

THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION  
OF SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONAL  
FIRST GRADE PROGRAMS  
IN OKLAHOMA

By

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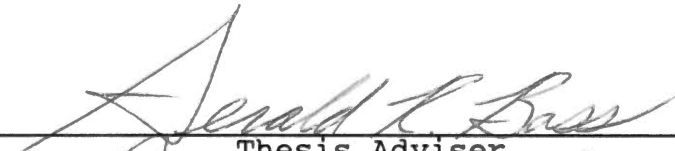
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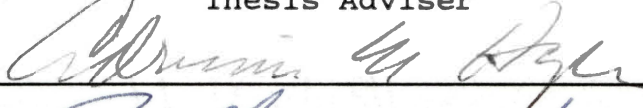
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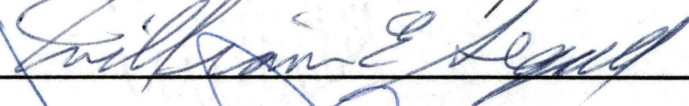
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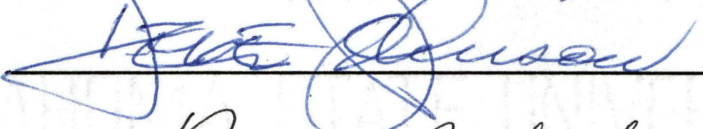
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Don't you know that in every task the most important thing is the beginning, and especially when you have to deal with anything young and tender?

Plato -- *The Republic*

The manner in which young and tender children are placed in schools has been an issue for some time (Zais, 1976). Student placement, one facet of which is referred to as retention, is a problem that has faced education since the inception of public schools in America. Public education, as defined herein, refers to schooling practices occurring in America during the post-Civil War era. Prior to the Civil War, most schools were organized as one-room entities in which students of different ages received instructions from one teacher in one setting. Arrangements such as those mentioned above allowed students to progress from level to level according to academic achievement.

Between the Civil War and World War I, several factors influenced the organization of schools and the placement of students. Some of these factors included the Industrial Revolution, technological advances, and changes in demographics brought on by urbanization, which probably had



the largest single impact on education (Zais, 1976). It is estimated that, at the end of the Civil War, approximately 80% of the population lived in rural areas and on farms. Urbanization, coupled with job complexity and diversity, created the need for an expanded curriculum. The ability to read was no longer enough for educational achievement. Courses and subject areas such as math, accounting, and writing became essential as survival skills in the cities (Zais, 1976). Traditional content areas such as English and math were given a more practical slant while the less traditional areas such as typewriting, stenography, and bookkeeping began to evolve as a part of the standard curriculum.

With an increasingly complex curriculum came the stated need to place students in groups according to some criteria (Zais, 1976). In the one-room schoolhouse, the "three R's" dominated the curriculum. However, with the expansion of curriculum and increased student enrollment in concentrated areas, one teacher could no longer meet the needs of all students. Organizationally, this led to the division of students into groups for strictly logistical purposes. The need to differentiate between students according to academic progress brought about leveling or placing in graded levels. For want of a better method, chronological age was most frequently used.

In the one-room school, retention posed no problem

since students who were unable to perform as well as their peers would merely do more work in the same setting, with the same students. However, in the graded school, non-achieving students would be left behind at the end of the academic year if unable to function on the same level as their peers. Traditionally, placement was accomplished by arranging students into groups according to chronological age, a method which is still used in the majority of schools in the United States today (Manning & Manning, 1981).

If critical decisions are to be made regarding promotion and retention of students, the respective ability levels of individuals should be identified (Medway & Rose, 1984). Thus, integral to the issue of student placement is the method by which ability, or achievement, is measured. Spurred at least in some part by reports such as The National Commission on Excellence in Education's A Nation at Risk (1983), much attention has been focused on the application and results of achievement and competency tests. One of the specific recommendations of the National Commission on Excellence in Education was that standardized achievement tests be given at "major transition points" from one level of schooling to another. According to the Commission, these tests would serve three purposes:

- a) certify the student's credentials;
- b) identify the need for remedial intervention;  
and
- c) identify the opportunity for advanced or accelerated work (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 28).

Much of the public attention in recent years has been focused on the achievement of older children, particularly teenagers. This has been seen by some educators, particularly the proponents of early childhood education, as a "band aid" approach (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1989). They have seen the goal of early childhood education as the placement of students according to their developmental maturity as opposed to chronological age (Ilg, 1978).

One of the early proponents of the concept of developmental readiness and the placement of students according to developmental readiness was Dr. Arnold Gesell. Over a period of 40 years, Dr. Gesell and his co-workers at the Yale Clinic of Child Development derived norms of child behavior through clinical observations. Although children learn at different rates, there were found to be certain behaviors that could be used as indicators of school readiness. However, these indicators have seldom been recognized or accepted in public schools as a standard by which all children should be measured (Ames, Gillespie, & Streff, 1972). It has therefore been the belief of individuals dedicated to the concept of developmental readiness that young children, primarily those between the ages of three and eight years of age, should be placed in school based on maturity level, not chronological age.

In recent years, early childhood educators have developed and implemented programs such as transitional

first grades or other alternative placement programs. Supporters of these programs have sought to provide an additional grade step between kindergarten and first grade, thereby allowing children who are not developmentally prepared for first grade to have an opportunity to mature for another year (Ostrowski, 1988).

#### Statement of the Problem

According to a 1985 study conducted by the Oklahoma State Department of Education, transitional first grade programs had been implemented in approximately 35% of Oklahoma's public school districts. However, there were no State Department of Education guidelines for the implementation or operation of such programs. Great care may have been taken in some districts to insure that both developmentally appropriate practice and curriculum were integrated into transitional first grade programs, whereas in other districts a more conventional, structured approach may have been used. Another area of difference may be teacher selection. In some districts, teacher assignment may have been based on district need rather than a teacher's individual area of expertise. Therefore, the problem possibly inherent to many transitional first grade programs in the State of Oklahoma concerns the lack of standardization of placement, curriculum, and staffing, key elements of the programs.

The investigative purpose of this study was to examine four areas (decision to implement, student placement, teacher assignment, and curriculum) of primary importance to the success of transitional first grade programs and to identify commonalities that exist among those programs. Specifically, four successful transitional first grade programs were studied. Research questions which guided this study were as follows:

1. Who was involved in the selection of the transitional first grade program as an alternative method of placement and what factors led to the development of that program?

2. How was student placement determined and who was involved in that determination?

3. What were the processes and criteria for teacher selection?

4. Who determined the curriculum materials that were chosen and why was this selection made?

#### Significance of the Study

All schools, no matter what their demographic characteristics, are confronted with the same basic problems in forming transitional first grade programs. In implementing this curriculum change, it is important that some method of program standardization be identified to provide similarly appropriate educational experiences for

each student. By investigating the areas in question, an attempt was made to identify trends or patterns in the decision making process used in developing transitional first grade programs. These patterns and other findings may be beneficial to the State Department of Education and to local school districts in their efforts to formulate guidelines for the organization and standardization of transitional first grade programs in Oklahoma and elsewhere.

#### Limitations of the Study

Application of the findings and conclusions from this study may be limited because of the following.

1. The study was limited to Oklahoma schools and included an examination of only four programs in the State.
2. There were no direct classroom observations.
3. Findings and conclusions of this study were based on personal interviews with teachers and administrators and, as such, may have been influenced by personal beliefs, history, and maturation.

#### Definition of Selected Terms

The following definitions of selected terms serve to promote a better understanding of this study:

Transitional first grade is a special intermediary grade which was created for children who have completed kindergarten but who are not developmentally ready to be

promoted to first grade.

Developmental readiness philosophy operates from the belief that each child is a unique individual and readiness for any given task is dependent upon the biological-maturational make-up of the child (Carll & Richards, 1983).

Developmentally appropriate curriculum involves the organization of subject areas around themes so as to integrate all domains of development: physical, social, emotional, and cognitive (Elkind, 1989).

Early childhood is defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children as the years from birth through age eight.

Developmentally appropriate practices are those classroom activities involving teachers and/or students which are based upon the developmental readiness philosophy and a developmentally appropriate curriculum.

Overplacement refers to the placement of children in grade levels beyond their capability.

