis of studies on the accuracy of teachers' judgements of students' academic achievement by Sudkamp, Kaiser and Moller (2012) found that there was a positive correlation between the teachers' judgements of student achievement and the students' performance on standardized assessments (effect size .63). The authors suggest that some of the varying results of the studies have more to do with the methodologies chosen rather than the actual accuracy of teachers' judgements.

Concerns expressed about the appropriateness of the board assessments are echoed in a variety of sources. As stated, the narrow focus on literacy is not supported in the literature and is counter to recommendations by many (Bagnato, 2006; Best Start Panel on Early Learning, 2006; National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 2009; Pascal, 2009).

Research evidence indicates that educators' practice is very much related to their personal beliefs (Fang, 1996; Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998; Tierney, 2006) therefore teachers are more likely to balance the need to complete the board

assessments with their own view of what is important when deciding which students are at-risk. This will of course be impacted by their ability to provide support to these students in the classroom and/or access interventions from other sources. This may also be influenced by the pressure to prepare students for Grade 1, a pressure which was acknowledged in the literature (Kagan & Kaurez, 2007). Indeed, in their review of the implementation of the FDELKP, researchers found that in terms of literacy and numeracy some teachers (as well as administrators and parents) felt the need to push for a more academic focus (Vanderlee, Youmans, Peters, & Eastabrook, 2012).

While teachers' personal beliefs are extremely important in their practice, research also indicates that these beliefs can be influenced by the context in which they teach. Although they were not able to identify the specific factors involved, Lin, Lawrence, and Gorrell (2003) found that Kindergarten teachers' views of school readiness varied depending on their geographic region. The authors speculate that different standards, curriculum, licencing requirements, and student populations may be responsible for the difference. Jordan and Stanovich (2004) found that school culture, particularly the beliefs of the principal had an influence on teacher beliefs and attitudes.

Summary of question 3. The discussion of beliefs and knowledge surrounding the assessment and identification of at-risk students at various levels of the school system included the participants' views on which students might be at-risk and on the assessment and identification processes in their boards. A variety of characteristics were noted when participants were asked to describe students at-risk however the majority focused on social and emotional development. Circumstances in the child's life such as family structure, and SES as well as elements of the FDELKP were suggested as factors that might contribute to a student being at risk. Concerns around the assessments intended to identify at-risk students and the process involved in deciding which students were at-risk and required extra support included whether or not the assessments were consistent with the goals of the FDELKP, the fact that students who do require support may be missed due to limited resources, as well as the point that teachers and ECEs might not have the knowledge required.

Research question 4 – To what extent are the conditions present that would allow for the emergence of a shared understanding regarding the identification of at-risk students and what it means for a student to be at-risk? In understanding the elements

that influence who is identified as at-risk a key goal was to explore the level to which participants believed they had an opportunity to discuss which students might be at-risk. Ideally, a common understanding increases the likelihood that time and resources are being used effectively to achieve a common goal. However, it is also important that alternative views and opinions be respected and that all members of a team have a voice. In this case a wider variety of understandings of the at-risk construct might be considered. While stated understandings are important, evidence of these can be seen in practice.

There was a stronger shared understanding in the schools within the Cedarview board, although this was much more obvious at one school (B. Reid). Participants were very clear that they had a common vision and considered social and emotional growth the most important factor for young students. They also believed that they had ample opportunity to discuss their concerns about individual students. Some participants at S. Fitch believed they did share information readily about students of concern but were less clear about the opportunity to discuss the concept of at-risk in general. Interventions available in the school appear to be consistent with the shared understanding.

At Maple Leaf, there was a common focus on academic concerns with most agreeing that they discussed at-risk students on a regular basis in staff meetings and in school learning team meetings. There were differences between participants however, with the principal very clear that they spent a great deal of time discussing the various issues that might contribute to a student being at-risk (for example data from Statistics Canada regarding socio-economic information about the community) while the ECEs stated they were not involved in discussion as they did not attend staff meetings.

Summary of question 4. To determine the extent to which conditions exist for the emergence of a shared understanding regarding the identification of at-risk students and what it means for a student to be at-risk participants were asked to reflect on discussions of at-risk students. The consistency between the stated policies and the actual practice as described by the participants was also noted. In terms of Cedarview, there was consistency between the board's stated approach to and definition of at-risk, the interventions available and the beliefs and practice at the school level. This would indicate a higher level of shared understanding, however there was still an emphasis on early literacy in terms of assessments that would put the commitment to this understanding somewhat in question. A shared understanding is less

clear in Maple Leaf where the assessments at the board level and approach within the school are clearly connected to literacy but the interventions available are more directed at behaviour.

The literature indicates that shared goals such as those found in Cedarview leads to a greater sense of efficacy amongst teachers and higher student achievement (Creemers & Reezigt, 1999; Kurz & Knight, 2004). Conversely, it has also been found that differences between system expectations and the beliefs of educators can result in tensions (Tierney, 2006).

Summary of Cross Case Analysis

The themes that emerged from the analysis of the data were similar in both cases although some of the details varied. Differences appear in terms of the board protocols with Cedarview taking a more global concept of at-risk while the protocol from Maple Leaf was more focused on early literacy. In terms of assessments required by the board, both were focused on early literacy and reading skills. In terms of interventions, Cedarview established whole school programs to promote social and emotional growth while Maple Leaf created a team to provide interventions targeting behaviour and speech and language difficulties. In-school interventions were focused on social skills as well as early literacy in Cedarview and on early literacy in Maple Leaf.

When considering the most salient characteristics of students at-risk, participants from both boards noted social and emotional aspects although interaction with peers was most important to participants from Cedarview while behaviour difficulties were of most concern to those from Maple Leaf. Participants from both boards questioned whether the assessments required by the board were appropriate in the FDELKP. It was apparent in both boards there was discussion of individual students when considering who might be at-risk, although a shared understanding and focus was more obvious in the responses of participants from Cedarview.

The following section presents an exploration of the findings through the lens of complexity theory; it begins with a brief review of the main elements of the theory.

Findings Through the Lens of Complexity Theory

The conceptual framework created to guide this project was informed by complexity theory. It described the nested nature of the school system and suggested the elements that

might influence which students would be considered to be at-risk. In the following section complexity theory will be used to further discuss the findings, first by examining the possibility of an evolving approach to identifying students at-risk within each school board and then by exploring the elements and interaction that might influence the identification of individual students. The section begins with a brief description of complexity theory.

Complex organizations such as the education system exhibit a number of elements including: (a) internal diversity, (b) redundancy, (c) decentralized control, (d) neighbour interactions, and (e) enabling constraints (randomness and coherence). **Internal diversity** is the variation within the system which allows for new ideas and a wider range of novel responses to arise while **redundancy** refers to common ground such as shared vocabulary, expectations and experience. Redundancy allows for interaction among agents but also allows members to compensate for the weaknesses of other members (Davis & Simmt, 2003). Complex systems operate within **enabling constraints**; this is a balance between the sense of identity in the system (**coherence**) and disruptions that push the system to adjust and adapt (**randomness**). To allow for change and growth there must be a certain level of **decentralized control**; this freedom within boundaries is necessary to allow for the sharing of ideas (**neighbour interactions**).

The school boards both have a sense of coherence in that they are part of the provincial school system which includes traditional structures. This imposes a number of constraints such as curriculum expectations, assessment strategies based on meeting the curriculum expectations, a tendency toward teacher-directed learning, and age-based classes. As Lemke and Sabelli (2008) point out, these constraints are particularly resistant to change; “when we consider that many of the key structural features of educational practice (e.g. student-teacher ratios, use of textbooks, age-grading, local-taxation funding, curriculum areas, teacher training institutions) have been stable on timescales of a century or longer, we can infer that these are powerful system-regulatory relationships maintaining stability” (p. 126). However, the school system does gradually adapt as changes occur over time. At the provincial level these changes (disruptions) can result from a number of events such as differing political agendas as governments are elected and changing expectations from society. Examples of disruptions pertinent to this project include but are not limited to an increased demand for accountability, which led to the implementation of provincial

assessments. This in turn led many school boards to create assessment and tracking protocols that would allow them to determine areas of strengths and weaknesses; information that was then used to target interventions at the board, school and student levels with the aim of improving assessment results.

The introduction of the FDELKP presents another disruption. While play-based, child-centered approaches to teaching are not new; the strong emphasis placed on these teaching methods in the FDELKP does present a challenge to traditional teaching methods. The presence of educator teams, including an ECE is also a definite change in the status quo. The fact that children may be in the schools earlier (age three rather than four) and for longer periods (full-day as opposed to half-days) will put pressure on already tight resources such as speech and language and Special Education support within the school. Deciding who is at-risk is important in terms of providing timely and effective interventions however many elements are in play when it comes to making these decisions. The pressures for accountability mentioned earlier continue to have an impact on assessment and intervention practices. In many boards this has led to early identification processes that focus on a narrow range of literacy skills. While these skills are important and have some validity in predicting later academic success, the narrow focus may result in less attention to other equally important areas of development, such as those in the physical, emotional and social domains. For tracking purposes, these assessments are often carried out on specific schedules and are not necessarily done in the course of the student's everyday activities. These assessment practices are counter to those recommended by experts and are not consistent with those included in the FDELK program. The interactions between these and other elements with the resulting bumping up of ideas, will determine how the concept of at-risk might evolve in each board. Complexity theory provides a lens through which to view these elements and examine how the understanding of at-risk might evolve in each board.

Cedarview. As stated, the school boards operate within enabling constraints or boundaries; these include the elements of the school system above as well as the policies and procedures that guide their practice. One such policy involved the need to establish an early identification protocol however, an element of decentralized control permits each board to interpret the policy as they see fit. Responding to the disruption of the FDELKP while operating within the existing constraints of the early identification protocol has presented a

challenge for many boards in that they must now apply the protocol to younger children within the child-centered, play-based framework of the FDELKP. In the case of Cedarview DSB, the existing identification protocol included a definition of the characteristics to be considered when deciding who would be at-risk which includes a wide range of domains.

There are elements of redundancy within the school system in that there is a common language in terms of the curriculum and general expectations of behaviour within the school. There is a general acceptance that the board assessments must be completed but there is also a common understanding within the board that a focus on social skills is important; this is particularly evident at B. Reid PS. However, diversity is evident in that there are many understandings of what it means to be at-risk and differing opinions on the characteristics that are important in deciding which students might need extra support. The differing backgrounds and knowledge of teachers and ECEs provides another key element of diversity.

Neighbour interactions are occurring in terms of discussion about which students might be at risk and how to help them. There were specific examples, especially at B. Reid of discussions between the ECEs and the teachers as well as between the teachers and the SERT with regard to students of concern. These interactions are supported by the inclusion of ECE in staff meetings and professional development activities which increases the likelihood of sharing ideas and building common ground on a wide range of issues. There are a variety of different, sometimes contradictory ideas bumping up against one another with the system. An example of this is that although the participants accept the assessments, they question their usefulness and how these assessments, based on benchmarks, fit within the play-based philosophy of the FDELKP. These interactions are also apparent in the enhanced registration program which provided some opportunity for the involvement of parents, school and the local Health Unit.

