Taiwanese Perspectives on Young Children's Early Schooling Experiences

by

Chin-Hsiu Chen

B.S., State University of New York at Geneseo, 1995
M.Ed., University of Victoria, 1999

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTORAL OF PHILISOPHY

in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction

Taiwanese Perspectives on Young Children's Early Schooling Experiences

by

Chin-Hsiu Chen

B.S., State University of New York at Geneseo, 1995
M.Ed., University of Victoria, 1999

Supervisory Committee

Dr. M. I. Mayfield (Department of Curriculum and Instruction)
Supervisor

Dr. A. Preece (Department of Curriculum and Instruction)
Co-Supervisor or Departmental Member

Dr. R. H. Fowler (Department of Curriculum and Instruction)
Departmental Member

Dr. B. Timmons (Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies)
Outside Member

Dr. P. R. Tarr (Faculty of Education, University of Calgary)
External Examiner

Supervisory Committee

Dr. M. I. Mayfield (Department of Curriculum and Instruction)
Supervisor

Dr. A. Preece (Department of Curriculum and Instruction)
Co-Supervisor or Departmental Member

Dr. R. H. Fowler (Department of Curriculum and Instruction)
Departmental Member

Dr. B. Timmons (Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies)
Outside Member

Dr. P. R. Tarr (Faculty of Education, University of Calgary)
External Examiner

Abstract

Early childhood programs have been proliferating in Taiwan for the past decade due to the drastic changes in the society, and to public and professional concepts of child development. Children, today, are placed in non-maternal and academic-focused early childhood programs at a much younger age than previously. The current trend of so-called "the earlier the better" in Taiwan raises issues about the effects of early formal schooling experiences on children's optimal development. However, very little is known about young children's early schooling experiences in Taiwan due to the lack of empirical studies.

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives and experiences of Taiwanese mothers, children, teachers, and administrators regarding young children's early schooling involvement. Participants were recruited mainly from two preschools (one public and one private) in a west-central city of Taiwan. Research participants included 32 mothers, 10 young children, 3 teachers, and 3 administrators. A qualitative design with a phenomenological approach was used in the study to investigate the subjective experiences of the phenomenon. Data were collected by using focus groups and individual interviews. In addition, a content review was conducted to gain an

overview of how young children's early schooling involvement was viewed by the parental advice literature in Taiwan. From the analysis of the data, the following five general themes emerged: children's development, mass media, social competition, differences between individuals and groups, and cultural change aspects. The specific meaning of each theme is illustrated, including similarities and differences amongst the participants. Finally, limitations, implications and future research directions are discussed.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation for all those who have supported me in the completion of this dissertation.

My Ph.D. committee has played a pivotal role in the development and refinement of this dissertation. To Dr. Mayfield, my supervisor, thank you sincerely for the invaluable guidance and advice you have provided throughout my graduate studies, and also all the time and help you have generously given to me in the process of writing this dissertation. To Dr. Preece, Dr. Fowler, and Dr. Timmons, my committee members, I would like to express my deep gratitude for your insightful suggestions as well as critical support during my journey. Special thanks to Dr. Tarr for serving as the external examiner, your time and constructive comments are much appreciated.

To the two preschools and the participants in Taiwan, I thank them for the efforts, cooperation, participation, and encouragement throughout the study. Without them, this dissertation would not have been possible.

Finally, I thank my family and friends for believing in me and for lots of great support.

I would like to recognize the financial support made available to me through Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP).

Chapter One ~ Introduction

Emily Smith, 5 years of age, is in kindergarten in Springdale, USA. She has been doing gymnastics since she was two and a half years old. She takes piano lessons and is enrolled in baseball, tennis, and soccer. In the summer she participates in a swimming class, and belongs to a Girl Scout group (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 2001). As illustrated by this report, in many countries many young children's lives today are filled with numerous structured activities, especially among the middle-class families (Rosenfeld & Wise, 2000). In other words, children of the 21st-century are experiencing a childhood very different from those born early in the last century (Hymowitz, 1999). This reflects the changes in the culture of childhood and society in general, and underscores the importance of studying young children's participation in more structured activities. The focus of this study was to investigate mothers', children's, teachers', and administrators' perceptions of early schooling experiences in Taiwan.