#### Summary

This study was focused on four primary areas regarding the implementation and development of transitional first grade programs in Oklahoma. The investigative purpose of the study was to identify commonalities that existed among districts having successful transitional programs. The results of this study may assist in the development of

guidelines which could be established by the State Department of Education, or by local school districts, for use in planning or implementing transitional first grade programs.

Chapter II contains a review of literature relevant to the topic of transitional first grade programs. A description of the research method is provided in Chapter III. Chapter IV contains a report of the findings, while the conclusions, recommendations, and commentary are included in Chapter V.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The early stages of this study were focused on a review of the relevant literature supportive of the topic. The following summary of that review is divided into three major sections: a historical perspective of public education outlining the development of the structured facilities called schools, the theoretical foundations upon which the transitional first grade concept has been based, and a review of selected transitional first grade programs which have been implemented in American public schools.

#### Historical Perspective

Appropriate student placement has been a problem faced by educators since the beginning of formal schooling in America. Although the Quincy Grammar School, founded in 1848 in Boston, Massachusetts, was the first graded elementary school, organizationally, prior to about 1870, public schools were largely one-room entities comprised of students of varying ages and abilities. Achievement in the one-room schoolhouse was determined by the student's progress through a series of texts (Lehr, 1982). The

student was allowed to move to a higher level, or grade, only as material was mastered (Thompson, 1980).

However, with the dawning of the Industrial Revolution and the demographic changes which occurred as a result, schools began to undergo radical organizational changes (Jarvis & Wooten, 1966). Schools became much more complex in their organization and standardized with their system of classifying students. By 1870, the majority of schools were structured around graded textbooks and leveled classrooms (Dexter, 1922). Leveling (placement) was initially determined, as it still is now, by chronological age. Students were started in school at age five or six and were retained if they did not learn the material at each grade level (Thompson, 1980). Very little attention was given to individual differences in ability or learning rate. It has been estimated that approximately 50% of all students during the period from 1840 to 1930 were retained at least once before reaching the eighth grade (Medway & Rose, 1984). During the Depression years, an attempt was made to make school more desirable in order to try to get students to stay in school rather than drop out and search for employment. This trend continued through the 1950s and 1960s. Schools, through grouping and individualized instruction, began to address individual differences and reduce academic failure (Medway & Rose, 1984). Programs that attempted to address self-concept and feelings of

self-worth were inserted into the curriculum. Retention, at that point, was based more on age, social and emotional maturity, home life, and student interest than on grades or test scores alone. Thus, the practice of "social promotion" came into being (Medway & Rose, 1984). That trend continued into the 1970s when achievement test scores began to decline and critics of public education blamed social promotion as the major cause (Lehr, 1982).

During the 1950s, a single event occurred that probably had more influence on public education than anything else in recent history: the Russians' successful launch of Sputnik. The ramifications of that event created a concern that public education in the United States was "behind" and a sense of urgency to get "caught up." This fear led to the escalation of demands for an increased output, or production, of students highly skilled in math and science (Elkind, 1988). The schools were also pressured to approach learning from a more scientific, product-oriented model. Elkind (1985) compared the resulting educational system in the United States with an industrial system.

It has become too product oriented and has ignored the workers. By pressing for even faster, more efficient production, the needs of the workers--self-esteem, pride in their work, and a sense of accomplishment--suffer. The result is shoddy workmanship, absenteeism, and lack of commitment to job and the industry. The school's response to push children even harder is bound to fail (p. 68).

Two new phrases surfaced during the 1960s: educational

accountability and minimum competencies. These, as their proponents espoused, were the answer to "functional illiteracy" and the other deficiencies, both perceived and real, in the public school systems (Lehr, 1982). The two terms were interrelated, as one was created by the demand for the other.

Public demand for accountability in education led to the establishment of minimum competency tests and a certain required level of achievement before graduation or promotion (Gutherie, 1981). According to Gutherie, the pressure applied to schools for failing to meet stricter standards and greater accountability was based on the problems of youth unemployment and functional illiteracy. In early 1970, the unemployment rates for youth ranged from 15% to 35%. Critics of public education blamed the schools for failing to develop communication and other job-related skills (Gutherie, 1981).

Through the 1970s and into the 1980s, much more emphasis was placed on the development of methods to measure minimum competencies as a means of insuring accountability of the educational system to the public. The use of competency testing originated in Oregon in 1972 with a State Board of Education proposal recommending a testing program. The idea quickly spread to other states and was generally linked to graduation and/or promotion (Gutherie, 1981). Much emphasis has recently been placed on the development of

a test of minimum competencies for graduating high school seniors. In Oklahoma, for example, students graduating in 1992 and beyond will be required to pass a test of minimum skills in order to receive a diploma (Oklahoma House Bill 1017, 1990). Those students unable to successfully pass the examination will be given a "certificate of completion" rather than a high school diploma.

This primary emphasis on addressing the achievement levels of older students has been described as a "band aid" approach to the problem (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1989). Beadle (1980) stated that, by the time they reach the eighth grade, students will have already developed 75% of the skills that they will ever acquire. The emphasis on changing the achievement level of students must then be in starting students correctly in those young and tender years.

#### Developmental Readiness

The conceptual base for the developmental readiness movement has been grounded in the belief that the "average child" is a statistical concept and does not actually exist (Carll & Richards, 1977). Developmental readiness is thus a belief that all individuals are unique in their intellectual, physical, social, and developmental growth. There are, however, certain developmental stages through which all children can be expected to progress as they grow. The review of literature revealed that different observers

have identified the stages by different names and that the descriptions of the stages vary in length, content, and complexity according to the researcher's technique and/or purpose (Morse & Wingo, 1962).

The developmental readiness concept had its beginning in the theories of Jean J. Rousseau (1712-1778), Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), and Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852). Their overall philosophy was one of unfoldment. They believed that, as they grew and matured, children unfolded what nature had enfolded within them. As the directors of their own growth process, children would demonstrate readiness for new growth when the time was right (Bigge, 1983). According to Bigge, Rousseau wrote that the best education for the child was the education that least hampered the development of the pupil's natural ways.

Pestalozzi, a Swiss, was influenced by Rousseau, particularly in regards to education of the poor. He developed a home for paupers and a school for refugees. Pestalozzi believed that school should directly involve the child and suggested methods appealing to the senses (Bigge, 1983).

Froebel coined the term kindergarten, meaning "garden of children." He believed that children should be allowed to play, but that play could be arranged for them by teachers in a manner that would develop their minds, bodies, and senses. Froebel, believing that older boys' problems

were rooted in earlier experiences, admitted boys as young as three years of age to his school. Later, Froebel's writings provided the philosophy for the kindergarten movement in America (Bigge, 1983).

Erick Erickson (1963) described personality development using the depigenetic principle:

each stage of development has a time of special ascendancy. Anything that grows has a ground plan, and . . . out of the ground plan the parts arise, each part having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole (Erickson, 1963, p. 92).

According to Erickson's plan of development, four to five year old children are characterized by the conflict of initiative versus guilt. Thus, children should be given freedom to explore and experiment. Adults should promote initiative also by responding positively to children's questions. If children think their activities and questions are pointless, they may feel guilty and develop poor self-concept (Erickson, 1963).

Robert J. Havighurst (1952) defined developmental tasks as those tasks arising at or about a certain period in life when a person must learn to be healthy, happy, and productive. When the concepts and materials presented coincide with the developmental maturity of the individual, then "teachable moments" occur. According to Havighurst, if concepts are presented too early, they may confuse children and create feelings of inferiority.

Probably one of the most widely recognized names in the

area of developmental philosophy is that of Jean Piaget. Piaget believed that maturation is a sequential, individualized process and that students progress, or mature, at different rates (Almy, Chittenden, & Miller, 1966).

Piaget (1979) wrote that human beings inherit two basic tendencies: organization and adaptation. The intellectual processes seek a balance through "equilibration," a form of self-regulation that stimulates children to bring coherence and stability to their view of the world around them. He described the following four periods of cognitive development: (a) sensory-motor intelligence, (b) pre-operational thought, (c) concrete operational, and (d) formal operations. Piaget proposed that, in progressing through the pre-operational stage which lasted until approximately seven years of age, children should be allowed to choose their own learning experiences and learning experiences should be individualized.

In the realms of education . . . students should be allowed a maximum of activity on their own, directed by means of materials which permit their activities to be cognitively useful. In the area of logico-mathematical structures, children have real understandings only of what they invent themselves, and each time that we try to teach them something too quickly, we keep them from reinventing it themselves. Thus, there is no good reason to try to accelerate this development too much: the time which seems to be wasted in personal investigation is really gained in the construction of methods (Almy, Chittenden, & Miller, 1966, p. 6).