How the early identification process might evolve depends on the interactions between a number of elements. The pressure of accountability is somewhat mitigated in Cedarview by the fact that provincial test scores are higher than the provincial average. Smaller class sizes also mean the individual students may be given more attention. The focus on social and emotional well-being at both the board and school levels as well as the suggestion that the use of Nipissing District Developmental Screen is an indication that a more global understanding of which students might be at-risk may be evolving.

Maple Leaf. As with Cedarview, Maple Leaf DSB operates within the enabling constraints of provincial policy and must react to both the need to establish early identification protocols and the implementation of the FDELKP. Again redundancy is evident in the shared acceptance of the board assessments while diversity is apparent in the variety of opinions about who is at-risk. Diversity is also represented in the differing opinions (between the principal and the SST) as to where majority of intervention support was being focussed.

The different backgrounds of the teachers and ECE provide another example of diversity however, unlike in Cedarview the ECEs were fewer opportunities for neighbour interactions between these groups in that there was little or no time for co-planning or discussion and ECEs were not included in staff meetings. This presents a contrast to the idea that teachers and ECEs should be working as a team in the classroom.

Yet, neighbour interactions were evident between board and school levels. One of the Kindergarten teachers had previously held a position in board administration; she had been directly involved in the creation of the developmental continuum as well as the early intervention team. The continuum was being shared throughout the school board, increasing the likelihood that teachers would focus on a range of developmental domains and hopefully promoting discussion around the assessment of student who might be falling behind. As with Cedarview, the enhanced registration program provided further opportunities for neighbour interactions.

As in Cedarview, these initiatives indicate a move toward a more global view of at-risk. However, competing elements are involved including continued pressure to improve test scores. Unlike Cedarview, the schools in Maple Leaf board scored below provincial averages on the provincial assessments. Also, larger class sizes make it more difficult to implement the play-based Full-Day program. Further, fiscal restraints draw into question the future effectiveness of the early as there was no indication of more staff to cope with the growing number of schools implementing the FDELKP.

The previous discussion applied the concepts involved in complexity theory to the school boards in a general sense by focusing on the understanding of at-risk. The next section places the emphasis on interactions between levels and elements, a key concept in complexity theory, and addresses the overarching research question, "What are the elements

influencing who is identified as at-risk in the Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program in Ontario?"

Synthesis - What are the elements that influence whether or not an individual student is labelled at risk?

One of the key elements of complexity theory is that it is the interaction between elements and individuals that determine outcomes. Recognizing that a system is complex means an acceptance that because there are so many possible interactions over time, it is impossible to reliably predict specific outcomes. This does not mean however that there is no point in trying to understand the system as it is possible to describe generalities and trends. For example, while we cannot predict how specific teachers and students will react to each other, we do know that, in general, positive interactions between students and teachers are important for student success (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). I believe that it is important to come to some kind of understanding of the various elements at play and to recognize how these elements interact in a complex system. While determining how to achieve positive outcomes is not the purpose of the project and not part of complexity theory, understanding the elements influencing the labelling of a student as at-risk, is one step toward leading those elements in a positive trajectory.

Given the nature of complex systems, it is impossible to identify every element or interaction that might be involved, therefore the following represents elements that have been discussed at the various levels of the school system and the possible interactions between them. **The child.** At the centre of the discussion is the child and the characteristics that make them who they are. Some of these elements are more stable than others and include such elements as sex, race, culture, age, stage of development in various domains and the presence or absence of specific abilities/disabilities. In terms of identifying whether or not a child might be considered to be at-risk, it is not necessarily the characteristics themselves that are as important as how the child's strengths and weaknesses are perceived and responded to by others (family, peers, teachers, etc.). These perceptions will at least in part be based on child's ability to interact with others and with the curriculum, although, as has been discussed the relative importance of these two elements varies.

Parents. Although not included in my original concept map, participants specified parents and family structure/situation as integral parts of the system. This is one illustration

of the fact that contextual environmental issues can interact with and influence cognitive and social development. Single parent families, those in difficulty and low-SES were elements mentioned that might result in a child being at-risk. In terms of interactions, parents were seen as helping with the process of identifying their child as at-risk (both informal identification and formal identification) by offering accurate information about the child's development and adjustment to school. Alternately, parents were seen as hindering the process if they failed to provide information and/or were reluctant to acknowledge problems. Parents were also key in the intervention process, again positively by working with teachers and ECE on behaviour and academic issues and by making sure support was available of the child (i.e., paying for tutoring or formal assessments) and negatively if they were either unable or unwilling to work with the school. Relationships and communication between parents, teachers and ECEs and the school in general were considered key.

Classroom. Given the findings of the current study, the specific classroom in which a child was placed can have a significant impact on whether or not a child might be considered to be at risk. Influences include the characteristics of the classroom itself in terms of the size and organization of the room as well as the structure of the class, number of children overall, presence of children with behaviour difficulties or special needs. For example, according to participants, larger numbers of children in the room made it more difficult to notice individual difficulties, reduced the educators ability to deal with behaviour difficulties in a discreet and timely manner.

The beliefs and knowledge of the teachers and ECEs responsible for the classroom and how the beliefs and knowledge impact their practice will also influence who is considered to be at risk. For example, some teachers and ECEs felt they were quite very knowledgeable about child development would be likely to notice when a child might not be progressing as expected while others were not a confident of this ability. Teams that had a good working relationship and communicate regularly felt they were more likely to be able to combine their strengths to create a positive learning environment in which those that need support are not only noticed by given the help they need. Interactions here include those between the adults themselves, between the individual child and the class as a whole and the adults, and how the teachers and ECE interact with the system elements such as curriculum and early identification protocols.

School. The particular school a child is in is another element. As discussed earlier, school culture can influence the shared and individual beliefs about which characteristics are most important; this was particularly obvious at B. Reid PS where there was a clear focus on social and emotional development supported by the principal. According to participants, school administration can also impact the services available through decisions about scheduling and the allocation of SERT/ SST time. Interactions include those amongst the school staff, between the school and the board and between the school and the province (curriculum, provincial assessments/ early identification, implementation of FDELKP). A further consideration is the location of the school in terms of economic status of the community as a whole, services available, and proximity to larger centres. Again, this was noted at B. Reid, where a number of participants felt there were fewer students identified as at-risk due to the relatively affluent nature of the community. Interactions include those between the school and the community, such as providing support or lack of support for school programs and the level of services required. This would also include interactions between the school and the other agencies involved that might provide support and services to at-risk students.

Board. As has been discussed in the cross-case analysis, participants noted that the elements at the board level included the choice of early identification protocol, and how the FDELKP is being implemented. These represent interactions between the boards and the province as well as those with the schools and communities involved.

In the case of individual children, whether or not they are considered to be at-risk will depend on their own characteristics but, as has been found in the current study, will depend just as much on their family, and the classroom, school, and board in which they are located. To illustrate these points, I will return to the students described at the beginning of the document.

Sarah is a happy child who enjoys school, particularly playing with friends. She prefers the dress-up center and tends to avoid activities that involve cutting and pasting or writing. Sarah's mother is a little concerned that she is behind in knowing her letters and doesn't seem to enjoy the books in the home the way her older sister did at that age. Will her teachers realize that Sarah is significantly behind her peers in reading and writing?

In terms of early identification protocols, Sarah is more likely to be identified for her reading difficulties in Maple Leaf because of the stronger focus on readiness in that board; however, her writing difficulties may be overlooked. Cedarview's use of assessments for both reading and writing make it more likely both issues will be recognized. Other important interactions include those between the teacher (and possibly the ECE) and Sarah's mother; the fact that Sarah's mother is expressing concern may mean that Sarah is more likely to be considered at-risk. The knowledge and beliefs of the teacher and ECE will come into play; identification will depend on how experienced both are with the assessments and with the expected development of reading and writing skills. The ECE is less likely to be involved because Sarah's difficulties are more of an academic issue. Some of the likely interactions in Sarah's case are depicted in Figure 15.

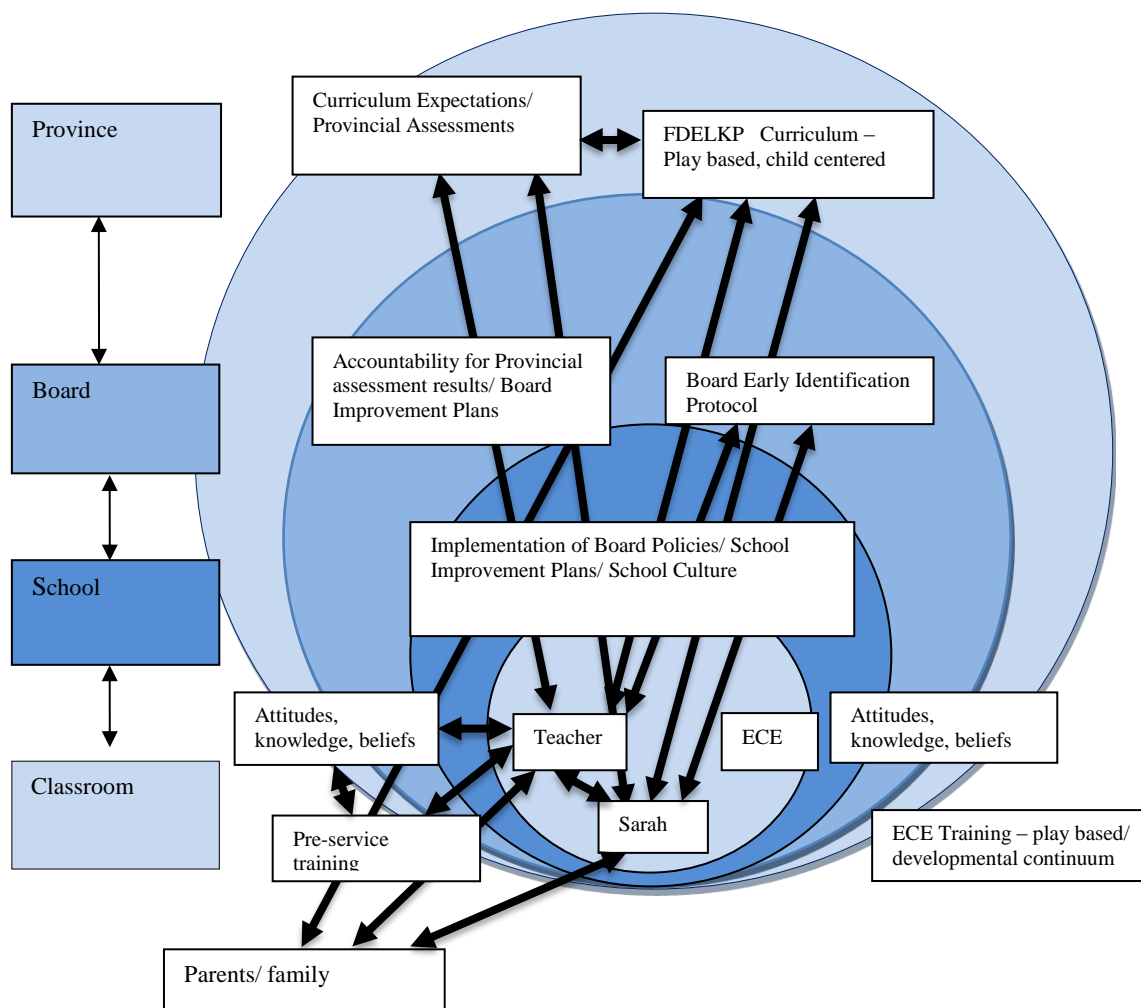


Figure 15: Elements that will influence whether or not Sarah is identified as at-risk.