Background to the Study

Research on child development and child care is multifaceted and its contributions are wide ranging. It influences and reflects the demographic and economic changes, societal values and resources that shaped childrearing practices and early childhood education in the industrial world in the second half of the 1900s (Bremner & Fogel, 2001). For example, the emphasis on cognitive development in the mid-1900s spurred much interest in the effects of early learning experiences on children's developmental outcomes. With the scientific studies of infant cognition and the cognitive behaviorist theory of the importance of environmental interventions during the early years, "the earlier the better" assumption that views prevention efforts at the beginning stages of life

as a prudent investment in the well-being of the society at large has been embedded in the field of early childhood care and education since the 1950s (Bremner & Fogel, 2001).

Brain Research

Research on early brain development and learning has further intensified the focus on early experience and its effects on later development. Recent advances in brain research have provided new evidence that experience in the earliest days, weeks, and years of life have consequences for later development. For example, some researchers reported that babies can recognize their names and discriminate between two colors as early as two weeks of age (e.g., Hainline, 1998; Mandel, Jusczyk, & Pisoni, 1995). And by one month, babies can distinguish sounds as similar as "pah" and "bah" (Werner, Marean, Halpin, Spetner, & Gillenwater, 1992). The human brain grows at a rapid rate during the first three to five years of life and what happens in those first years can either promote or curtail development (Shore, 1997). This evidence from brain research has greatly increased interest in the effects of early childhood interventions on outcomes for children, and captured much public attention in both the U.S. and Taiwan. For example, research on early brain development was highlighted in the White House Conference on Early Childhood in 1997 in the United States. Moreover, pictures of infants beamed from the covers of popular magazines featuring articles on "How a child's brain develops" (*Time*, 1997) and "How learning begins" (*Newsweek*, 2000). In Taiwan, a well-known magazine, *Common Wealth Magazine*, had devoted a special issue on the importance of early brain development. As a result, the image of the "helpless infant" in the early 1900s has been transformed to the "competent child" in the mid-1900s and the "scientist in the crib" at the end of the 20th-century.

Studies on Early Academic Learning

Accordingly, some professionals endorse an early academic orientation during the preschool years and advocate the image of the "competent child" (e.g., Doman, 1994; Englemann & Englemann, 1981). They argued that academic attitudes and practices in the early years provide a challenge that would enhance young children's minds and increase their academic and intellectual abilities. For example, Doman (1994) laid out a curriculum in which parents would begin at infancy to teach children to read, do math, and to develop a vocabulary. Furthermore, the literature revealed that the studies conducted by these researchers supporting academic approach claimed that the early academic skills learning would enhance children's positive attitudes about school and their self-esteem (e.g., Becker & Gersten, 1982; Bereiter, 1986; Gersten, Darch, & Gleason, 1988).

On the other hand, an academic emphasis for young children has been a controversial issue in North America for years (Kagan & Zigler, 1987; Rescorla, Hyson, & Hirsh-Pasek, 1991; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2004). Outspoken scholars argue that highly academic expectations and practices may harm young children by compromising their normal development. For instance, Sigel (1987) asserted that teaching academics to preschool children is dangerous to children's emotional development. Elkind (2001) strongly condemned the downward extension of academic curricula to preschoolers and used the term "hurried child" to label this "too much too soon" phenomenon. Elkind (1993) further stated that loss of appetite, physical fatigue, decreased efficiency, and psychosomatic symptoms occurred more frequently in young children who were exposed to formal instruction. The view is that young children do not have the cognitive capacity

to adequately understand and master the academic skills of these formal instruction programs, and the overall result is an unnecessary stress with no long-term benefits (Kagan & Zigler, 1987).

Another argument against the early teaching of academic skills is that, although early instruction may be harmless or even beneficial in the short term, it may have negative consequences in the long term. Comparative studies (e.g., Rescorla, Hyson, & Hirsh-Pasek, 1991; Schweinhart, et al., 2005; Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995) on the different effects of different curriculum models in early childhood programs reported that academically oriented programs produced substantial increases in IQ and some benefits in language skills immediately and in the short term, particularly for children who were disadvantaged in the United States. However, in the long term, children in academic-oriented programs were found to have more negative outcomes (such as negative perceptions about themselves and lower educational expectations) than children in nonacademic programs. In other words, children who attended preschool programs that stressed academics demonstrated no long-term gains and had less positive attitudes about school than children who attended nonacademic preschool programs (Rescorla, Hyson, & Hirsh-Pasek, 1991; Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995).