An organization which has greatly affected the



developmental philosophy is the Gesell Institute for Child Development (Carll & Richards, 1983). Originally a part of the Yale Clinic of Child Development, the Gesell Institute has supported research on children's developmental stages since 1956. The basic philosophy postulated at the Gesell Institute is that instruction should be child-centered and based on individual needs. The philosophy of its founder, Dr. Arnold Gesell, and his proteges has operated from the following constructs.

1. Growth is orderly, structured and predictable.
2. All children have their own rates and patterns of growth particular to them. . . .
3. Children are total action systems, their physical, social, emotional, and intellectual components depending upon and supporting each other. . . .
4. Readiness for any given task has its basics in the biological-maturational make-up of the child. . . .
5. Educational programs should be developed for the child based on where the child is now, not based on where one feels the child ought to be. . . .
6. Each child should be respected as a total person (Carll & Richards, 1982, pp. 117-119).

The Gesell Institute philosophy regards a child's emotional, social, physical, and adaptive capacities as being of equal importance as intelligence to human development. According to Gesell, to define school readiness as having to do only with intelligence contradicts established research (Meisels, 1987). School readiness, as defined by the Gesell Institute, is the capacity to learn and cope with the school environment, while school success

is the ability to learn and have enough energy reserve to be a competent growing human in all areas of living. The Gesell Institute staff have, through observations of young children over extended periods of time, devised two norm-referenced testing instruments, the Gesell School Readiness Screening and the Gesell Preschool Assessment, which they consider to accurately measure the developmental growth of a child using tasks most closely associated with maturational-related aspects of school readiness. The institute sponsors seminars at various times annually to train people to administer these testing instruments.

If a child is found to be developmentally young for kindergarten, for example, educational settings more consistent with the child's development can be considered. A longitudinal study by Ames and Ilg (1964) established a positive relationship between kindergarten readiness and sixth grade achievement. They found that the Gesell testing instruments primarily measured maturity and not intelligence or experiences. Kaufman (1971) reported that, although test interpretation is qualitative in nature, examiners interpreted results similarly with an interrater reliability of .87. This was significant in that it demonstrated standardization of scoring procedures.

Although the Gesell School Readiness Screening and the Gesell Preschool Assessment are used as tools in many schools to identify and place young children, they are

subject to some controversy. Shepard and Smith (1988) contested the value and reliability of these testing instruments and noted that others had also criticized the tests as lacking evidence of reliability and validity and suffering from inadequate norms. While acknowledging that these tests are being widely used across the United States, Shepard and Smith (1988) wrote that the popularity of these tests was derived from their pleasing philosophy and because educators take at face value the claim that use of the test is supported by research.

The developmental readiness philosophy has thus been founded on the belief that children, being unique individuals, mature at different rates and experience different stages of growth. In addition, children have their own rates and styles of movement up the developmental ladder. Therefore, according to that philosophy, introduction of activities and experiences prior to children's ability to synthesize such material may lead to anger, frustration, and a feeling of inferiority.

#### Transitional First Grades

The practice of providing an additional year of education between kindergarten and first grade is the conceptual base for the following review of transitional programs. The programs displayed a variety of titles, including transitional, non-graded, junior first grade,

open, and ungraded. These programs focused on students who, although they were chronologically eligible to be promoted, demonstrated a level of skills below that considered as necessary to operate successfully on a first grade level. According to a study done by Ames and Ilg (1979), an overplaced child will manifest certain characteristics such as frequently experiencing difficulty separating from the parent, being disruptive in the classroom setting, and lacking appropriate social integration skills at school and at home.

Proponents of the developmental readiness philosophy believe that, by placement in situations in which they are unable to perform (overplacement), students have a greater chance of experiencing feelings of inferiority, frustration, and anger (Ames & Ilg, 1979). By providing an alternative to the regular lock-step classroom routine, educators have hoped to provide, among other things, an opportunity for a child to mature one more year before being placed in the first grade. The programs occurring between kindergarten and first grade have several things in common. They provide stronger educational direction for students during the primary developmental stages. According to Corsine and Ignas (1979), transitional programs extend the time frame for students whose developmental patterns are slower or uneven. In addition, they provide alternatives to a pass/fail organizational pattern in schools. Finally, as

noted by Entwisle and Haydnk (1978), transitional programs provide for learning experiences that deal with all areas of human growth, but with major emphasis on the academic skills in reading and math.

#### Aumsville, Oregon

In order to help students found to be "at risk" in a standard first grade program, the Aumsville School District, in 1982, initiated a readiness program. The program was designed to address students' emotional, social, physical, and academic growth prior to entering the first grade. For these "at risk" students, first grade thus became a two-year program (Pheasant, 1985).

Placement decisions were supported by a variety of assessment data provided through use of the Brigance K & 1 Screening Instrument, Metropolitan Readiness Tests, the Marion ESD Speech and Language Screening Tools, the Gesell School Readiness Screening, and a teacher-constructed screening instrument which was created because teachers wanted additional information use in making their decisions (Pheasant, 1985). In the readiness room, teachers utilized the state-adopted textbooks and recommended curriculum areas. However, when provided with textbooks, a readiness strand was used. Although students studied the same skills as presented in the first grade, alternative approaches and activities provided enough variation so that, when they went

to regular first grade, they did not exactly repeat the same work. In addition, the curriculum stressed the development of motor skills, social skills, and positive self-concept (Pheasant, 1985).

Students who completed the readiness class were not only prepared to successfully complete first grade work but were expected to be average or above and to be leaders rather than followers. These expectations were fulfilled to a great degree (Pheasant, 1985). Because it was school district policy not to label students, longitudinal records were not available. Nevertheless, informal monitoring of student progress showed that they had not encountered discipline or academic problems and, for the most part, were achieving in the average or upper groups.

#### Sioux Falls, South Dakota

The Sioux Falls School District, in 1970, initiated an alternative placement program to serve kindergarten students who because of physical, emotional, or behavior factors were identified as not ready to move on to a traditionally structured first grade (Solem, 1981). Their Junior First Grade was designed to provide an additional year of growth for those students. Assignment of students to the class was based upon children's scores on the Yellow Brick Road Screening Test, The Metropolitan Readiness Test, and an informal Pupil Behavior Rating Scale for each child. When

specific cases warranted, school psychologists conducted further testing and parents were involved in the final enrollment decision.

The curriculum was designed to improve reading and math readiness, to develop oral language, and to enable students to better listen and follow directions. Activities accentuated gross-motor and eye/hand coordination. Teachers and staff members worked to nurture social and emotional maturity and self-reliance and to improve children's self-esteem. In May of 1978, 25% of the first graders who had previously been in Junior First Grade ranked in the top quartile of their first grade classes, 50% were in the second and third quartiles, and 25% were in the lowest quartile (Solem, 1981). By 1980, 28% of former Junior First Grade students ranked in the top quartile, 70% ranked in the second and third quartiles, and only 2% ranked in the lowest quartile. All of these youngsters had been identified in kindergarten as likely to experience failure in the first grade.

#### Other Programs

Another program initiated to provide an additional year for developmental growth was located in Polk Elementary School in Milam, Tennessee. Wallace Burnett, the principal, reported that, although specific test data were not available, he believed that many students who otherwise

might have needed special education services had been able to advance successfully with the help of this program (Burnett, 1983).

A suburban school district near Rochester, New York, adopted Transition Classrooms as an alternative placement option for children not ready to enter first grade after spending one year in kindergarten. Selection for the Transition Classroom was two-fold, with observation and evaluation by the teacher in the regular kindergarten setting provided as the primary source supported by results of testing by the school counselor who used a battery of screening instruments. Parents of those children recommended for placement were invited to observe in the Transition Classroom prior to placement and to confer with both teacher and counselor. The parent could refuse such transitional classroom placement. The curriculum was flexible, and adaptable, to accommodate children with varying language, motor, auditory, visual, and social deficiencies. A detailed, individualized treatment plan was designed to focus on specific problem areas identified in the screening process. One unique aspect of this program was the option for students to rejoin their fellow classmates in the second grade if sufficient progress had been made (Dolan, 1982).