Harrison is a quiet boy who likes to draw and play with puzzles. He does not contribute during circle time and rarely interacts with his peers. When he is asked questions, he answers with brief statements, often just one word. He is an only child with busy parents who both work full time. Will his teachers recognize his delayed language development and weak social skills?

In terms of identification protocols, Harrison is less likely to be considered at-risk at either Maple Leaf or Cedarview although this would depend on whether his possible language delays are impacting Harrison's development of early literacy skills. Harrison's lack of interaction with peers and participation is more likely to be of concern in Cedarview due to their stronger focus on social and emotional development. Again this will depend very much on the beliefs and knowledge of the teacher and the ECE involved. This is particularly important in the case of language development considering that teachers may not realize when there is a problem in terms of speech and language difficulties (Antoniuzzi, Snow, & Dickson-Swift, 2010). The ECE might be more likely to notice Harrison's lack of social skills in either board but again this was more of a focus at Cedarview.

Harrison's parents will also influence whether or not he is considered at-risk. As a number of participants pointed out, parents do not always have a great deal of knowledge about child development and therefore are not always aware when there is a problem. They noted that this was particularly evident when the child is a first born or only child. See Figure 16 for a depiction of the elements in Harrison's case.

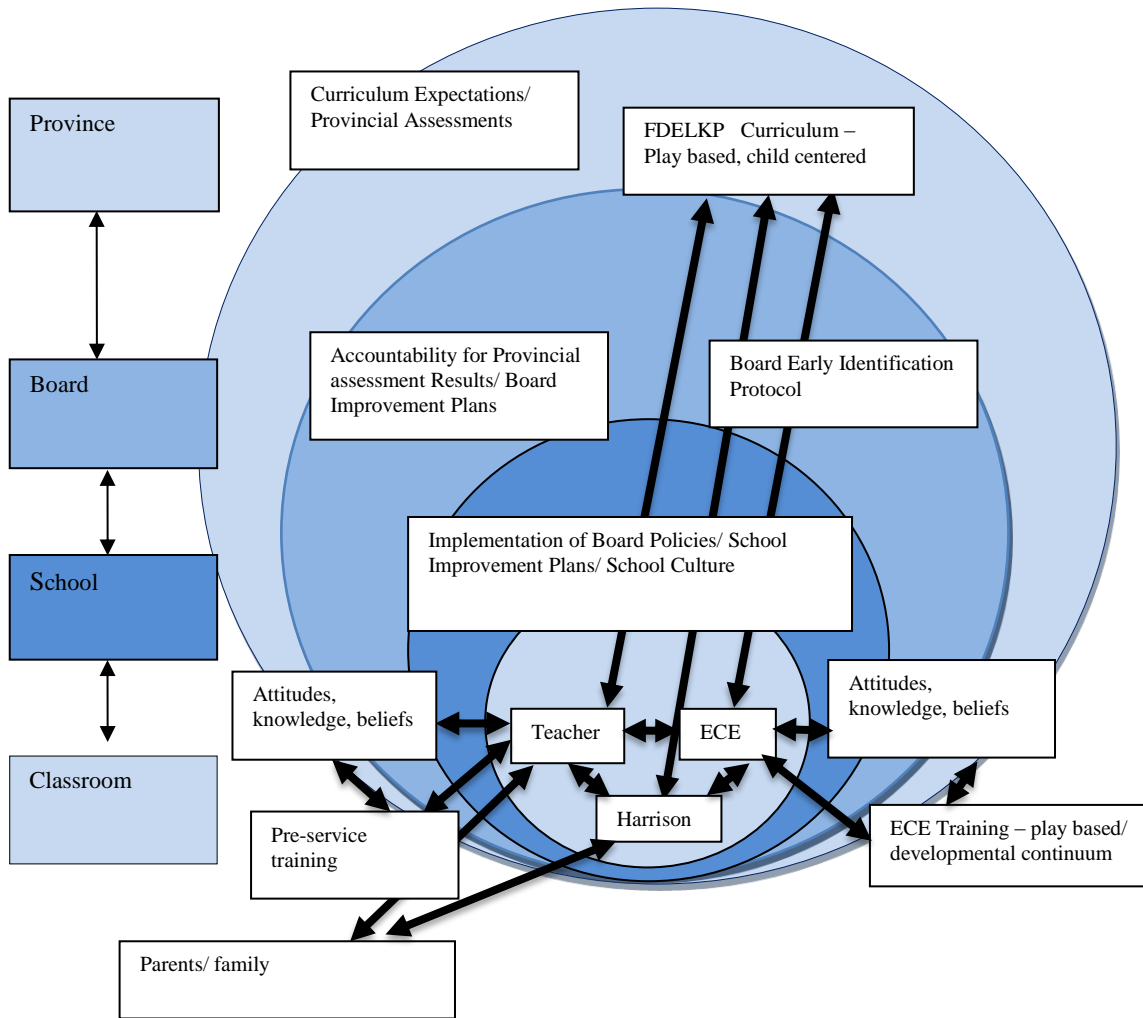


Figure 16. Elements that will influence whether or not Harrison is identified as at-risk.

James is a very active little boy. He loves gym and outside play but is reluctant to sit during circle time and struggles to be quiet when stories are read aloud. His impulsivity and high energy means that he does not always interact positively with his peers. James’ early literacy skills are quite strong but he does not always pay attention to instructions and rarely completes activities that require writing. His father is a single parent working hard to support James and his two younger siblings. Will his teachers recognize that James’ behaviour is negatively impacting his social and emotional development and possibly his academic progress?

James’ behaviour may be noticed in the course of the enhanced Kindergarten registrations implemented by both school boards, however these are voluntary programs and busy, single parents may not be able to participate. Once in school, James is unlikely to be identified by the early identification protocols in either board because of his strong early

literacy skills. In the classroom, as in the other cases, it is the knowledge and beliefs of the teacher and ECE, and especially their willingness and ability to deal with disruptive behaviour that will determine whether or not James is considered to be at-risk. At Cedarview, with the focus on social interactions, James would likely result in his being identified. However, he is also likely to get attention at Maple Leaf especially if James is placed in a crowded classroom; a situation participants felt might make difficulties such as James' worse. In that case, he might be referred to the early learning team in that board. Figure 17 depicts the interactions in James' case.

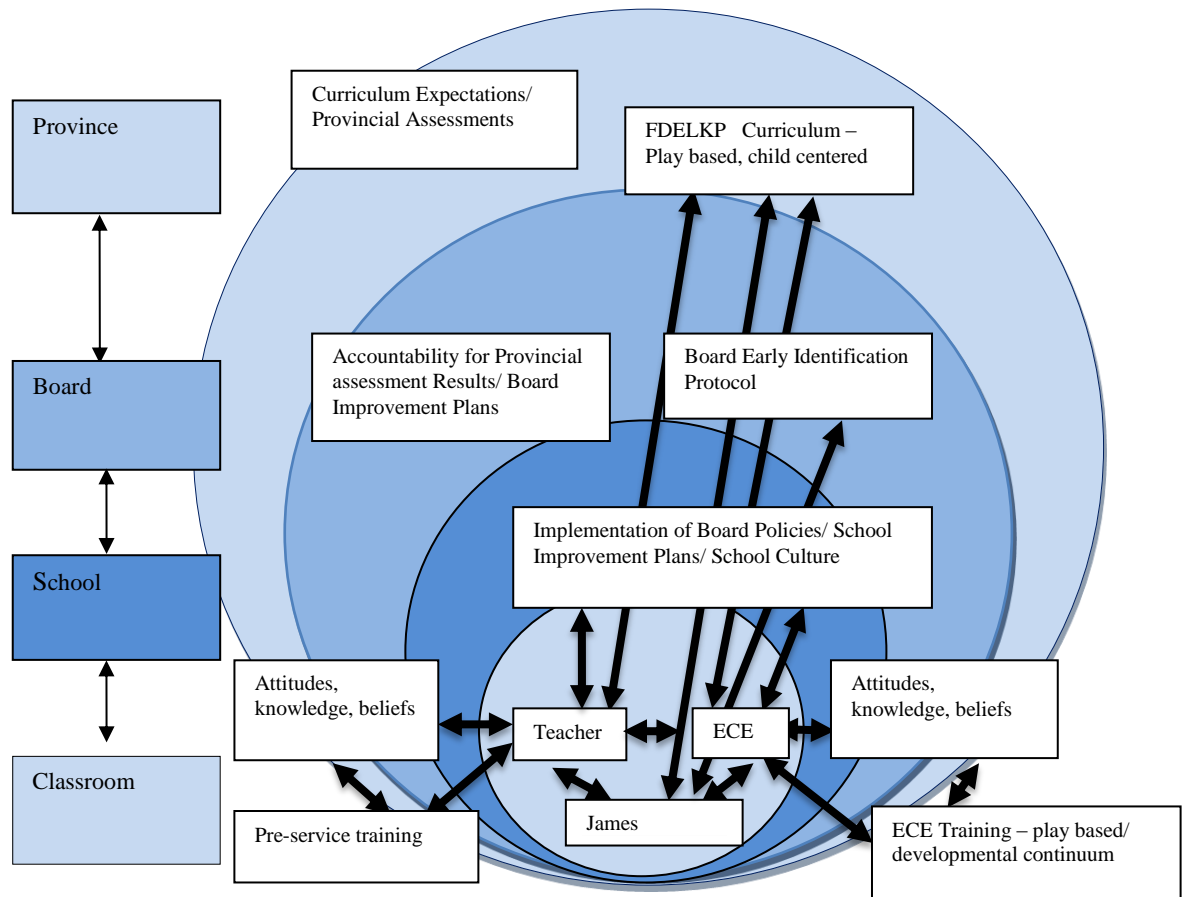


Figure 17: Elements that will influence whether or not James is identified as at-risk.