For the past two decades, the early childhood education philosophy embraced by many in the United States views play as an important vehicle for young children's academic and overall development, and formal instruction as inappropriate and harmful for young children (Zigler, Singer, & Bishop-Josef, 2004). This view was further intensified by the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) statement on "developmentally appropriate practice" (Bredekamp, 1986) and its

publication of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8* (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) in fighting against the increasingly academic orientation of kindergartens (Goffin & Wilson, 2001). In addition, recently, there have been increasing numbers of grass-roots groups such as Putting Family First, National Family Night, and Take Back Your Day calling for time out from the frenzied pace and high stakes of family life in America today. For example, Alvin Rosenfeld, the co-author of *The Over-scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap* (Rosenfeld & Wise, 2001), started the National Family Night Organization that aims "to stop the overscheduled madness" (www.nationalfamilynight.org).

In brief, child development and early education in the second half of the 20th-century have been characterized by the increase in the provision of intervention programs for young children that may reflect the influences of the scientific studies, advanced technology in understanding human development, and other social factors. For example, the Russians' launching of Sputnik in 1957 and the government's War on Poverty, concerned with the deleterious and long-term effects of poverty on young children, led to a great expansion of early intervention programs for young children in the United States (Zigler, 1984). In conclusion, the trend of involving young children in more early schooling activities has become a widespread phenomenon in the US and many countries. However, the topic of involving young children in structured activities remains a controversial issue among early childhood educators. As this study was designed to explore young children's early schooling experiences in Taiwan, the next section presents background information on Taiwan's early childhood education and the relevant issues.

Background Information on Taiwan

It is not uncommon to find more and more children around the world experiencing early schooling and training, including children in Taiwan. As noted, Taiwan has recently experienced enormous changes more dramatic than any time in its history (Lin & Tsai, 1996). In particular, early childhood care and education in Taiwan have been undergoing great changes due to multiple factors such as changes in social and family structure, and influences of Western ideology on child development (Hsieh, 2001). Since martial law was ended in 1987, Taiwan's restrictions on mass media were lifted, import tariffs were cut, and goods that were previously unavailable flowed into the country. The country's per capita income doubled within one decade (Government Information Office of Taiwan, 2003). Currently, the percentage of working mothers of young children under age six is approximately 54% and approximately 63% of families are dual-income families (National Statistics of Taiwan, 2004). In addition, according to the National Statistics of Taiwan (2004), the average family size has dropped within a single generation from six children to the current norm of two children. These changes, inevitably, have had a major impact on the nature and scale of early childhood education in Taiwan.

Early Childhood Education

In Taiwan, early childhood education is considered education before primary school and is not part of compulsory education (Republic of China Ministry of Education, 2004). Basically, there are two types of early childhood education programs: preschool and cram school (private supplementary tutoring). The former refers to educational institutions that provide primary care and education services for children under the age of

six. The latter offers extracurricular programs including English, computer, fine arts, and other school-related subjects to young children.

Today, children are educated predominantly in early childhood programs instead of at home (Chao, 1999). As a result, early childhood education is experiencing tremendous growth in Taiwan. For example, the number of early childhood programs for young children, including preschools and cram-school programs, has doubled almost every year for the past decade while the birth rate has dropped from 4.66 to 1.11 per 1,000 population (National Statistics of Taiwan, 2004). According to the Republic of China Ministry of Education (2004), 243,303 children attended 3,234 registered preschools and about 318,918 children attended 3,600 childcare facilities and nursery schools in the school year of 2001. In addition, in the school year of 2000 to 2001, 87.16% of children under the age of six and 97% of six-year-olds attended formal preschool settings. Thus, the number of preschools has increased tremendously from 28 in 1950 to 1,186 in 1980 and 6,834 in 2002.