The review of alternative programs revealed that these programs were highly localized, meaning that there were as



many different interpretations of needs and philosophies as there were programs and there was no standard blueprint. Steere (1972) reported that few studies of these programs included an adequate description of the design. The studies presented in this chapter were indicative of data screened for the study.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHOD

The investigative purpose of this study was to examine four areas (decision to implement, student placement, teacher assignment, and curriculum) of primary importance to the success of transitional first grade programs and to identify commonalities that exist among those districts. Specifically, four successful transitional first grade programs were studied. Research questions which guided this study were as follows:

1. Who was involved in the selection of the transitional first grade program as an alternative method of placement and what factors led to the development of that program?

2. How was student placement determined and who was involved in that determination?

3. What were the processes and criteria for teacher selection?

4. Who determined the curriculum materials that were chosen and why was this selection made?

This chapter contains three sections. The first section contains a description of the population and sample

identified for this study. An overview of the development and control of the interview protocol is provided in the second segment. The final section contains a review of the data collection and analysis procedures.

### Population and Sample

In 1985, the Oklahoma State Department of Education conducted a survey of all public school districts in the state. Of the 508 districts from which responses were received, 177 (35%) were identified as having transitional first grade classes. A panel of experts then identified 12 of those districts as having implemented successful transitional first grade programs. The experts involved in the survey included faculty members in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Oklahoma State University and the early childhood education coordinator for the Oklahoma State Department of Education. The list was confirmed by means of subsequent telephone conversations with the members of the expert panel. Four sample districts were then selected from the list on the basis of their geographical proximity to Oklahoma State University and thus their common location in the northeast quadrant of Oklahoma.

The community in which District A was located had a population of approximately 40,000 people. The school system was comprised of approximately 2,600 students divided among 10 attendance centers, 6 of which were elementary

schools. Each elementary building had a full-time administrator and contained grade levels K-5. The transitional first grade classrooms had been located in two of the elementary schools since the inception of the program. The programs were implemented in August of 1988 and, at the time of this study, had been in existence for two years.

District B, with a community of about 6,000 and a student population of nearly 2,400, was located near a large metropolitan area. The district had five elementary buildings with a full-time administrator in each building. Just as in District A, grade levels K-5 were housed in each elementary school. Transitional first grades had been in existence in District B for the seven years preceding this study. The program originated in one building and was expanded during the following two years to include all elementary attendance centers in the district.

District C, situated in a community of approximately 16,000 people, had a student population of nearly 1,900. This district had six elementary attendance centers with grade levels 1-6 in each of five buildings. The sixth school was made up of kindergarten classes alone. Transitional first grade programs, implemented in District C in August of 1984, were all housed in one building. Students identified for placement in the program were bused from throughout the district to that particular attendance

center.

District D, with a student population of nearly 3,100, was located in a community with a population of approximately 26,000 people. This district had eight elementary schools. The transitional first grade programs were initiated in two buildings in August of 1979 and had since been implemented at four other sites. The elementary schools in this district were organized on a K-6 basis with a full-time administrator in each building.

#### Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was designed specifically for this study with the cooperation of the thesis advisor and various other individuals associated with Oklahoma State University and the Oklahoma State Department of Education. The protocol was designed to be open-ended in that it posed broad questions relative to the four areas of research, but also incorporated more specific follow-up questions to promote discussion. The broad questions were based upon the topics identified as key elements in the relevant professional literature. A copy of the protocol is contained in Appendix A.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

In-depth, on-site personal interviews were conducted with persons identified as individuals involved in the

conception, organization, and/or implementation in each of the four districts' transitional first grade programs. Those interviewed included superintendents and/or assistant superintendents, building principals, and teachers. It was originally intended that parents would also be interviewed. However, it was found that parents had not been involved in the development of the programs and, therefore, none were interviewed. Interviews were also conducted with Oklahoma State Department of Education staff members Judy Franks-Doebler, Coordinator of Early Childhood, and Mary Reid, Executive Director of the Curriculum Section. The content of those interviews was primarily focused on the status of transitional first grade programs currently in place in the State of Oklahoma.

Upon completion of the interviews, the information gathered was organized first in a sequential manner by district and then organized according to the topics identified by the research questions. Analysis activities focused on the identification of similarities and differences among the four districts.

#### Summary

The target population for this study included all public school districts in the State of Oklahoma which had transitional first grade programs as reported by the State Department of Education as a result of a 1985 study. Out of

a total of 277 such districts, 4 were selected for this study. The selection of these districts was based primarily upon the success of their programs and then upon their geographical proximity to Oklahoma State University. The interview protocol was designed with the cooperation of the thesis advisor and various other individuals at both Oklahoma State University and the Oklahoma State Department of Education. The protocol posed broad questions followed by more specific follow-up questions. Data were obtained through on-site interviews with individuals identified as having been instrumental in the planning and/or implementation of transitional programs in these districts. The analysis of data focused upon the similarities and differences among the districts.

## CHAPTER IV

### PRESENTATION OF DATA

This chapter is divided into two separate sections. The first section contains a presentation of the data gathered in response to the research questions posed earlier in this study. The second section contains a comparison of the similarities and the differences among the transitional first grade programs in the four selected districts.

#### Findings

The data gathered during the interviews were organized by district and then analyzed according to themes developed from the research questions. These data for the four districts are presented in the following portions of this chapter, organized by the themes of inception and development, placement of students, teacher assignment, support, and program.

#### Inception and Development

In each of the four districts, the impetus for the establishment of a transitional first grade program came from discussions between classroom teachers and their



building administrators. In District A, two experienced kindergarten teachers, in separate buildings, began to discuss concerns they had regarding an alternative to retention for kindergarten students. The building principals shared the concern reported by the teachers and were not only receptive to suggestions made by the teachers but also encouraged and assisted them in searching for a viable alternative.

Similarly, in Districts B and C, teachers were concerned with the need to help students who, by the time they had finished a regular year of kindergarten, were deemed "not ready" to be promoted to first grade. In one of the districts, the teacher initiating the concern was an experienced first grade teacher while, in the other district, that role was performed by an experienced kindergarten teacher. In District D, the kindergarten teacher had been trained to administer the developmental readiness test produced by the Gesell Institute. As a result of that training, she believed that she was better able to identify children who were not developmentally ready to be promoted to first grade.

In District A, the teachers went first to their building principals to discuss the prospect of developing an alternative method of placement for those kindergarten students considered for possible retention. The principals were receptive to the idea and, in turn, approached the

assistant superintendent for special programs. They discussed common concerns and the desirability of examining transitional first grade as a possible option for students not ready to successfully accomplish first grade work. The two administrators then began to gather pertinent information pertaining to alternative placement programs. The assistant superintendent, after assembling the information gathered by the building principals and visiting with administrators in other districts which had transitional first grade programs, approached the superintendent seeking approval for the program. The superintendent presented the proposal to the school board and indicated that, with their approval, the district would implement the project, but only if sufficient grant monies could be obtained to offset the costs. The transitional first grade was thus the only alternative which was examined in that district. Eight months transpired from the first presentation to the building principal to implementation of the program.

A remedial kindergarten program had originally been considered in District B in an attempt to provide an appropriate program for "at risk" kindergarten students. That program had not been implemented since teachers and administrators alike were concerned that testing students after only one week of school would not provide a valid assessment of ability. The kindergarten teacher did,

however, begin gathering information regarding other alternatives, primarily by visiting with teachers in other districts having established transitional first grade programs. Particular attention was paid to the topics of curriculum and placement and to personal observations by the teachers in those programs. The teacher and the building administrator then approached the assistant superintendent with her findings. At the direction of the assistant superintendent, the teacher continued with the investigation and, ultimately, the implementation of the program with the cooperation and involvement of the elementary counselors who were involved only in the recommendation of screening instruments. The data gathered were then presented by the assistant superintendent to the school board which gave permission to proceed with the project. The transitional first grade program began operation six months after its inception.

The origin of the transitional program in District C also focused on a kindergarten teacher who believed that an existing program was not effectively meeting the needs of all students. Prior to any attempt to address the issue of developmental maturity in young children, District C had experimented with two other programs, the Joplin Plan and "Jump Start" kindergarten. The Joplin Plan (tracking) originally had been implemented as a method for addressing the needs of students with varying achievement levels. Each

building had three sections at each grade level. The students were divided into leveled groups for reading and math instruction. At a pre-determined time each day, many students thus left their homerooms and went to other rooms for reading and math instruction. The kindergarten and first grade teachers, however, did not believe that this alternative placement procedure was addressing the cause of the problem. The kindergarten teacher, having been trained by the Gesell Institute to administer their readiness test, believed that developmental immaturity was one of the major causes of low student achievement. As a result of her conversation with the building administrator, a "Jump Start" kindergarten program had been started.