Chapter Summary

The chapter began with a cross-case analysis of the findings presented in Chapter 4 and focused on how the findings answered the four sub-questions used to guide the research project. Question one addressed the system requirements used to identify which students might be at-risk. Descriptions both boards assessment protocols and approaches to early identification were provided. Question two was focused on the assessments being used in the schools and how these were used in the identification of students that might be at-risk. While the board required assessment were used, many other methods of determining student progress were also discussed. The fact that the board required assessment might not be the best way to gauge students' abilities and that they were not necessarily consistent with the goals of the FDELKP was a key point. The third question was aimed at gaining an understanding of the beliefs and knowledge of participants surrounding the assessment and identification of at-risk students. A variety of views were expressed however, social and emotional development and general readiness for school were considered the most important elements by many. Question four was intended to explore the idea of the development of a shared understanding about which students might be considered to be at-risk. There appeared to be more of a consistent and shared focus in Cedarview which centred on social and emotional development however, there were discussions of moving toward the use of developmental continua for assessment rather than (or as well as) the benchmark assessments currently being used. This would likely broaden the focus of early identification to the consideration of a wider range of characteristics.

The next section of the chapter was focused on the analysis of the findings through the lens of complexity theory. After a brief review, the main elements of the theory were applied to each board particularly as to the understanding of at-risk and how this understanding might evolve. The final section presented a synthesis of the findings and an answer to the over-arching research question by providing a description of the elements that might influence the identification of students at-risk and included several hypothetical sample students by way of illustration.

The following chapter will present the contributions of the research, limitations encountered during the project as well as recommendations and final thoughts.

Chapter 6 – Conclusions and Recommendations

Contributions of the Research

Theoretical. The current study adds to the limited but growing body of research using complexity theory to both guide the methodology and as a lens through which to view the results. The study deepens our understanding of how complexity theory can be used to provide insight into systems that have many different elements at play at any one time. Although the theory is descriptive rather than prescriptive, it can help suggest the elements that need to be in place if we want to encourage systems to evolve and learn. In an organization with deeply ingrained traditions and a generally top-down structure such as a school system it is important to recognize that there needs to be a certain level of freedom (decentralized control) if the system is going to change and adapt. To promote interactions, there needs to be a level of redundancy to allow for common understandings and to facilitate communication but also a level of diversity to compensate for weaknesses and infuse novel ideas. It is through the neighbour interactions between and amongst the levels and the ideas bumping up against one another that learning within the system will take place.

Practical. To begin with, the study adds to the body of knowledge about the assessment and intervention practices being used in Kindergarten classrooms in Ontario. By identifying current practice and how these align with the beliefs and knowledge of individuals at various levels of the education system, areas of potential conflict as well as common understandings were identified. This revealed some discontinuity between assessment practices aimed at school improvement and those suggested in the FDELKP curriculum and recommended in the research. The findings of this study also provide insight into the collaborative experiences of teachers and ECE workers, an area that has not been explored to date.

Limitations

An essential step in any research process is to recognize and attempt to mitigate any factors that might limit or weaken the study. Careful thought has been given both to elements inherent to all qualitative research as well as those specific to this project.

Researcher bias. As stated, all research is guided by the researcher's beliefs and feelings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and to improve the quality of the research it is important that those feelings and beliefs are examined for any potential impact. To identify possible

areas of difficulty, I engaged in many periods of reflection questioning beliefs about the topics involved as well as the research process. I recognized that my experiences as a mother of a child who struggled early in school and as a teacher who attempted to help students with similar difficulties have influenced my thinking. In particular, I recognize that because I believed that my son did not get help early enough and that our mutual frustrations with his learning had long lasting negative impacts on his self-concept and belief in himself as a learner, I was inclined to look at those students who might not be noticed in the early identification process. Similarly, my experience with early identification protocols included a narrowing of focus over the years which resulting in a reliance on benchmark targets. I did not feel that this was a positive development for either the students or the teachers. I was aware that this may have led me to expect similar situations in other boards and to possibly focus on negative comments from participants. Many discussions with colleagues in the field of early education as well as my supervisors and others involved in educational research helped clarify and deepen my own understandings and how these beliefs guided the project.

Transferability. Unlike quantitative research that seeks to generalize findings across wider populations, qualitative research hopes to provide insight into social situations that are similar to those being studied. The degree to which the findings of this study could be applied in other contexts such as the elements influencing early identification in other schools or school boards is an indication of the transferability of the study. As mentioned above, there was an attempt to recruit boards and schools that varied in terms of location and size by applying for approval to conduct research in both urban and rural boards that were also larger and smaller geographically. One of the boards covered a somewhat larger geographic area, however neither contained highly populated urban centres; the schools involved were similar in enrolment numbers and were situated in smaller urban settings. Despite the similarities the two boards did have different early identification protocols and it was felt that there was sufficient variation to provide a range of understandings and experiences for the research project. However, it must be recognized that the experiences in other boards such as those in truly rural settings, or those on different points along the FDELKP journey may be very different.

Time constraints. Practical issues, particularly the need to minimize the interruption to classroom and school routines, as well as the distance to the research sites, meant the time

spent with each participant and opportunity to become familiar with the school setting were both somewhat limited. In an attempt to mitigate this factor, I tried to gather as much information as possible during each visit. I spent what time I could in the classrooms and during breaks in the staff room so that the participants could become more comfortable with me and I could glean a deeper understanding of the school culture. The limited time available also meant that I was relying on the perceptions and intentions of individuals rather than being able to actually observe which students end up with the at-risk label.

Recommendations

System requirements. There was a lack of clarity in terms of who was responsible for early identification. Although the Education Act places the responsibility within the Special Education mandate, assessment and tracking once students are within the school system has become more of a Curriculum issue and is tied to school improvement. Further, the original goal of the Policy Memorandum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1982) was to identify learning disabilities specifically. The policy has not been updated since 1982 and no longer reflects the current reality in schools where a wider range of issues, including mental health are of concern. It would be beneficial if this policy was revisited at the provincial and then at the school board level.

Assessment. Recommendations from research findings and from the panels that advised on the creation of the FDELKP clearly point to the use of developmental continua as part of the assessment process (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007; Pascal, 2009). The use of a continuum to support assessment would draw attention to a wide range of developmental domains and result in greater recognition of students that might not be developing as expected. This would reduce the tendency to focus on a narrow range of literacy skills and include essential areas such as understanding of basic mathematical concepts and problem solving which are currently missing from assessment strategies.

To account for the variation in development and be consistent with recommendations in the research all assessments should be carried out on multiple occasions and in the context of the child's everyday activities rather than the current practice of single assessments that are often completed in a withdrawal setting (McCain, Mustard, & McCuaig, 2011; Meisels, 2007). There is willingness in both boards to move in this direction and there have been efforts to create a continuum that combines the curriculum expectations with current

understanding of early child development. It would be beneficial to support these efforts and explore a more widespread use of the continuum in the classroom.

The development of a continuum for assessment purposes would also have implications for both teacher education and early childhood education programs in that teachers have not necessarily been trained in early child development and early childhood educators are not as familiar with the school system and curriculum expectations. Increased training in these areas and in the use of continua for assessment would be beneficial to both groups of educators. Of particular importance would be an increased understanding of speech and language development. As Antoniazzi, Snow, and Dickinson-Swift (2010) found teachers are often inaccurate in their identification of students in need of further assessment for speech and language difficulties. Given the importance of oral language in both social and academic development, it is essential that students who need support in this area receive it in a timely manner.

Intervention. The purpose of early identification is to recognize students that may be in need of extra support. In order to mitigate longer-term negative outcomes of early difficulties it is essential that interventions be provided in a timely and effective manner. Participants raised the concern over long wait times and limited services and noted that as a result of the FDELKP students will be in the school system earlier and for a longer period of time, therefore current levels of resources for services that already seem stretched may be inadequate. Addressing this issue will involve multiple layers of the school system (provincial, board and school level) and will require continued collaboration amongst multiple ministries (e.g. Ministry of Health and Ministry of Children and Youth Services) which is already evident (i.e., resources to help with the identification of mental health issues).

Identification process and shared understanding. More discussion around the idea of what it means for a child to be at-risk between all parties is an important step toward developing a shared understanding and approach toward identification and intervention. As has been discussed, a common set of goals can lead to a greater sense of efficacy for those involved as well as higher student achievement.

Also important to the shared understanding is that all members are part of a team. At present, the role ECEs play in the classroom is not always clear, and there is little or no time

for discussion and joint planning (Vanderlee, Youmans, Peters, & Eastabrook, 2012). Further, as indicated by participants, they are not involved on an equal footing in school activities such as staff meetings and professional development. ECEs at least in one board did not feel they were knowledgeable enough about the identification process. Shared professional development in this area would increase their understanding and contribute to their ability to make appropriate recommendations when they are concerned about students. These issues will need to be addressed if there is to be a true sense of partnership in FDELKP classrooms.

Parental involvement. It is clear from the results of the study that parents, and family in general, are key components in whether or not children might be at risk and whether or not they receive necessary interventions. Parents should be encouraged to participate in the education system, to take on the responsibility of advocating for their child/children and work in partnership with educators. The efforts to include parents evident in both school boards should continue and be expanded beyond the registration process. Educators need to make sure that parents are accepted as part of the team and make efforts to facilitate involvement and promote positive communication. Efforts to include parents in the identification process and beyond must also continue.

Creating risk. The concern that large class sizes and over-crowded classrooms made it difficult to implement the FDELK program as intended and may be having a negative impact on students was raised by participants. It was noted that that rooms being used were not always designed with younger students in mind creating possible supervision issues and that lack of space made dealing with discipline in a discrete manner problematic. This is supported in the research on the implementation of the FDELKP (Vanderlee, Youmans, Peters, & Eastabrook, 2012) and in studies that indicate that only quality programs produce positive outcomes (Barnett, 2008; Pianta et al., 2005). Given that early education experiences are so important, these issues should be reviewed and addressed to insure that the program is not adversely effecting students and creating risk rather than addressing it as intended.

Suggestions for Future Research

Early childhood is a time of great potential, but there is the opportunity for both benefit and harm (McCain et al., 2011). While there is substantial research as to how the potential for healthy growth and development can be realized, there are also gaps in our

knowledge. Many questions remain around the assessment of young children both in terms of creating a shared understanding of what to assess and how it should be done. This is especially true when it comes to deciding on which children might be at-risk for school failure. Clearly, more research needs to be done to establish clearly understood and accepted indicators of development (Betts et al., 2009; McDonald, 2007).

There is particularly a lack of research about ECE programs in the Canadian context (Friendly et al., 2006). This is a concern especially in light of Ontario's new Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program. The draft Kindergarten curriculum embraces the concept of play-based, child-centered learning. However, there are many elements other than policy statements that contribute to how programs are implemented (Bennett, 2005; Vanderlee, Youmans, Peters, & Eastabrook, 2012). Therefore it is not clear how this play-based and child-centered program is and will be realized in the classroom.