Taiwan's early childhood education curriculum has undergone many changes at different times in history to meet the differing social needs and values, namely from the emphasis on ethnic identity and patriotism during the Japanese occupation, to "life education" in the postwar period, then to "science education" during the 1980s. In 1981, the government passed the *Early Childhood Education Act* (Republic of China Ministry of Education, 1981), the first and the most important law for early childhood education in Taiwan. In the same year, the *Preschool Education Law* was promulgated to set up the basic standards for preschools. The law covers the preschool system, the number of students allowed per class, required teacher qualifications, minimum standards for

facilities, and financial penalties for violators. In order to improve the quality of early childhood education, the Ministry of Education revised and promulgated the *Standards for Kindergarten Curriculum* in 1987 (Republic of China Ministry of Education, 1987). The major goal of kindergarten education is to provide children with an education to enhance their physical, moral and intellectual development. The curriculum is divided into six areas: play, health, language, work, music, and general knowledge (concepts in mathematics, social studies and sciences). While the *Standards for Kindergarten Curriculum* provides an outline of the curriculum, preschool centers and teachers are free to design activities according to children's needs and interests.

The learning of academic skills as a standard goal for kindergarteners has never been included in the *Standards for Kindergarten Curriculum*. However, in a survey by Pan (1992), 75% of the 377 preschools visited in Taipei County taught children to write Chinese characters and phonetic symbols, and some preschool children had written homework every day. Hsue and Aldridge (1995), in comparing and contrasting "developmentally appropriate practice" and traditional Taiwanese culture, pointed out that the value of academics was stressed and early childhood education was viewed as a preparation for primary education. As Lin and Tsai (1996) stated, the emphasis on children's cognitive development was a response to the society's expectation, as Taiwanese parents were concerned with children's academic achievement and wanted to give their children a "head start" to succeed in later schooling.

With the changes in social structure and the influence of Western views of education of young children, a variety of Western early childhood programs such as the Project Approach, Montessori, and Waldorf can easily be found in Taiwan (Hsieh, 2004).

In addition, in order to survive in the increasing competitive early childhood market caused by the declining birth rate, many preschools are pressured to change their curriculum (Hsieh, 2001). For example, besides the academically oriented lessons such as language and mathematics, other enrichment activities such as computer use, swimming, and English conversation are also being added to the curriculum in order to attract pupils.

On the other hand, there are also some practical concerns regarding the quality of early childhood programs. Currently in Taiwan, private operators run about 60% of preschools and almost all the cram schools (Republic of China Ministry of Education, 2004). The cost of these private early childhood education programs is quite high. According to the 1999 survey by *Common Wealth Magazine* (Chao, 1999), Taiwan's preschool education tuition is about two to three times more than that of Japan, and a child's educational expenses take about 18% of a family's monthly income. On average, tuition for preschool programs is at least four times higher than public college tuitions. As a result, Taiwanese family expenditures on children's educational activities account for 4.3% of the Gross National Product (Government Information Office of Taiwan, 2003). This was in comparison to the amount of GNP spent on children's educational expenses by the families in the United States (1.56%), Japan (1.86%), and Germany (1.77%).

Private Supplementary Tutoring

"Don't let your child lose out! Get Started" and "By age six, your child's future has been determined" are some well-known television commercial slogans for cram schools (private supplementary tutoring schools) in Taiwan (Chao, 1999). According to an internet-based poll of families with children from ages two to six years, 51% of children

are enrolled in English cram schools, 27% in piano lessons, and 20% in math, dance, music, and pottery lessons (Chang, 2003). Approximately 49% of preschool children are enrolled in one type of cram school program and 28% in two types. One third of families spent less than $80 Canadian per month, 23% spent around $80-130, and 15% spent more than $2,200 per month on children's cram school programs (Chang). In addition, 53% of parents said they were satisfied with the cram school programs that their children were in and 54% would not consider reducing their expenses for cram school programs and believed that these programs were necessary.

In Taiwan, the "private supplementary tutoring" is called "buxiban" in Chinese (or "cram school"), which includes academic schools, natural science schools, sports schools, information schools, home economics schools, arts schools, and business schools. In general, "buxiban" means tutoring in academic subjects provided by tutors (for financial gain) in addition to mainstream schooling (Zeng, 1999). The nature of academic "buxibans" varies considerably in Taiwan, from individual tutorials held in the homes to large classes in huge lecture theatres. While there are different types of schools, more than half of the "buxibans" are used for preparing students for the senior high school and university entrance examinations. Other cram schools specialize in subjects such as foreign languages, civil service exams, TOEFL, and other exams required for study abroad. Recently, the so-called "brain development" programs that claimed to stimulate young children's brain activities have joined the "busiban" market.