This "Jump Start" program, for students deemed to be "at risk," was offered during the summer between kindergarten and first grade. It was designed to give students additional help in preparation for first grade. However, due to low participation, the program failed. Attendance was voluntary and the students needing this service frequently did not attend.

In retrospect, the teacher having been involved in both of those programs, as well as the transitional first grade classroom now in place, reported that these programs had focused on the symptom rather than the problem. The teacher then approached the principal and the assistant superintendent to request permission to investigate

alternative methods which might be designed to meet the needs of those students who were finishing kindergarten but were not yet ready for first grade. The primary concern was early childhood development.

Although the assistant superintendent had no knowledge of early childhood education, he was supportive of the interest shown in the program by the teachers and by their principal. Three teachers and the building principal subsequently reviewed available literature and visited with teachers in districts already using transitional first grades in an effort to determine possible philosophies, curriculum, and placement activities. After gathering as much information as they considered necessary, the committee of teachers and principals met again with the assistant superintendent to make the recommendation that the program be implemented. Following that meeting, the assistant superintendent presented the proposal to the school board at the next regular monthly meeting. The time span between the first organized discussions and the implementation of the program encompassed 18 months. The teachers interviewed in District C stated that the program had been strongly supported district-wide by both the administration and the teachers.

In District D, the kindergarten teacher and one of the elementary principals shared a concern for students deemed "at risk" at the end of their kindergarten year. As a

result of that concern, and prior to the development of the extended transitional first grade programs, a voluntary supplemental kindergarten program had been initiated. That kindergarten program was held during the summer and, due to poor attendance, failed, as had the "Jump Start" program in District C. Teachers and administrators reported that, even if the pre-kindergarten had been successful, it would not have addressed the problem.

Although the concerned teacher and the principal in District D had not been trained in early childhood education, they believed that developmental immaturity was the common element among those students experiencing difficulties at the end of the kindergarten year. After obtaining information pertaining to developmental readiness through professional publications, the teacher and the principal developed a personal interest in research conducted by the Gesell Institute. They then approached the assistant superintendent in the spring of 1979 and requested permission to investigate alternative placement programs, specifically transitional first grades. The assistant superintendent believed the program had potential and encouraged them to move forward with their investigation. The teacher and the principal worked jointly throughout the spring and early summer gathering relevant literature. In addition to objective data, personal interviews were conducted with teachers and administrators in other

districts having implemented alternative placement programs. As a result of their investigation, the teacher and building principal decided to readdress the issue with the assistant superintendent. The assistant superintendent then presented a proposal for transitional first grade to the board of education and final approval was granted in July of 1984.

While each of the four programs began as a concern of teachers, the school board in each district made the final decision to implement the transitional first grade program. The acceptance in all four cases was attributed to the fact that the programs addressed, as nearly as possible, the problem of developmental immaturity among kindergarten students.

#### Placement of Students

It was obvious in all four districts that a most important feature of the transitional first grade program was student placement. The manner and criteria by which placement decisions were made varied somewhat among the districts. Critical to such decisions were the criteria upon which placement decisions were made, the manner in which parents were informed and involved, and the timeline for the decision process.

Determination of the criteria to be used in making placement decisions was made jointly by the individuals involved in the planning and implementation of all four

programs. In Districts A and C, the staff relied on educators who were already involved in transitional programs for advice on appropriate criteria, while those in Districts B and D initially relied on tests which were already in place, adding additional assessment criteria at later times.

Three common criteria used to determine placement in all four districts were teacher recommendations, Metropolitan Readiness Test scores, and results of the Gesell School Readiness Screening. In Districts B, C, and D, teacher recommendations were weighted higher than the other criteria. In addition to the three common criteria, the placement decisions in District A were supported by the results of the Brigance K & 1 Screening Instrument, the Oklahoma Screening Instrument (in October), a reading modality assessment and parent/teacher conferences. Reading modality was measured using an instrument designed specifically for use in that district by a professor of reading instruction at a state university. Districts B, C, and D used only the three common criteria. Teachers in Districts A, B, and C reported that all placement-related instruments were appropriate for their intended use, while those in District D considered both the Metropolitan and the Gesell to be inadequate if used alone. The teacher and the building principal in that district believed that additional assessment instruments should be utilized.

Parents were involved in placement decisions in all



four programs. In fact, the parent(s) were given the final authority to determine the placement of the child. During the first year the program was implemented in District C, placement was mandatory. However, pressure from the community brought about a change in policy requiring parent permission to be obtained prior to placement in transitional first grade programs. In each program, parents were to be consulted during the kindergarten year, as soon as deficiencies in abilities were noted. However, those contacts generally occurred at regular parent/teacher conferences which were scheduled at the end of the second, third, and/or fourth nine-week periods. The results of tests administered to determine developmental maturity and cognitive ability were generally available at those conferences.

Final decisions relevant to placement were made during April or May in all four districts. District staff members provided parents with the results of previously administered tests as well as teacher recommendations and an overview of the knowledge base by which the final decision should be made. As noted above, however, in all four districts the students were placed in transitional first grade programs only with the approval of their parents.

Reports from Districts A and C indicated that all identified eligible students were enrolled in those programs. In District B, because of parental objections,

only 75% of the identified students were served in the program. While all students identified as being in need of the program in District D could be accommodated, five percent of the parents refused to have their children placed in the program. Class sizes were restricted to 17, 16, 18, and 20 in Districts A through D respectively.

### Teacher Assignment

Teacher selection and assignment varied somewhat among districts. The common practice of advertising vacancies within the district prior to notification to college placement agencies and the State Department of Education had been generally utilized. In two of the districts, B and C, the initial teacher selection was accomplished by listing the vacancy within the district, and then screening and interviewing the internal applicants. In Districts A and D, however, teachers originally involved in the development of the programs had volunteered and were subsequently selected to fill the positions.

### Support

Support for the students, teachers, principals, parents, and others associated with the transitional first grade programs were personified in two ways. Financial support, which will be addressed later in this section, and collegial or interpersonal support were evident through the

involvement of the districts' central administrators. In District A, a monthly opportunity was provided for parents to spend an evening at the school with the teachers and the building principal. The district provided, at no cost to the parents, an evening meal and the consulting services of a child psychologist from the county health department. This allowed parents an opportunity to receive pertinent, factual, first-hand information regarding young children. The assistant superintendent believed strongly enough in the importance of the program that she also attended and participated. On more than one occasion, she even assumed the role of baby-sitter, so that parents could be free to interact with teachers, principals, and the psychologist.

Financial support for the programs varied considerably among districts. District A, as a result of a grant obtained through the Oklahoma State Department of Education, committed \$20,000 to be used for supplies, training, and other needs unique to the program. None of the funds were used to supplant the normal instructional cost associated with the program. In District B, transitional first grades were designated as special programs and, as such, received an additional \$100 per student per year for additional supplies and manipulatives. The teachers were sent to workshops, such as Math-Their Way, at district expense, using funds provided in the same manner as for regular classroom teachers. The teachers in District C initially

received \$2,000 to be used for supplies and manipulatives specifically for the transitional first grade program. They were also encouraged to attend those workshops focusing on methods and materials for teaching "at risk" students. District D provided no monetary support above that which was already budgeted for the regular classroom. In fact, the first year the program was implemented, the teacher was told, "If you can do it with what you have, go ahead." However, leaders of the parent-teacher organization in that school in District D decided to provide support to the transitional first grade program. They provided, over time, a variety of classroom materials to support the program. Overall, administrators reported instructional costs to be comparable to those for other elementary grades, particularly when adjusted for pupil-teacher ratio.

#### Program

Determining and developing curriculum was a shared task within each of the districts with the teachers contributing heavily to program selection. A more accurate term than "curriculum" would be the term "program." The common thread identified among districts involved in this study was that they wanted the transitional first grade programs to be developmental rather than remedial in scope. Therefore, the instructional focus of the programs entailed more than just curriculum as referred to by subject areas alone. Program,

then, included the identification of both curriculum (subject areas) and developmental goals (emotional, physical, intellectual, and social) and their implementation through developmentally appropriate practices.