The design of the FDELKP brings together ECEs and regular teachers in the classroom. With different training and background, these educators may have very different ideas about learning and assessment with the potential for positive collaboration but also the possibility of conflict. In terms of assessment, recommendations made by the Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning (2007) and supported by Pascal (2009) clearly advocate for the use of a developmental continuum to be used with classroom observation as a key source of information (Pascal, 2009). While the FDELKP documents suggest a variety of assessment methods including observation, the students' progress is to be measured against curriculum expectations (Ontario, 2010). Furthermore, schools already have established systems of assessment and early identification in place as mandated by the Education Act (Ontario, 2000). These are often based on meeting benchmark expectations by specific times in the year. Tensions may arise, in this case between teachers and system level expectations. Teachers may also feel the pressure discussed earlier of trying to accelerate learning with a goal of improving later test scores in provincial assessments. What teachers and ECEs know and believe will have an impact on the early learning experiences of the children in their classes and on which children they consider to be at-risk. Further research into these questions, particularly as the program is being implemented can help reveal areas of tension and conflict. Understanding the elements that influence the identification of at-risk students

is an important first step to promoting dialogue and resolving the tensions that may interfere with the promised benefits of the FDELKP.

Final Thoughts

My initial goal when I started my Ph. D. program was to research all the ways school boards were approaching early identification and to find the “best” way. Among the realizations gained over the process were first, that it was beyond my ability as a student to actually research all the ways but also, that the idea of there being a “best” way was much more complicated than I thought. The project confirmed my concern that in many boards, the concern over improving test scores has led to a focus on a narrow range of literacy skills in the early primary grades. These were the skills that were assessed and were often the main target intervention resources available. While early literacy skills are undoubtedly important, I still believe that the focus on a small number of skills is not in the best interest of children and that a wider range of other characteristics should be considered just as important.

Under the current system, we could speculate as to the futures of students such as Sarah, Harrison, and James. While Sarah’s difficulties might be identified by the protocols focusing on early literacy, there is no guarantee she will receive the interventions that might be necessary. Further, the narrow focus of the assessments may not target her specific issues, especially with regard to written work. Given support and more importantly encouragement she could learn to overcome her difficulties and retain her enthusiasm for school. Without support she may very well become discouraged and resentful and fall into a pattern of avoiding work she finds difficult putting her further and further behind her peers. Similarly, with support such as he might find at B. Reid PS, Harrison may to start interacting with his peers which could improve his social skills. If his language delays are noticed by the educators in his classroom, he may be provided with interventions. The possibility of interventions may be more likely at Wynne-Jones PS due to the presence of the early learning team but this will still depend on the issue being recognized. Without support, Harrison may continue to participate in limited ways with the possibility of more isolation and further delays in language development. In James’ case, his behaviour issues may lead to long-term difficulties both socially and academically especially if he continues to miss instructions and avoid written work. This may be especially likely if he is located in one of the more crowded classroom. With interventions such as those provided by the early

intervention team, James (and the educators in his classroom) may learn strategies to deal with his excess energy and impulsivity. This is dependent, however, on the team having the time and resources to provide support for the increasing numbers of schools and classrooms now offering the FDELKP.

In my son's case, the early identification system did not work to his advantage. As mentioned, the wait-to-fail attitude common at the time meant that although it was recognized he was not learning in the same way as his peers, no active interventions were put in place until Grade 3. His learning disabilities and rather mixed support and understanding from educators throughout his academic career left him discouraged and with little belief in his ability to learn. Nearing the end of secondary school however, he encountered a teacher who ran an innovative program focused on the environment. The teacher was supportive of all of his students and recognized Nic's love of the outdoors and strong teamwork and leadership skills. After his success in the TERRA program, Nic chose to enroll a Fishery and Wildlife program at college. It was a good attempt and he might have been successful if he had had the confidence and self-advocacy skills to ask for the help he needed (or had been close enough to home to get family support). However, he has found successful employment in his second area of interest, the construction industry. He has just purchased a house and already has plans for renovations.

Nic was a major influence in my decision to investigate early identification and I firmly believed he should have received more support earlier in his schooling. That being said, I have begun to question my beliefs in terms of the whole concept of identifying students at-risk. To begin with, there are so many different interpretations of the term that its value is questionable. Secondly, the term places the focus too much on the child when there are so many other factors involved. But more importantly, the term places an emphasis on weakness and inability. While I still feel that making sure students get the very best start in school possible is essential, and those that might require extra support for whatever reason must get that support, I am now questioning whether we might be better off paying attention to what children can do rather than what they can't.

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Appendix A: Policy/Program Memoranda**Policy/Program Memorandum No. 8****Issued under the authority of the Deputy Minister of Education**

Date of Issue: Revised 1982

Effective: Until revoked or modified

Subject: LEARNING DISABILITIES

Application: Directors of education
Principals of schools

References: Memorandum 1978-79:14 (Curriculum: The education of students with learning disabilities)

The Education Act requires school boards to provide appropriate special education programs and services for all their exceptional students by 1985, either directly, or by purchasing them from other school boards.

The Act also requires school boards to implement procedures for early and ongoing identification of the learning abilities and needs of pupils, and to prescribe standards in accordance with which these procedures are implemented. Identification and appropriate intervention at this early stage will ensure that learning-disabled students are provided with meaningful early school experiences related to their individual strengths and needs.

1. DEFINITION OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

The Ministry of Education defines learning disability (Special Education Information Handbook, 1981) as:

A learning disorder evident in both academic and social situations that involves one or more of the processes necessary for the proper use of spoken language or the symbols of communication, and that is characterized by a condition that:

- a. is not primarily the result of
 - i. impairment of vision;
 - ii. impairment of hearing;
 - iii. physical handicap;
 - iv. mental retardation;

- v. primary emotional disturbance; or
 - vi. cultural difference; and
- b. results in a significant discrepancy between academic achievement and assessed intellectual ability, with defects in one or more of:
- i. receptive language (i.e., listening, reading);
 - ii. language processing (i.e., thinking, conceptualizing, integrating);
 - iii. expressive language (i.e., talking, spelling writing);
 - iv. mathematical computations; and
- c. may be associated with one or more conditions diagnosed as:
- i. a perceptual handicap;
 - ii. a brain injury;
 - iii. minimal brain dysfunction;
 - iv. dyslexia; or
 - v. developmental aphasia.

2. IDENTIFICATION OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

a. General screening to identify students with learning disabilities

Identification procedures for students suspected of having learning disabilities should be carried out in the student's language of instruction. Where a student's language is other than English or French, a reasonable delay in the language-based aspects of assessment should be considered.

The screening should consist of an early developmental review involving parents and local interdisciplinary services. The procedures involved are outlined in Memoranda 1978-79:15 and 1979-80:24 on *Early identification of children's learning needs*.

No single characteristic is likely to be diagnostic of a learning disability. Since children develop at different rates and in different ways, care should be taken to ensure that developmental differences are not automatically seen as disabilities. Where, however, a child is exhibiting a number of characteristics normally associated with learning disabilities, further assessment should be considered.

b. Specific diagnostic procedures for students identified as having learning disabilities

A diagnostic evaluation for individual students should be based on some or all of the following:

- continuous educational assessment;
- detailed health assessment (hearing, vision, physical and neurological);
- psychological assessment;
- language assessment;
- social/family history;

- assessment of observed behaviours in a variety of settings.

Assessments may vary in complexity according to the requirements of each pupil under consideration.

It is essential that all results of diagnostic procedure and their implications be discussed with the parent, student, and educators involved in the planning and implementation of the student's program. It is expected that communication and co-operation will have been established previously between the home and school. Families are a most influential force in the development of children and youth; without family involvement, opportunities for the progress of exceptional pupils are greatly reduced.

3. PROGRAMMING FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

The assessment results (learning styles, strengths, interests, needs, and socio-emotional development) will dictate the most effective program. It is of paramount importance that the findings or psychological, educational and medical reports be translated into instructional expectations and strategies to assist teachers to meet the needs of each student. With the assistance of the resources available, including information resulting from the diagnostic procedures, the school principal, in consultation with special education and student services personnel, has the responsibility of ensuring that an appropriate program will be implemented for each student. A cautionary note should be added here. Although assessment is the basis for program development it is good practice to hold assessment results as tentative. This should not inhibit program development but, rather, permit program adjustments and modifications to be made as new information becomes available.

In many cases, reinforcement of the program at home will be desirable and productive. School and board personnel should work closely with parents to ensure that a consistent and co-operative approach is developed and sustained.

Both elementary and secondary schools should have resource teachers available to assist learning disabled students. School boards should also make provision for assistants to work with individual students where necessary, and under the direction of the classroom teacher. Such assistance might be in the form of tutorial sessions on an individual or small-group basis conducted by teachers, classroom assistants, aides, or volunteers. School boards should ensure that classroom assistants have suitable skills and knowledge for the conduct of their assignments with learning disabled students.

Students with mild forms of learning disabilities can be served appropriately within the regular classroom. A special education consultant or resource teacher can provide the assistance required by the classroom teacher in the selection and organization of materials and instructional approaches suitable to the needs of these students.

Students with moderate forms of learning disabilities will probably require

assistance outside of the regular classroom on a part-time basis. The assistance should be available for individual students or small groups for part of the day. A resource room teacher, itinerant special education teacher or classroom assistant should be assigned to schools, depending on the need in each community.

Students with severe forms of learning disabilities may require placement in a special education class for children with learning disabilities.

A learning-disabled pupil's level of intelligence, background of experience, stability of personality and home support may decrease or increase his/her ability to function in school. These factors must be considered when recommending placement. A student who has some severe learning disabilities but who also has a number of strengths may be able to handle a regular classroom with part-time assistance, whereas a less disabled student who has many accompanying needs may require full-time special class placement. The type of assistance required may change from year to year. A pupil retained in a regular classroom with support help may require a full-time special class placement at a later time in his educational program. Conversely, a student requiring full-time special class placement for one or two years may be able to cope in a regular grade with part-time assistance at the end of that time. Some mildly disabled students may need part-time assistance for a period of time to develop strategies to help them cope adequately in a regular classroom.

The enrolment and the placement of students in such programs are to be in accordance with the terms of Regulation 262 *Elementary and Secondary Schools and Schools for Trainable Retarded Pupils – General*, as amended by Ontario Regulation 617/81 and in accordance with the guidelines in the *Special Education Information Handbook, 1981*.

School boards should provide professional support services to classroom personnel for ongoing assistance in individual student program development, evaluation and follow-up.

Liaison with the home, other involved professionals, and community agencies must be maintained to ensure integration of services and the effectiveness of the program.

The teaching methods used with a learning disabled student must be highly personalized and compatible with the student's strengths. It is important that the methodology be structured, sequential, and reinforced with relevant activities. Acceptance, commitment, and involvement on the part of pupil and parents are critical to the success of each student's program.

Programs must be reviewed regularly (Regulation 262).

Special instructional equipment should be provided where it will be of assistance in the development of a successful program. It should be used to foster self-confidence and independence.

The education of children and youth with learning disabilities is the responsibility of school boards in Ontario. In the majority of circumstances, children with learning disabilities will be residing in their own homes. It is recognized, however, that there are a few exceptional cases where a pupil will have a clearly identifiable need for special non-education services; i.e., care or treatment. Some pupils may require residential services for such educational programs.