The government statistics indicate that as of the end of May 2001, there were 8,666 "buxiban" centers registered with the government (Government Information Office of Taiwan, 2003). However, a very large number of "buxiban" operated without a license,

so the total number was even larger. In addition, there are no statistics on the real number and age of students who attend cram schools. In a recent survey conducted by *Common Wealth Magazine* (He, 2005), 70% of Grade 4 to 6 students attended cram schools after school, and spent on the average of 1-3 hours (per day) in cram schools. Furthermore, approximately 50% of the children have cram school lessons on the weekends. The survey also found that 37% of children are involved in one-subject cram schools, 30% in two subjects, and another 30% in three or more subjects. On average, a family paid about $6,000 per month (approximately $230 Canadian dollars) for one child's cram school expenses. In addition, 50% of families reported that the cram school expenses occupied about one-tenth of family's monthly earning. Approximately 50% of children reported that they dislike cram schools. Interestingly, the author pointed out that the number of cram schools has increased five fold since the launching of educational reform in 1994. From 1994 to 2005, the number of cram schools in Taiwan has grown from 2,626 to 14,073.

According to the Ministry of Education's *Rules for Establishing and Administrating the Short-Term Buxiban* in 1987, academic "buxibans" were not allowed to enroll elementary students, and middle school students were not allowed to have tutoring classes from Monday morning to Saturday noontime. However, these rules were hardly observed or enforced (Kwok, 2001). Conversely, the new-generation entrepreneurs in the cram business have been expanding classes for younger students, and many have opened the so-called "Baby Class" (Zeng, 1999, p. 156). The age of children involved in cram schools also has been declining. With the growing number of young children involved in cram schools and the dramatic increase in the number of cram

schools in the past decade, attending cram school has become a "norm" and part of young children's life in Taiwan.

An enormous amount of time and money has been invested by Taiwanese families in their children's early educational programs for many parents see additional early schooling as a "necessary evil" (Chao, 1999) to ensure their children's entrance to universities and promising futures. The new evidence from brain research has also greatly increased interest in the effects of early childhood interventions on outcomes for children. Many articles and advertisements cite brain research in reference to promoting "educational" programs and products in Taiwan. For example, in an article by a pediatrician (Chang, 2001), the author addressed the issues of "windows of opportunity" and "critical period" to promote an early childhood training program called *Advanced Leadership Training System*. This author stated that the most critical period of a child's development is at the age of three years, and that parents need to have a systematic and well-planned training program to maximize the child's potential and positively effect their future development. Thus, the North American research on early brain development played a crucial role in promoting the concept of "competent child" in Taiwan.

Educational Reform in Taiwan

During the last decade there have been large-scale educational reforms initiated at the primary and secondary levels in Taiwan. According to the Republic of China Ministry of Education (2004), the main goals of the educational reform are to expand educational opportunities, foster continuous life-long learning, to increase quality school education, and to promote paradigmatic shifts from teacher-centered to student-centered learning. For example, the curriculum at every level from early childhood education to university

is being revised to emphasize creative thinking and problem solving skills (Republic of China Ministry of Education, 2004). Most importantly, with new educational policies, the joint examinations to enter senior high schools and universities were eliminated in 2001 and 2002, respectively. As a result, the so-called *Multi-route Promotion Program for Entering Senior High Schools* and *Multi-route Promotion Program for College-bound Seniors* were implemented. The primary goal of this reform was to reduce exam-related pressure on students and to provide multiple channels (such as through assignment, application, or selection by recommendation) for students to advance to higher levels of education. However, students would still have to pass the Basic Achievement Test for high school and Scholastic Attainment Test for college. These tests are given twice a year during the last year of junior and senior high schools.

However, these educational reforms have become a target of public criticism over the past couple of years. For example, the multiple entrance system for colleges and high schools has also triggered much controversy and also spawned many problems. A common criticism is that the use of the proficiency exams in the last year of junior high and high schools has intensified pressure on students and competition among students (Chiu, 2003). Instead of taking the once a year joint entrance exam and competing with students in the same district, students now are taking proficiency exams twice a year and competing with students across the nation. As a result, calls by the general public for sweeping reform of the educational system are quite common, and the design of an effective evaluation for assessing the results of educational reforms and their implementation is a critical need.