The programs selected, according to those individuals interviewed for this study, were adopted by the participating districts to include goals in areas outside the realm of commonly identified subject areas. For example, enhancing self-esteem was listed as a primary goal of the programs in Districts B, C, and D. Personnel from District A stated that the major program goal was that children should grow in their weak areas with the development of self-esteem as the second highest priority. They also believed that low self-esteem, immaturity, and poor social skills contribute greatly to the lack of success experienced by those students identified as at risk in kindergarten and, therefore, eligible for transitional first grade programs.

When asked to what extent the Oklahoma Suggested Learner Outcomes influenced the curriculum and goals of the program, individuals from Districts A, B, and D replied that those outcomes were contained in the district curriculum guide and were thus used to identify goals of the program. District C, on the other hand, used the outcomes to help make decisions relative to the program but did not directly incorporate them.

The use of hands-on, activity-oriented programs with a high degree of student involvement were used in curriculum delivery. "Math-Their-Way," for example, focuses entirely on the student's construction of knowledge through the use of manipulatives. Other commercially produced programs such as McMillians' Beginning to Read, Write, and Listen; "Story Starters" by the Write Group; and "Big Books" were purchased by some districts for use in their programs. The commonality of these programs, again, was rooted in the fact that they were centered around high interest and high student involvement and thus were activity-based programs.

#### Comparisons

This portion of the chapter contains an analysis of the data collected in regard to the four transitional first grade programs. The focus was on the identification of similarities and differences which could be used to make comparisons among the programs.

Classroom teachers played key roles in the conception, development, and implementation of the transitional first grade programs in each district. The impetus for all of the programs originated as a result of discussions between classroom teachers and building administrators. As a result of those discussions, other members of the staff, such as counselors and other classroom teachers, became involved with the development of curriculum, selection of materials,

and student assessment. Budgetary allocations were determined by central administration alone, while teacher selection involved both central office and building administrators.

Funding for the programs varied among districts by as much as \$20,000. District A secured a grant that enabled the teachers to purchase anything for which they asked while, in contrast, the teacher prior to the first year of implementation in District D was told, "If you can do it with what you have, go ahead." Support, both in funding and encouragement, did allow the teachers in Districts A, B, and C to attend workshops such as "Math Their Way," Bill Martin Workshops, and workshops promoting the use of the whole language approach to language development. Attendance at these workshops and the ability to purchase materials and manipulatives needed to implement these approaches varied with the amount of money allocated to the program. For example, the teacher in District B attended the workshop for "Math Their Way" but did not have the funds to purchase the manipulatives to implement the practices which would have provided maximum benefits.

Districts B and C had previously attempted other alternative placement programs. Both had centered around a remedial curriculum aimed at those students considered "at risk" in kindergarten. In District C, a program had been implemented during the school year in place of the regular

kindergarten; in District B, it was a summer program. The program in the summer failed due to lack of attendance. The full-year program, in District B, had been discontinued because teachers and administrators believed that it was unfair to assess a kindergartner for such placement after only one week of school. They jointly agreed that the children needed a full year of kindergarten experience and the opportunity to develop social skills through interactions with other students.

As stated earlier, teachers played a key role in the conception, development, and implementation of these programs. It was noted that in no district had parents been involved in any one of these three steps. Administrative support was in strong evidence in each district, even though in District C the teacher completed the majority of the investigative work leading up to the adoption of transitional first grade as an alternative method of placement. In all four districts surveyed, the school board granted the final approval for the programs to be implemented.

In considering the subject of student placement, programs in all four districts, from the beginning, were focused on the developmental readiness and the incorporation of developmentally appropriate practices in both philosophy and methodology. Therefore, student placement was based upon criteria which attempted to assess the students'



intellectual, social, and emotional maturity. With the exception of District A, in which all criteria for placement were perceived to be weighed equally, the teacher's recommendation was the most highly regarded. In addition to such recommendation, the Gesell School Readiness Screening and the Metropolitan Readiness Test were also used in each district.

Parental involvement with the program varied from district to district. In all four districts, parents were informed during the first semester of kindergarten if their child was experiencing difficulty, either emotional, social, or intellectual, via regular parent/teacher conferences. If large enough discrepancies were noted in these areas, parents were asked for permission to test the child for possible learning disabilities as well as to conduct other tests designed to assess developmental maturity. As soon as the results of those tests were obtained, conferences were again held to relay the new information to the parents. After the test results were explained to the parents, the teacher and parent would discuss the placement of the child. In some instances, that could mean special education, transitional first grade, or regular classroom, but in each district the parents made the final placement decision.

It should be noted that during the first year that transitional first grade programs were in place in District C, students were tested and placed in the program without

parental approval. That policy stayed in effect for one year. Following the policy change, parental permission was required prior to placement in the transitional first grade program.

District A went beyond any other district in parent involvement. After placement of the student in the program, the district held monthly support group meetings at each school site. During the monthly meetings, a meal was served at the expense of the district. Parents of students involved in the program were invited to attend and baby-sitters were provided for the younger siblings. Each principal was required to attend and, at some point, the assistant superintendent was there to help provide babysitting services. As another arm of support, a child psychologist from the county health department was placed on contract to attend these meetings. The psychologist answered questions and led discussions pertaining to child development.

In no district surveyed were teachers involved in the interviewing or selection of teachers for the program. In all four districts, the standard procedure for filling vacancies was accomplished by advertising within the district before opening the position to outside applicants. In Districts B and C, a negotiated contract between teachers and administration mandated that procedure; however, in Districts A and D, the teachers involved in the development

of the program volunteered and were hired for the job.

When asked to prioritize the characteristics of individuals being sought to fill the position of a transitional first grade teacher, teachers and administrators alike tended to place higher value on subject knowledge, personality, and experience than on transcripts (grades earned in college) and certification. In District A, B, and C, the principals and the teachers believed that a background and/or training in childhood education would be beneficial; however, the transitional first grade teacher in District C did not believe that such training would help. The transitional first grade teacher in District D replied that, of the five student teachers she had had in her classroom in the last five years, the four that had early childhood training were "by far the best prepared for working with transitional first grade students."

The similarities among districts were evident relative to the design of their programs and selection of and approach to curriculum. The objective of all four programs was to provide an opportunity for a child to grow physically, emotionally, intellectually, and socially at an individual pace. The programs in Districts A, B, and D directly addressed the state suggested learner outcomes with District C using them only as guidelines for making program decisions. The teacher, as in the conception and development of the program, was integral and instrumental in

selecting and developing curriculum. This process was shared, in varying degrees, in each district with the teacher playing an important role.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND COMMENTARY

According to a 1985 study conducted by the Oklahoma State Department of Education, transitional first grade programs had been implemented in approximately 35% of Oklahoma's public school districts. However, there were no State Department of Education guidelines for the implementation or operation of such programs. Therefore, the problem possibly inherent to many transitional first grade programs in the State of Oklahoma concerns the lack of standardization of placement, curriculum, and staffing, key elements of the programs.

The investigative purpose of this study was to examine four areas (decision to implement, student placement, teacher assignment, and curriculum) of primary importance to the success of transitional first grade programs and to identify commonalities that exist between those programs. Specifically, four successful transitional first grade programs were studied. Research questions which guided this study were as follows:

1. Who was involved in the selection of the

transitional first grade program as an alternative method of placement and what factors led to the development of that program?

2. How was student placement determined and who was involved in that determination?

3. What were the processes and criteria for teacher selection?

4. Who determined the curriculum materials that were chosen and why was this selection made?

The population for this study consisted of all transitional first grade programs in the state. For the purpose of this study 4 programs were selected from a list of 12 which had been identified as successful by a group of experts in the field of early childhood education

In seeking to identify shared characteristics of these successful programs, an interview protocol was based upon the research questions. Broad open-ended questions were based upon topics identified as key elements in the relevant professional literature. More specific follow-up questions were designed for clarification of the research questions. The data were obtained by means of on-site interviews held with teachers, administrators, and/or others identified as key participants in the development or operation of the transitional programs.

The study found that no parents had been involved in the initiation, planning, or implementation of the

transitional first grade program in any of the four districts studied. The impetus for the development of these alternative programs had been provided, as the result of personal observations and classroom experiences, by the kindergarten and/or first grade teachers. Prior to the final decision to adopt the proposed program, contact was made with other schools having previously initiated programs such as these. The responsibility for this task was generally shared among teachers, elementary counselors (in some cases), and administrators. In two of the districts, options other than transitional first grades had been tried but had failed for various reasons. The concept of transitional first grade classrooms as an alternative for students experiencing difficulties at the end of kindergarten was thus the result of the collective thoughts, concerns, and efforts of teachers and administrators in each district.