Admission to the majority of residential facilities in Ontario is determined selectively on the basis of assessed need for special non-educational services. That is, the child's educational requirements, per se, have no bearing on his or her eligibility for residential care.

Responsibility for seeking appropriate residential care facilities rests directly with the parents of each pupil. School boards are, however, expected to assist parents in locating the appropriate care or treatment service. Depending upon the nature the child's requirements, this may be provided by a children's mental health centre, children's psychiatric service, children's aid society or other organizations offering appropriate service. It should be made clear to the parent that contact does not necessarily mean the child will be accepted into an approved residential program, but only that the agencies involved and the school board will work together with the family in clarifying the nature of the child's needs and assist in finding appropriate provision.

Collaboration between school boards and the Ministry of Community and Social Services and its funded agencies will be necessary to ensure that planning responds to the needs of individual children and families generally.

Information regarding care and treatment services may be obtained from the appropriate Children's Services area office of the Ministry of Community and Social Services.

4. MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

a. Financial assistance

The annual General Legislative Grants Regulation provides financial assistance to school boards for the provision of program and services at the elementary and secondary school levels. This includes programs and services for children with learning disabilities.

b. Professional development for teachers

The Ministry of Education Special Education courses permit a comprehensive program in learning disabilities during the three parts of the summer/winter courses. These courses provide for the preparation of teachers, consultants and supervisory personnel who have responsibility for the education of exceptional students. A

component of pre-service teacher education programs focuses on special instructional approaches for exceptional students, including those with learning disabilities.

c. Curriculum development

The Ministry of Education has developed a support document entitled, *Children with Learning Disabilities* (Curriculum Ideas for Teachers, 1980). This publication deals with classroom instructional approaches and techniques for teachers of students with learning disabilities.

d. Regional offices

The Ministry of Education, through its regional offices, will provide assistance to school boards in:

- i. the use of early identification processes;
- ii. their efforts to provide appropriate educational programs for students with learning disabilities; and,
- iii. evaluating the effectiveness, and need for further development, of resources, programs and services.

Appendix B: Policy/Program Memorandum No. 11

Issued under the authority of the Deputy Minister of Education

Date of Issue: Revised 1982 **Effective:** Until revoked or modified
Subject: **EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF CHILDREN'S LEARNING NEEDS**
Application: Directors of education
 Principals of schools
References: Memoranda 1978-79:15; 1979-80:24

Each school board is required to have approved and in operation by September, 1981, procedures to identify each child's level of development, learning abilities and needs and to ensure that educational programs are designed to accommodate these needs and to facilitate each child's growth and development. These procedures are a part of a continuous assessment and program planning process which should be initiated when a child is first enrolled in school or no later than the beginning of a program of studies immediately following Kindergarten and should continue throughout a child's school life.

It is expected that school boards having adopted procedure known to be in tune with the development characteristics of young children will continue to refine them as staff knowledge and experience increases.

Some Principles for Early Identification

1. Language development is a major component of early identification. It is important, therefore, that procedures used be in English for an English speaking child and in French for a French speaking child. Where a child's language is other than English or French, a reasonable delay in the language based aspects of assessment should be considered.
2. Teachers in consultation with parents must strive to know each child as soon and as thoroughly as possible in order to provide learning opportunities that will help each child. It is imperative that children and their parents do not feel that they are in an "examination-test" situation when information related to the provision of learning opportunities is obtained. Where necessary other professionals may assist in this process.
3. A variety of strategies should be used to maintain an ongoing review of each child's emotional, social, intellectual and physical development.
4. Continuous assessment from different perspectives should be followed up with suitable programs that reflect what is known about each child at any point in time. Such programs should be provided in an environment wherein the child feels secure.
5. Information derived from assessment should be treated as tentative and temporary; it is not appropriate to use these data to predict children's long-term achievements.

6. Teachers may identify some children with special needs who require further assessment. Teachers should consult with other professionals to determine appropriate learning programs.

Some Resources for Early Identification

1. In recent years there has been much activity in the development of instruments for use in early identification procedures. Careful analysis and review of these instruments in the context of primary education is essential.
2. Research consistently confirms that a supportive teacher who implements programs suited to children's individual needs and who provides immediate, positive reactions about developing competencies and attitudes, is a very reliable authority for deciding what a child can and cannot do.
3. Teachers may need to reinforce their interview skills, their skills in interpreting different facets of child behaviour, and their abilities to recognize when other professional assistance is necessary.

Inservice activities should be developed to accommodate these needs. Professional activity days could be used most effectively for this purpose.

4. Personnel within Ontario's 43 public health units may be able to assist school boards with relevant social and health information. Contact with the local medical officers of health is encouraged.

In jurisdictions where parents provide teachers with social and health information, parents must be assured that the information will be kept confidential, and that it will be used in establishing good educational programs for children.

5. Within regional offices of the Ministry of Education, designated staff members have responsibility for assisting boards with matters relating to early identification.
6. A resource guide to *The Formative Years*, tentatively entitled "The Beginning Years of School" is being prepared by the Ministry of Education. This guide will provide suggestions for implementing early identification procedures within the context of early childhood programs.
7. The Ministry of Education has initiated a number of research studies designed to provide up-to-date information meeting the needs of young children. The reports are available either in microfiche or as bound copies from:

Ontario Government Bookstore, 880 Bay Street, Toronto, Ontario M7A 1N8

Learning abilities: identification and intervention practices (1981)

Mr. Iain Davidson, Dr. Margaret Hughes, Dr. Harry Silverman, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. \$5.00

This study describes early identification procedures and intervention programs being used in Ontario, evaluates the reliability and validity of these techniques, and outlines criteria for choosing appropriate instruments and procedures.

The Windsor early identification project (1976).

Dr. K. G. O'Bryan, Ontario Educational Communications Authority

The approach used in the Windsor Project was multi-disciplinary, involving educators, psychologists, the medical profession and the research team. The tests developed were designed for Windsor but have general applicability with some local modification. Bound copy \$2.50 Microfiche (ON00565) \$1.50

Le projet de dépistage précoce de Windsor (1976)

Dr. K. G. O'Bryan, Ontario Education communications Authority

Bound copy \$2.50 Microfiche (ON00565) \$1.50

Children's characteristics on school entry (1980)

(Junior Kindergarten, Senior Kindergarten and Grade 1)

Dr. G. A. V. Morgan, University of Guelph.

The research team developed a set of instruments and used them on a representative sample of children entering school for the first time to identify the skills and abilities that they had acquired. Data was also collected on parents' expectations of the school program well as the schools' expectations of the beginning children. \$5.00

Identification of learning disabilities in Ontario: A study of the validity of assessment instruments and procedures (1980)

Dr. Robert B. MacIntyre - Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

In addition to examining instruments and procedures, the researchers studied the process used in schools to generate, apply and interpret data. The report includes an annotated list of major tests with a validity summary for tests specific to the learning disability issue.

Early childhood education: perceptions of programs and children's characteristics (1980)

Dr. M. W. Wahlstrom, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Ontario programs for children aged three to eight are described and analysed. Issues relevant to Early Childhood Education are outlined and related to the delivery of services through the programs of various agencies. \$5.00

Kindergarten programs: effects of regular half day, alternate full day, and daily full day programs

Dr. Andrew Biemiller, University of Toronto.

The study examined the effects of the three types of program on the children's health, temperament, preferences and their skills in a variety of academic and social

situations. Microfiche (ON01480) \$1.50

8. Many school boards have had early identification procedure in place for some time; they can provide valuable information to boards wishing assistance. A random sample of early identification programs around the province is presented in *Curriculum Connections* No. 14, October 1979, a publication available from the Ontario Association for Curriculum Development, c/o Edgewood Junior Public School, 230 Birkdale Road, Scarborough, Ontario, M1P 3S4. A reference copy is held by the:

Information Centre
Ontario Ministry of Education
(416) 965-1451

Appendix C: Demographic Information Form

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Please note that the following information will be used for research purposes only and will remain strictly confidential.

Participant Name _____

Email or other contact information _____

Age (circle one) (20 – 24) (25 – 29) (30 – 34) (35 – 39) (40 – 44) (45 – 49) (50 – 54)
(55+)

Current position _____

Years of experience in current position _____

Other relevant experience _____

Education (degree (s) / diploma (s)) _____

Other (AQ and/or other courses) _____

Preparation for FDELKP _____



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Appendix D: Recruitment Message – School Administrators

Title of the Study: Investigating the Elements Influencing the Identification of “At-Risk” Students in the Context of the Full-Day Early Learning - Kindergarten Program in Ontario

Dear Potential Participant,

Greetings! My name is Suzanne Gooderham; I am a doctoral student at the University of Ottawa. I am conducting research into how students in the early primary grades are identified as being “at- risk” for school failure. It has long been recognized that there is group of children who despite reaching school with no obvious medical or behavioural difficulties, struggle academically. While it is agreed that early assessment and identification of these students is important to avoid the poorer long term outcomes that often result, there is little consensus on how they should be identified. Through this research, I hope to increase our understanding of the various elements that might influence who is identified “at risk” and why.

This is my doctoral research project and I will be conducting the research myself under the supervision of my thesis co-supervisors Dr. Jessica Whitley and Dr. Cheryl Duquette of the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa.

I am contacting you because you have important insight into the early assessment and identification practices within your school. I would appreciate a few minutes of your time for a brief interview. If you agree to participate in our research, I would ask you to be involved in an individual interview. It would be conducted by me, on site, and it would be an estimated 30 minutes in length. With your permission it would be audio-taped to ensure accuracy. Upon completion of the data analysis, you will also have an opportunity to review the results of the study summarized draft form.

There are many benefits to this study. This is an opportunity to have your voice and experiences heard, and to engage in reflective practice. Your perspectives will play an important part in potential changes to educational policy and pedagogy as well as future professional development. I hope that you would consider participating in this study and look forward to your input.

If you have any questions you can call me.

Thank you!

Suzanne Gooderham, PhD Candidate
University of Ottawa
145 Jean-Jacques-Lussier, Ottawa, ON, K1N6N5



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University of Ottawa
Faculty of Education

Appendix E: Recruitment Message – Board Personnel

Title of the Study: Investigating the Elements Influencing the Identification of “At-Risk” Students in the Context of the Full-Day Early Learning - Kindergarten Program in Ontario

Dear Potential Participant,

Greetings! My name is Suzanne Gooderham; I am a doctoral student at the University of Ottawa. I am conducting research into how students in the early primary grades are identified as being “at- risk” for school failure. It has long been recognized that there is group of children who despite reaching school with no obvious medical or behavioural difficulties, struggle academically. While it is agreed that early assessment and identification of these students is important to avoid the poorer long term outcomes that often result, there is little consensus on how they should be identified. Through this research, I hope to increase our understanding of the various elements that might influence who is identified “at risk” and why.