Chinese Cultural Factors

In Taiwan, the rapid growth of preschools and cram schools in recent years also reflect the strong influence of the Chinese cultural heritage. Taiwan inherits mostly Confucian traditions including the emphasis on educational achievement. Studies on Chinese parental perceptions of children's development and education have indicated that Chinese parents tend to put more emphasis on academic achievement than the development of socio-emotional skills and view early childhood programs as a preparation for formal schooling (e.g., Beckert et al., 2004; Ebbeck & Gokhale, 2004; Lin & Fu, 1990; Weikart, 1999). This perception of the purpose of early childhood programs is evident in the implementation of academically oriented curricula in Taiwan. The studies on supplementary tutoring also pointed out that the meritocratic societal drive in Confucian heritage culture is associated with the vigorous growth of cram schools in many East Asian countries, including in Taiwan (e.g., Bray & Kwok, 2003; Kwok, 2001; Rohlen, 1980; Zeng, 1999). In addition, affordability of the tutoring fees in a large competitive market, economic affluence of families, and the nuclear nature of tutees' families are positively correlated to the growth and popularity of cram schools in Taiwan. As a result, the emphasis on early academic achievement and the growth of cram schools cannot easily be hindered by the recent educational reform. Conversely, educational reform seems to accelerate rather than to reduce the high achievement pressures as more children are involved in cram school lessons at a younger age (He, 2005). In conclusion, the above changes in the numbers and nature of early childhood programs in Taiwan are mirroring the new concept of childhood, namely the "competent child" which is consistent with the Chinese traditional beliefs.

In brief, the need for early childhood education involvements has become more evident in Taiwan in recent years for various reasons. However, while parents are scrambling to win the big race for their children's futures, there are some concerns and warnings from professionals in Taiwan regarding the negative impacts of early schooling. These concerns are reflected in recent articles published by some of the most prominent parenting magazines in Taiwan such as *Common Wealth Magazine* and *Preschool Education*. Scholars have warned parents of the dangers of focusing narrowly on cognitive development (the potential negative impacts of "hurrying" children) by referencing North American studies and opinions. For example, a well-respect parenting magazine, *Preschool Education*, has published numerous articles promoting the importance of developmentally appropriate practice and of play in early childhood education. In the article by Cheng (2004), Elkind's "hurried child" and Rosenfeld's "over-scheduled child" were referred to as the author stated that early cognitive skills learning may hurt a child's development and lead to emotional and physical stress. In conclusion, Cheng pointed out that family time, play, reading, awareness of individual difference, and a well-balanced development are the keys to having a "talented child."

The expansion of early childhood programs in Taiwan and the other regions in the world has been driven by the changes in social and family structure, and updated scientific knowledge about child's intellectual development. The interest in early programs from birth or the prenatal period also has been fueled by widespread attention to brain development in the first few years of life. At the same time, there is increasing debate on the issue of early formal schooling among scholars and professionals. The debate has been largely formed by two opposite positions: (a) those in favor of the early

schooling involvement ("the earlier the better"), and (b) those concerned about the "too much too early" exposure of young children to "formal" education. However, there is a lack of studies that directly address this important topic in the literature in both North America and Taiwan. In addition, with the Chinese cultural values for academic achievement and examination-driven school cultures, Taiwan's current early childhood education practices seems to be driven mainly by the "competent child" or, in other words, "the earlier the better" orientation. The growing number of early childhood programs and the declining age of children involving in cram school programs further reflect the Taiwanese parents' efforts to provide optimal early learning environments for their very young children. Therefore, there is a great need to explore this issue in a Taiwanese context.

Statement of the Research Problem

Recent research on brain development and the effects of early environments has shown that early cognitive and social experiences have an impact on children's well-being and their later learning ability (Bruer, 1999; Shore, 1997). Consequently, the topic of the effects of early formal schooling experiences on developmental outcomes has been debated among the professionals for years. With the current trend of involving young children in more structured activities at earlier ages, the need to address the costs and benefits to young children's "head start" practices in a scientific way is greater than ever. Given the importance of this topic for educators, parents, children and policy makers, it is surprising that there exists relatively little research in the literature. In particular, there is a lack of studies exploring the perspectives and experiences of those who are directly engaged in the early childhood educational process (parents, children, teachers, and

administrators). Therefore, there is a great need to investigate how the phenomenon of increased structured activities at earlier ages is experienced by those involved.