There were no standardized criteria among the districts for the selection of teachers. The procedures used to fill the transitional program teaching position(s) were no different than those used to select teachers for the regular classrooms. In no district were other classroom teachers involved in the selection of the transitional first grade program teacher(s). When questioned about attributes conducive to teaching a transitional first class, responses varied somewhat among teachers and administrators, with

teachers placing more emphasis on personality and subject knowledge. Administrators, while agreeing that personality was an important characteristic, reported that experience dealing with primary age children was also critical.

Student assessment and placement criteria also varied from district to district. However, in each district a combination of teacher input and assessment instruments to measure both cognitive skills and developmental maturity were used to determine student placement. When asked what criteria determined student placement, the first response from each individual in each district, was "teacher recommendation." While individuals in District A stated that all methods of assessment used for student placement were given equal importance, those in Districts B, C, and D reported that teacher input provided the most reliable criterion for placement. Similarities in the testing instruments utilized in student placement were noted between districts with the most prevalent being the Gesell and Metropolitan Readiness tests.

Collegial support for the programs and teachers was extremely high in all districts. All of the teachers interviewed perceived themselves to have been instrumental in the development, and supported in the implementation, of the program. An evening dinner and program, provided at no cost to the parents, was held monthly in District A. Central administrators believed strongly enough in the need



for such an exchange that the assistant superintendent not only attended these gatherings but assumed other various duties in support of the principal and the teacher. In no other district were parents, teachers, and administrators involved in such a continuous support group.

Curriculum for the transitional first grade programs involved more than is commonly identified as curriculum in a regular classroom setting. All of the teachers and administrators reported the belief that their programs were developmental rather than remedial. They all noted, when asked, that the programs in their schools were utilizing developmentally appropriate practices. By using a variety of techniques and approaches in curriculum delivery, teachers in all four districts expressed the belief that student self-esteem would improve through academic success. All of the districts had implemented programs that were hands-on, activity-oriented, with a high degree of student involvement. There were similarities between districts using programs such as "Math-Their-Way" and the use of literature for reading instruction as opposed to basal approaches.

The teacher and the program were supported to the greatest degree in District A. The utilization of a State Department of Education grant in the amount of \$20,000 allowed the teacher and administrators to purchase a wide variety of materials as well as to attend workshops focusing

on the identification and the use of developmentally appropriate practices. Funding in Districts B and D, as noted in Chapter IV, was believed to be inadequate by the teachers.

### Conclusions

The results of this study led to the following conclusions:

1. Transitional first grade programs are being developed and implemented in Oklahoma with little consistency or standardization pertaining to student identification, specialized teacher certification, or curriculum.
2. There is substantial opposition in the literature not only to the retention of students but to any program that offers alternatives to promotion within regular classroom settings.
3. There is a belief among administrators and teachers alike that training in early childhood education enhances the teacher's ability to identify and address the problems associated with developmental immaturity in young children.
4. There is substantial opposition in the literature to the use of the Gesell School Readiness Screening and the Gesell Pre-school Assessment as tools for the identification of developmental immaturity in young children.
5. Teachers who are assigned to developmentally-based

primary grade programs are more likely to have an ordinary elementary teaching certificate. There is little emphasis either on possession of a preschool/early childhood certificate or on the completion of coursework specific to child development.

#### Recommendations

It is evident that a large number of school districts are implementing transitional first grades as an alternative to kindergarten retention. If that is indeed the trend, the following recommendations are in order:

1. All school districts having implemented transitional first grade programs should be identified by the Oklahoma State Department of Education. This could be accomplished by the addition of one line on the state accreditation report filed by school districts each fall.

2. Standardization of criteria relative to student assessment and placement should be encouraged for all districts having transitional first grade programs or which plan to implement them at a later date.

3. Research should be conducted or supported by the State Department of Education relative to student assessment, curriculum, and teacher certification requirements in all states that currently permit and/or encourage the use of transitional first grade programs.

4. Developmentally appropriate curriculum and

practices should be mandated by the State Department of Education for use first in transitional first grade programs and, eventually, in all primary classrooms.

5. Support groups should be established to provide parents of children involved in transitional first grade classrooms with accurate, professional information relevant to early childhood education and development.

6. Transitional first grades should be identified as special programs. Funding for these programs should be calculated on a weighted pupil basis similar to that used for special education.

7. While this study has provided an overview of four districts, it is recommended that other studies be conducted involving a wider variety of districts and programs.

8. Studies should be conducted to determine the long-range effects of transitional first grade programs on student achievement.

9. Developmental maturity is recommended for inclusion as part of the criteria for determining school readiness rather than primarily basing this decision on chronological age.

#### Commentary

As seen through both the literature review and the results of this study, the development and implementation of transitional first grade programs is occurring in a large

percentage of the schools in Oklahoma. These four programs originated at the "grass roots" level of our educational system and, as such, represent the exception rather than the norm, because relatively few educational programs truly originate in the minds and hearts of those people who are daily involved in the educational workplace. The overwhelming majority of programs are the result of mandates and other directives from the federal and state governments that tend to place the building principal and the teacher in the role of the marionette. Much of the appeal and acceptance of transitional first grade programs by teachers and parents comes as a result of the immediate reinforcement received from short-term, positive changes in student behavior. Teachers are caring individuals who find it very difficult to watch children struggle, only to meet with limited success. By placing students in a program that accepts them at their individual levels of maturity and ability, the pressure to fit in and to keep up is diminished.

These programs were, as recommended by experts, truly successful, success being defined as people helping children to grow both personally and academically. The commonality among the programs lies in the "bottom up" manner in which they originated. Administrators did not decree the establishment of these programs, nor was the State Department of Education involved. These programs succeeded

because people made them work -- they believed in their ideas. The district that initiated its program with the \$20,000 grant and the program for which no additional expenditures were allowed were equally successful in the eyes of the teachers and administrators involved.

The issue central to the establishment of these programs is developmental immaturity. Children who are not capable of assimilating the information and acquiring the skills required to be successful in comparison with their chronological peers, need the additional attention, and time, provided by the transitional programs. Children come to school with tremendous variation in ability, background, and motivation. Just as it would be unrealistic to require every individual to complete a foot race of a specified distance within a specified time limit, so also is it unrealistic to not allow for the differences in our children. Some consideration must be given to placement of children in school programs on a basis other than chronological age. And when those children do enter school, the programs should often be those developed by teachers with the support of their administrators.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- I. Tell me about the decision to initiate a transitional first grade (T-1) program.
  - A. Who initiated the concept of an alternative method of grouping children?
    1. Why did that particular person assume that responsibility?
    2. Did that individual develop the details, or was that responsibility assigned to someone else?
    3. If assigned to someone else, did that individual then develop the details or was that responsibility assigned to someone else?
  - B. Were other options considered? If so, why wasn't one of the other options implemented?
  - C. Why was the T-1 method accepted?
  - D. Who ultimately made the decision to implement a T-1 program?
  - E. Were other individuals asked to provide input regarding program selection?
- II. Please talk about the placement of students.
  - A. What criteria were used to determine placement?
    1. Was any criterion given more weight or priority than any other?
    2. Of the total number of students identified as eligible for T-1, how many were actually

placed?

a. (If applicable) How was the decision made to place, or not to place, qualifying students?

b. Who made this decision?

B. Which, if any, screening instruments were used?

1. How were those instruments selected?

2. Do you feel the instruments selected were appropriate for their intended purpose?

C. Were parents consulted before placement?

D. How was the placement decision explained to the child?

E. When was the placement decision made?

F. What role did the parent(s) play in the decision?

G. Are there restrictions on class size?

III. Tell me about the manner of teacher assignment.

A. What were the criteria used for teacher selection?

B. What process was used for teacher selection? (Were other teachers involved in the process, or was it an administrative decision?)