This is my doctoral research project and I will be conducting the research myself under the supervision of my thesis co-supervisors Dr. Jessica Whitley and Dr. Cheryll Duquette of the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa.

I am contacting you because you have important insight into the early assessment and identification practices within your board. I would appreciate a few minutes of your time for a brief interview. If you agree to participate in our research, I would ask you to be involved in an individual interview. It would be conducted by me, on site, and it would be an estimated 30 minutes in length. With your permission it would be audio-taped to ensure accuracy. Upon completion of the data analysis, you will also have an opportunity to review the results of the study summarized draft form.

There are many benefits to this study. This is an opportunity to have your voice and experiences heard, and to engage in reflective practice. Your perspectives will play an important part in potential changes to educational policy and pedagogy as well as future professional development. I hope that you would consider participating in this study and look forward to your input.

If you have any questions you can call me.

Thank you!

Suzanne Gooderham, PhD Candidate
University of Ottawa
145 Jean-Jacques-Lussier, Ottawa, ON, K1N6N5

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Appendix F: Recruitment Message – Teacher and ECE

Title of the Study: Investigating the Elements Influencing the Identification of “At-Risk” Students in the Context of the Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Program in Ontario

Dear Potential Participant,

Greetings! My name is Suzanne Gooderham; I am a doctoral student at the University of Ottawa. I am conducting research into how students in the early primary grades are identified as being “at-risk” for school failure. It has long been recognized that there is group of children who despite reaching school with no obvious medical or behavioural difficulties, struggle academically. While it is agreed that early assessment and identification of these students is important to avoid the poorer long term outcomes that often result, there is little consensus on how they should be identified. Through this research, I hope to increase our understanding of the various elements that might influence who is identified “at risk” and why.

This is my doctoral research project and I will be conducting the research myself under the supervision of my thesis co-supervisors Dr. Jessica Whitley and Dr. Cheryll Duquette of the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa.

I am contacting you because you have important insight into the early assessment and identification practices within your school and classroom. I would appreciate a few minutes of your time for a brief interview. If you agree to participate in our research, I would ask you to be involved in an individual interview. It would be conducted by me, on site, and it would be an estimated 30 minutes in length. With your permission it would be audio-taped to ensure accuracy. Upon completion of the data analysis, you will also have an opportunity to review the results of the study summarized draft form.

There are many benefits to this study. This is an opportunity to have your voice and experiences heard, and to engage in reflective practice. Your perspectives will play an important part in potential changes to educational policy and pedagogy as well as future professional development. I hope that you would consider participating in this study and look forward to your input.

If you have any questions you can call me.

Thank you!

Suzanne Gooderham, PhD Candidate
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Appendix G – Explanation of Abbreviations Used in Tables 3 and 4 (Demographic Information for Participants)

ABQ – Additional Basic Qualification – qualification to teach in other divisions of the education system.

Deaf P 1 – Part one of a series of courses for teaching the deaf

DI coach – A person coaching other teachers in the use of Differentiated Instruction

EA – Educational Assistant

ESL teacher – English as a Second Language teacher

PQP – Principal's Qualification Program

Primary – Additional Qualifications in the Primary Division

Reading Specialist – Additional Qualifications in teaching reading. Specialist

indicates the completion of all three parts of the series of courses.

SERT – Special Education Resource Teacher

SO – Supervisor Officer's Qualifications

Spec. Ed. – Additional Qualifications in Special Education. Offered as a three part series, specialist indication completion of all three parts.

SST – Student Support Teacher

TA Diploma – Teacher Assistant Diploma

Appendix H: Website Review and Document Analysis

Provincial Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education Act • Standards for School Boards' Special Education Plans – 2000
Curriculum Documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full Day Early Learning -Kindergarten Program <i>Draft Version</i> • Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting in Ontario's Schools, First Edition Covering Grades 1 to 12 • Supporting your Child's Learning through Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting
Reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pascal, 2009. With Our Best Future in Mind • Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2006. Early learning for every child today.
Key Terms/ Ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assessment, assessment methods • curriculum expectations • at-risk • early intervention • early identification • evaluation • provincial standards

Appendix I: Research Questions, the Codes, and the Interview Questions

Information				
	CODES	Interview Questions		
		BP	SA	T/ECE
Contextual (context and background)				
Research Questions				
What are the elements influencing who is identified as at-risk in the Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program in Ontario?				
1. What are the system requirements and /or expectations for assessing and identifying at-risk students?	AR – B, IDP – B, IDP – S	2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 11	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10
Intervention strategies	IS – B	9	9	9
2. What assessments are being carried out at the school and classroom level and how are they being used to identify students at-risk.	A – S, A – C		6, 10	2, 3, 11
Intervention strategies	IS – S, IS – C	9	9	9
3. What are the beliefs and knowledge surrounding the assessment and identification of at-risk students at the various levels of the school system?	A-R C A-R CM	1, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11	1, 5, 7, 8, 10	1, 2, 6, 8
4. To what extent are the conditions present that would allow for the emergence of a shared understanding regarding the identification of at-risk students and what it means for a student to be at-risk?	A-R D C, A-R D S	3, 4, 5	12	12
Parents influence on identification	P			

BP – Interview Guide for Board Personnel
 SA – Interview Guide for School Administration
 T/ ECE – Interview Guide for Teacher and ECE

Appendix J: Interview Guide for Board Administrators

Introduction and Background

- Explain the purpose of the research – thank participant for agreeing to be involved
- Review informed consent, ask about audio-taping, and sign letter
- Gather background demographic information:
Age/position/ years of experience in your current position/ other relative experience/ education – training (degree (s)/ diploma(s))/ AQ and or other courses/ preparation for FDELKP (PD/ course)

Interview Questions:

1. When you think of young students that might be at-risk for school failure, what characteristics or difficulties come to mind? (3)
2. What, if any, assessments/ screening instruments do you use on entry to Kindergarten? (1)
3. Please describe the boards' protocol for the identification of "at-risk" students in the early primary grades.(1,4)
 - What assessments are done? When/ how often? Who is responsible for testing?
4. How long has it been in place? Has it changed since the introduction of the FDELKP?(1,4)
5. What can you tell me anything about how this particular protocol was chosen? (1,3,4)
6. Do you have a system for tracking the progress of students? If so, please describe it. (1)
7. What do you think are the advantages/ disadvantages of this system?(1,3)
 - Focus is more on admin/ practical details/ benefits/ challenges
8. Can you think of students who might still be "at-risk" but not identified by your protocol?
 - Might there be students that are falsely identified as "at-risk"?(3)
9. What mechanisms are in place to provide interventions for students who might be considered "at-risk"? (1)
10. What, if any, connections are there to your Board Improvement plan? (1,3)
11. What changes would you like to see in the future?

Appendix K: Interview Guide for School Administrators

Introduction and Background

- Explain the purpose of the research – thank participant for agreeing to be involved
- Review informed consent, ask about audio-taping, and sign letter
- Gather background demographic information:
Age/position/ years of experience in your current position/ other relative experience/ education – training (degree (s)/ diploma(s))/ AQ and or other courses/ preparation for FDELKP (PD/ course)

Interview Questions:

1. When you think of young students that might be “at-risk” for school failure, what characteristics or difficulties come to mind? (3)
2. What, if any, assessments/ screening instruments do you use on entry to Kindergarten? (1)
3. Please describe the boards’ protocol for the identification of “at-risk” students in the early primary grades and how you are implementing it in your school? (1)
 - What assessments are done? When/ how often? Who is responsible for testing?
4. How long has it been in place? Has it changed since the introduction of the FDELKP? (1)
5. What can you tell me anything about how this particular protocol was chosen? (1,3)
6. Do you have a system for tracking the progress of students? If so, please describe it. (1,2)
7. What do you think are the advantages/ disadvantages of this system? (3)
 - Benefits to students/ challenges in implementation
8. Can you think of students who might still be “at-risk” but not identified by your protocol? Tell me what makes you think they are “at-risk”? (3)
9. What mechanisms are in place to provide interventions for students who might be considered “at-risk”? (1)
10. Are there other assessments that are being used on a regular basis in the school? What are your reasons for using these assessments? (2,3)
11. What, if any, connections are there to your School Improvement plan? (1)
12. What discussion have you had with your staff about “at-risk” students? (4)

Appendix L: Interview Guide for Teachers/ ECE

Introduction and Background

- Explain the purpose of the research – thank participant for agreeing to be involved
- Review informed consent, ask about audio-taping, and sign letter
- Gather background demographic information:
Age/position/ years of experience in your current position/ other relative experience/ education – training (degree (s)/ diploma(s))/ AQ and or other courses/ preparation for FDELKP (PD/ course)

Interview Questions:

1. Think of a student that has been identified as “at-risk”, how were they identified? (3)
 - What assessments were used? Who decided they should be assessed?
2. Think of a student you are concerned about but has not been identified, why are you concerned, why haven't they been identified? (3)
3. What, if any, assessments/ screening instruments do you use on entry to Kindergarten? (1,2)
 - Identify which are board mandated and which are personal choices.
4. Please describe the boards' protocol for the identification of “at-risk” students in the early primary grades and how you are implementing it in your school? (1)
 - What assessments are done? When/ how often? Who is responsible for testing?
5. How long has it been in place? Has it changed since the introduction of the FDELKP? (1)
6. What can you tell me anything about how this particular protocol was chosen? (1,3)
7. Do you have a system for tracking the progress of students? If so, please describe it. (1,2, 3)
 - Identify which are board mandated and which are personal choice.
8. What do you think are the advantages/ disadvantages of this system? (3)
 - Benefits to students/ challenges in implementation
9. What mechanisms are in place to provide interventions for students who might be considered “at-risk”? (1)
10. What, if any, connections are there between the board protocol and to your School Improvement plan?(1)
11. What other assessment methods do you used in your classroom? What are your reasons for using these methods? (2)
12. Have you and your colleagues discussed how you decide who is “at-risk”? Can you tell me about those discussions? (4)



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Appendix M: Consent Form for School Administrator Interviews

Title of Study: Investigating the Elements Influencing the Identification of "At-Risk" Students in the Context of the Full-Day Early Learning - Kindergarten Program in Ontario

Project Description

Greetings! My name is Suzanne Gooderham; I am a doctoral student at the University of Ottawa. I am conducting research into how students in the early primary grades are identified as being 'at risk' for school failure. It has long been recognized that there is group of children who despite reaching school with no obvious medical or behavioural difficulties, struggle academically. While it is agreed that early assessment and identification of these students is important to avoid the poorer long term outcomes that often result, there is little consensus on how they should be identified. Through this research, I hope to increase our understanding of the various elements that might influence who is identified 'at risk' and why.

This is my doctoral research project and I will be conducting the research myself under the supervision of my thesis co-supervisors Dr. Jessica Whitley and Dr. Cheryll Duquette of the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa.