C. If you were to prioritize characteristics of individuals selected as T-1 teachers, in which order would the following be placed:

1. Transcripts.

2. Experience.

3. Subject knowledge.

4. Personality.

5. Certification.

D. Do you think early childhood certification would be helpful in dealing with T-1 students?

E. Once the teacher was selected, what assistance was provided for that teacher?

IV. Tell me about the T-1 curriculum.

A. What are the goals of the T-1 program?

B. Does your curriculum address the state goals?

C. Who determined the curriculum?

1. If the task was left to one person, what was the basis for that assignment?

2. What materials were selected to be used with the T-1 class? Are they appropriate?

D. How would you best define your T-1 curriculum?

1. Developmental.

2. Remedial.

E. To what degree was monetary support provided for building the program?

**APPENDIX B**  
**REPRESENTATIVE RESPONSES**  
**FROM INTERVIEWS**

## REPRESENTATIVE RESPONSES

### FROM INTERVIEWS

The following statements are direct quotes recorded during the interviews for this study. They were selected as representative of the overall data collected. The responses are organized by the subjects of implementation, placement of students, teacher assignment, program, and support. Within each of these areas, the material is presented in alphabetical order of the four districts. Each response is followed by a code to indicate the district (A-D) and the position held by the interviewee (A for district administrator, P for principal, and T for teacher).

#### Implementation

"The idea originated with the classroom teacher. However, we had two really neat principals that took the idea and ran with it" (A-T).

"We felt that we needed to have some alternative to kindergarten retention" (A-P).

"The teacher had taught in the primary grades for eight or nine years and had a good 'feel' for young children, their needs and abilities. After attending a Gesell workshop, she felt that we needed a program that would more

nearly address the individual needs of students" (B-P).

"We initially considered a transitional kindergarten. However, we felt it would be unfair to assess student's ability after only one week of school" (B-T).

"We felt the child needed a full year of socializing with other children before an attempt should be made to assess their abilities or try to identify deficiencies" (B-P).

"We just didn't have any options for students that were not ready for first grade" (C-T).

"From the first time we began to talk about this program until the time it began, covered a span of about 18 months" (C-T).

"Our district is organized around the neighborhood schools concept. We felt that by implementing a program in each building we could better serve the student" (C-P).

"The first grade teachers and I were frustrated because we had children at the end of kindergarten who we knew could not perform on a first grade level" (D-T).

"We wanted to find some way to address the needs of those students that we felt like would be 'at risk' in the first grade" (D-P).

"I didn't personally know very much about early childhood education, but I believe that anything that we can do . . . we need to. As I told [the teachers], 'Investigate our options'" (D-A).



## Placement

"We felt we needed a variety of tests to determine placement. We believed that if only one instrument was used, the possibility of 'holes' in assessment were possible" (A-A).

". . . we used a variety of methods for assessment, none were viewed as having more weight than others" (A-A).

"Teachers' judgment is the most critical in making placement decisions" (A-P).

"I think the battery of tests we give students provides a good overall picture of ability" (A-T).

"We were able to accommodate all of the students identified as needing the program" (A-T).

"Parental permission must be obtained prior to placement in the program" (A-P).

"We rely on teacher recommendations to be the major criteria for student placement in the transitional first grade program" (B-P).

"Of the total number of students identified, we were able to accommodate about three fourths of them in the program" (B-T).

"We prioritized the students. By that I mean that we tried to be sure and take those showing the greatest need" (B-P).

"Parental permission has to be obtained before placement occurs" (B-T).

"We were able to place all of the children identified as at risk in the program" (C-T).

"The final decision to place the student in the program rests with the parent" (C-P).

"Final placement decisions are made in the spring, usually in late April or early May" (C-A).

"Teacher recommendation is weighed most heavily in determining need" (C-P).

"The assessment instruments used are appropriate for their intended use" (C-P).

"We let the parents know as early as February that their child is experiencing difficulty and alternative placement may be an option" (C-P).

"The first year the program was in place, student assignment to the program was mandatory" (C-A).

"Teacher recommendation is probably the strongest indicator of student ability" (D-P).

". . . 95% of the students identified as in need of the programs were placed, 5% were not, due to parental refusal" (D-T).

#### Teacher Assignment

"An entirely new classroom was set up and a teacher was hired just for that class. This also reduced the class load in the regular first grade rooms" (A-A).

"There were no teachers involved in the selection

process" (A-P).

"I think training in early childhood education would be helpful for a transitional first grade teacher" (A-P).

"I think an individual wanting to teach T-1 would be an even-tempered, low key person with a developmental philosophy" (A-A).

"We wanted someone with kindergarten experience first, and preferably with certification in early childhood" (B-P).

"Yes, I think early childhood education would definitely be an asset in working with students in a T-1 classroom" (B-T).

"Regular procedures were followed regarding teacher selection" (B-P).

"Oh, I think early childhood education would be an asset to anyone teaching in a T-1 grade" (B-P).

"All of the teachers currently in the T-1 programs here have remedial reading certification" (C-T).

"All vacancies occurring within the system are listed on a flier and distributed to each building in the district" (C-T).

"No, I don't think training in early childhood education would be particularly helpful for someone wanting to teach T-1" (C-T).

"Yes, I think early childhood training would be helpful" (C-A).

"Yes, I think ECE would be critical to T-1 teachers. I

have had five student teachers, four with ECE backgrounds and one with regular elementary ed. training. The students with a background in ECE definitely have the advantage" (D-T).

"No teachers were involved in the interview selection process" (D-P).

"Initially we hired the teacher that had originated the concept. Then, as we added programs, we began to screen and interview for the positions" (D-P).

#### Program

"We view our T-1 program as developmental rather than remedial in scope" (A-A).

"Our curriculum was generated through the combined efforts of the teacher and assistant superintendent" (A-T).

"Ours is more than just curriculum in the traditional sense" (A-T).

"We do meet the state suggested learner outcomes for developmental first grade classes. And we used them as guidelines for establishing our objectives" (A-A).

"We attempt to meet the individual needs of the students through programs such as Math Their Way, big books, and Story Starters by the Write Group" (A-T).

"Although its not really a part of curriculum, we do provide snacks in the morning and afternoon to the transitional first grade students" (A-T).

"One of our goals is to enable each child to grow in weak areas while building social skills and self-esteem" (A-T).

"Our students are allowed to take more field trips than other grades. We feel that by doing this we strengthen social skills and enhance self-esteem" (A-T).

"Curriculum, in our T-1 programs, is more than what you would normally think of as 'curriculum.' Some of the areas that we try to address are self-esteem, social and language skills" (B-P).

"Selection of materials for use in the program was pretty much left up to the teacher" (B-P).

"The curriculum objectives were set district-wide by the transitional first grade teachers, principals, and counselors using the state learner outcomes as a guide" (B-P).

"Yes, we do meet the objectives established in the proposed state suggested learner outcomes" (B-T).

"Although the objectives are established on a district-wide basis, individual teachers determine approach (methodology)" (B-T).

"Our objective is to offer an integrated program. By that I mean that our objective is to address the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual growth of the child" (C-P).

"The three areas that I feel should be addressed are

self-esteem, intellectual growth, and mathematics" (C-T).

"Curriculum initially was determined by teachers, principal, and assistant superintendent" (C-T).

"We use no textbooks, no workbooks, and a minimum of ditto sheets. Let me stress, 'minimum.' We really don't like to use them" (C-T).

"We want our transitional first grades to reflect a developmental philosophy. We do not want a 'watered down' first grade program for these students" (C-T).

"We use instructional materials that are designed for high student involvement. We like to do activities that allow students to become involved and creative" (C-P).

"We believe we need to emphasize the development of social skills and improvement of self-esteem as much as we do the intellectual development of the child" (D-T).

"Our program is designed to meet the objectives of the state learner outcomes for developmental first grade" (D-P).

"The teachers [of transitional first grade programs] work together with the building principals to determine curriculum" (D-A).

"We want our program to be developmental rather than remedial" (D-P).

#### Support

"The superintendent indicated that if funding could be obtained through a grant we could pursue the project. We

applied for and received a \$20,000 grant from the State Department of Education which enabled us to provide virtually anything the teacher and building principal felt would be beneficial to the program" (A-A).

"I could not believe it. There were a few things that we mentioned that 'maybe' or 'would sure be nice' -- and there it was. They let us buy whatever we needed!" (A-T).

"In our district, the transitional first grades are viewed as special programs and, as such, are eligible for \$100 per year in additional funds" (B-P).

"We were given \$2,000 the first year to establish the program. After that, we are funded just like everyone else" (C-T).

"Ha! The first year we had to 'wing it.' I was told 'if you can do it with what you have, go ahead'" (D-T).

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