I am contacting you because you have important insight into the early assessment and identification practices within your school. I would appreciate a few minutes of your time for a brief interview. If you agree to participate in our research, I would ask you to be involved in an individual interview. It would be conducted by me, on site, and it would be an estimated 30 minutes in length. With your permission it would be audio-taped to ensure accuracy. Upon completion of the data analysis, you will also have an opportunity to review the results of the study summarized draft form.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any point. You can also ask questions at any time, including during the research. You are also allowed to refuse to answer any questions. If you choose to stop participating, or refuse to answer certain questions, there will be no negative consequences.

There are no risks associated with involvement in this project aside from those experienced in everyday life. There are many benefits to this study. This is an opportunity to have your voice and experiences heard, and to engage in reflective practice. Your perspectives will play an important part in potential changes to educational policy and pedagogy as well as future professional development.

The information that you provide will be strictly confidential, and will be protected to the extent permitted by law. All digital interview data and transcripts will be coded with a number. I will have sole access to the data. They will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and in password-protected electronic files. The data and transcripts will be kept for five years and then deleted and/or shredded.

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The University of Ottawa, Research Ethics Review Board, has approved this

research. Inquiries or any questions dealing with ethical conduct of this research can be addressed to the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research (613) 562-5387 (email: ethics@uottawa.ca). The University of Ottawa requires that its researchers obtain formal consent from those participating in research. Your signature at the bottom of this letter would serve such a purpose.

Any inquiries about the research study should be addressed to Suzanne Gooderham.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is yours to keep. If you agree to participate in the research project please fill out and sign both forms. Thank you for considering my project.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Gooderham
PhD Candidate

Informed Consent

I understand the purpose of the study, and what is required of me, and I agree to participate. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, and that my identity will remain confidential. I am aware that I am free to withdraw at any time, without any negative consequences.

I agree to participate in the study.

I agree to be audiotaped during the interview.

I do not agree audiotaped during the interview.

Participant Name: _____

Participant Signature: _____

Researcher Signature: _____

Date: _____



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Appendix N: Consent Form for Teachers/ ECE Interviews

Title of Study: Investigating the Elements Influencing the Identification of "At-Risk" Students in the Context of the Full-Day Early Learning - Kindergarten Program in Ontario

Project Description

Greetings! My name is Suzanne Gooderham; I am a doctoral student at the University of Ottawa. I am conducting research into how students in the early primary grades are identified as being 'at risk' for school failure. It has long been recognized that there is group of children who despite reaching school with no obvious medical or behavioural difficulties, struggle academically. While it is agreed that early assessment and identification of these students is important to avoid the poorer long term outcomes that often result, there is little consensus on how they should be identified. Through this research, I hope to increase our understanding of the various elements that might influence who is identified 'at risk' and why.

This is my doctoral research project and I will be conducting the research myself under the supervision of my thesis co-supervisors Dr. Jessica Whitley and Dr. Cheryll Duquette of the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa.

I am contacting you because you have important insight into the early assessment and identification practices within your school and classroom. I would appreciate a few minutes of your time for a brief interview. If you agree to participate in our research, I would ask you to be involved in an individual interview. It would be conducted by me, on site, and it would be an estimated 30 minutes in length. With your permission it would be audio-taped to ensure accuracy. Upon completion of the data analysis, you will also have an opportunity to review the results of the study summarized draft form.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any point. You can also ask questions at any time, including during the research. You are also allowed to refuse to answer any questions. If you choose to stop participating, or refuse to answer certain questions, there will be no negative consequences.

There are no risks associated with involvement in this project aside from those experienced in everyday life. There are many benefits to this study. This is an opportunity to have your voice and experiences heard, and to engage in reflective practice. Your perspectives will play an important part in potential changes to educational policy and pedagogy as well as future professional development.

The information that you provide will be strictly confidential, and will be protected to the extent permitted by law. All digital interview data and transcripts will be coded with a number. I will have sole access to the data. They will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and in password-protected electronic files. The data and transcripts will be kept for five years and then deleted and/or shredded.

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The University of Ottawa, Research Ethics Review Board, has approved this research. Inquiries or any questions dealing with ethical conduct of this research can be addressed to the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research (613) 562-5387 (email: ethics@uottawa.ca). The University of Ottawa requires that its researchers obtain formal consent from those participating in research. Your signature at the bottom of this letter would serve such a purpose.

Any inquiries about the research study should be addressed to Suzanne Gooderham.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is yours to keep. If you agree to participate in the research project please fill out and sign both forms. Thank you for considering my project.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Gooderham
 PhD Candidate

Informed Consent

I understand the purpose of the study, and what is required of me, and I agree to participate. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, and that my identity will remain confidential. I am aware that I am free to withdraw at any time, without any negative consequences.

I agree to participate in the study.

I agree to be audiotaped during the interview.

I do not agree audiotaped during the interview.

Participant Name: _____
 Participant Signature: _____
 Researcher Signature: _____
 Date: _____



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Appendix O: Consent Form for Board Personnel Interviews

Title of Study: Investigating the Elements Influencing the Identification of "At-Risk" Students in the Context of the Full-Day Early Learning - Kindergarten Program in Ontario

Project Description:

Greetings! My name is Suzanne Gooderham; I am a doctoral student at the University of Ottawa. I am conducting research into how students in the early primary grades are identified as being 'at risk' for school failure. It has long been recognized that there is group of children who despite reaching school with no obvious medical or behavioural difficulties, struggle academically. While it is agreed that early assessment and identification of these students is important to avoid the poorer long term outcomes that often result, there is little consensus on how they should be identified. Through this research, I hope to increase our understanding of the various elements that might influence who is identified 'at risk' and why.

This is my doctoral research project and I will be conducting the research myself under the supervision of my thesis co-supervisors Dr. Jessica Whitley and Dr. Cheryl Duquette of the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa.

I am contacting you because you have important insight into the early assessment and identification practices within your board. I would appreciate a few minutes of your time for a brief interview. If you agree to participate in our research, I would ask you to be involved in an individual interview. It would be conducted by me, on site, and it would be an estimated 30 minutes in length. With your permission it would be audio-taped to ensure accuracy. Upon completion of the data analysis, you will also have an opportunity to review the results of the study summarized draft form.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any point. You can also ask questions at any time, including during the research. You are also allowed to refuse to answer any questions. If you choose to stop participating, or refuse to answer certain questions, there will be no negative consequences. If you choose to withdraw from the study any data you have contributed will be destroyed immediately.

There are no risks associated with involvement in this project aside from those experienced in everyday life. There are many benefits to this study. This is an opportunity to have your voice and experiences heard, and to engage in reflective practice. Your perspectives will play an important part in potential changes to educational policy and pedagogy as well as future professional development.

The information that you provide will be strictly confidential, and will be protected to the extent permitted by law. All digital interview data and transcripts will be coded with a number. They will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and in password-protected electronic files. The data will be accessible only by me and my supervisors. The data and transcripts will be kept for five years and then deleted.

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and/or shredded.

The University of Ottawa, Research Ethics Review Board, has approved this research. It has also been approved by the school board and the principal of schools involved in the project. Inquiries or any questions dealing with ethical conduct of this research can be addressed to the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research (613) 562-5387 (email: ethics@uottawa.ca). The University of Ottawa requires that its researchers obtain formal consent from those participating in research. Your signature at the bottom of this letter would serve such a purpose.

Any inquiries about the research study should be addressed to Suzanne Gooderham.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is yours to keep. If you agree to participate in the research project please fill out and sign both forms. Thank you for considering my project.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Gooderham
PhD Candidate

Informed Consent

I understand the purpose of the study, and what is required of me, and I agree to participate. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, and that my identity will remain confidential. I am aware that I am free to withdraw at any time, without any negative consequences.

- I agree to participate in the study.
- I agree to be audiotaped during the interview.
- I do not agree audiotaped during the interview.

Participant Name: _____
Participant Signature: _____
Researcher Signature: _____
Date: _____



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Appendix P: Debriefing Message

Title of the Study: Investigating the Elements Influencing the Identification of "At-Risk" Students in the Context of the Full-Day Early Learning - Kindergarten Program in Ontario

Dear Participant,

My name is Suzanne Gooderham and I am a doctoral student at the University of Ottawa. I am conducting research into how students in the early primary grades are identified as being "at-risk" for school failure. It has long been recognized that there is a group of children who despite reaching school with no obvious medical or behavioural difficulties, struggle academically. While it is agreed that early assessment and identification of these students is important to avoid the poorer long term outcomes that often result, there is little consensus on how they should be identified. Through this research, I hope to increase our understanding of the various elements that might influence who is identified "at risk" and why.

I want to thank you for the time, energy and expertise you contributed to the project. It is through the contributions of individuals such as yourselves that we can really get a sense of what is happening in Ontario schools. The information and insight you provided through your interview will serve as an important source of information regarding the understanding of the identification of "at-risk" students in the early primary grades. Your perspectives will play an important part in potential changes to educational policy and pedagogy as well as future professional development.

The information gathered during the project will be incorporated into my doctoral dissertation which will be completed in the Spring of 2013. If you would like a summary of the results, please let me know and I would be happy to provide you with a brief report or presentation.

Any information requests about the ethical conduct of the project can be addressed to the Protocol Officer of the Research Ethics Board at the University of Ottawa, (613) 562-5387 (email: ethics@uottawa.ca).

Thank you again for your participation!

If you have any questions you can call me or email.

Thank you again for your participation.
Sue
Suzanne Gooderham, PhD Candidate

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Appendix Q: Draft School and Classroom Artifact Gathering

Assessment materials

- Formal Assessments
- Assessments for board protocol
- Checklist, Anecdotal notes, Portfolios

Tracking systems

- Tracking wall
- Charts
- Files of student work

Process

- Notes from meetings to discuss assessment and interventions

Evidence of interventions

- Intervention materials
- Designated time for interventions
- Designated personnel for interventions

Evidence of Organizational Support

- Designated space for materials
- Designated time (scheduled) for assessment

Appendix R: The Relation of Themes to Research Questions

Research Questions	Themes
1. What are the system requirements and /or expectations for assessing and identifying at-risk students?	Board Protocol
2. What assessments are being carried out at the school and classroom level and how are they being used to identify students at-risk.	How do we Really Know they are learning Looking at the Whole Child Are there other ways?
2. What assessments are being carried out at the school and classroom level and how are they being used to identify students at-risk.	Who is Getting Help?
3. What are the beliefs and knowledge surrounding the assessment and identification of at-risk students at the various levels of the school system?	Who is at Risk – this is not the same for both Will I have a Friend?(C) / Can they do school?(ML) Are they being supported at Home? Is School a Girl Thing? Are they Making the Grade?
3. What are the beliefs and knowledge surrounding the assessment and identification of at-risk students at the various levels of the school system?	We Do the Board Assessments, but.... Are They a Good Fit? The Not-So Squeaky Wheels Do They Just Need more Time? Will they Be Ready?
4. To what extent are the conditions present that would allow for the emergence of a shared understanding regarding the identification of at-risk students and what it means for a student to be at-risk?	Are They Getting Help? Are we on the same page? Who is Getting Help?