This study was designed to gain information about the phenomenon from the point of view of those who are themselves experiencing it directly, including determining how they see things, how they understand the situation, and how they interpret events. Based on my professional experiences in Taiwan, I was aware that many parents struggled with the different portrayals of children's early learning. The mass media in Taiwan seemed to favor the image of the "competent child" in promoting early educational programs and products, while some professionals warned parents of the dangers of the "hurried child." The focus of this study was particularly on Taiwanese mothers' perceptions of the current practices of early childhood education and how their perceptions would affect the decisions about young children's early schooling involvements. Taiwanese mothers, instead of fathers or grandparents, were chosen for this study as they are essentially responsible for deciding their children's early educational experiences (Ho, 1994). Therefore, how mothers construct and interpret their children's early learning experiences would give meaning to the phenomenon under study.

In addition to understanding mothers' perceptions of children's early learning experiences, there is also a need to understand the perceptions of professionals and children in order to gain a more holistic view of the phenomenon. It is important to explore professionals' perceptions and experiences because they play a role in transmitting early childhood education values to the families that they serve. Children's opinions of what it means to be engaged in structured activities are needed for they are directly affected by the phenomenon under study. Moreover, as Antoine de Saint-

Exupery wrote in *The Little Prince* (1945), grownups cannot, on their own, understand the world from the child's point of view and therefore they need children to explain it to them. To better understand the phenomenon, we need to pay attention to what children have to say about their experiences.

Rationale for this Study

The current trend of involving young children in more structured activities is a response to parents' needs to provide their children with the opportunity to get off to a good start in the early years. It is critical to examine the phenomenon of early schooling involvement as early experience affects the foundation of children's later learning and developmental outcomes. In particular, there is a greater need to study the topic in Taiwan for the following reasons. First, the vigorous growth of preschool and cram school programs in Taiwan indicated that more young children are engaging in structured activities at younger ages. Second, the Chinese cultural emphasis on educational attainment and the examination-driven school culture have created academically focused early childhood programs. Third, Taiwanese parents invest a greater amount of money for their children's early education expenditures than do parents in major western countries. Hence, the topic of early schooling involvement in Taiwan deserves much more attention than it has received to date.

With a better understanding of the phenomenon from those who are directly involved, our knowledge about early learning experiences in a Taiwanese context will be enhanced. The results of this study may serve early childhood programs and families by providing professionals and parents with insights into the phenomenon of involving young children in more structured activities. For example, the results of the study may

serve as a reference source for parents in making decisions about their children's early schooling involvements. For professionals, the findings of the study may enhance their awareness of the social, historical, and cultural contexts that define the mothers' and children's experiences.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore Taiwanese perspectives and experiences regarding young children's schooling involvement. In particular, how Taiwanese mothers viewed the phenomenon would be a main focus as mothers usually play a significant role in the upbringing of their young children in Chinese cultures (Ho, 1994). In addition, the opinions of children, teachers, and administrators on the topic were also examined and served as additional data sources. In order to understand the phenomenon experienced by participants, the general research questions were developed to direct this study. As mothers were the key informants in this study, the research questions were developed mainly to understand their points of the view. The research questions for professionals and children were modified based on the general research questions. The following are the general research questions used in this study:

1. What are the participants' descriptive definitions or personal interpretations of "the earlier the better" phenomenon?
2. What are the participants' perceptions of the benefits (positive aspects) and the problems (negative aspects) regarding more early schooling involvement?
3. What kinds of information and considerations do the mothers use to make decisions about enrolling or not enrolling their children in the cram schools?

4. Have there been any changes in the mothers' perceptions/experiences of their children's early schooling experiences since the enrollment of their children in cram schools, and any possible reasons for those changes?

Overview of the Research Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research design because it is the most appropriate approach to understanding social phenomenon from the participants' perspectives. Qualitative research is based on "constructionism," which assumes multiple realties are socially constructed through individual and collective perceptions or views of the same situation (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). In other words, people's perceptions are what they consider "real" to them, and the most effective way to understand a phenomenon is to have it described by those who have experienced it directly, as "the internal viewpoint (actor) is the privileged position for unveiling experience" (Giorgi, 1970, p. 196).

The early schooling experience is a broad research topic that leads to many research questions and could be tackled from various perspectives and employ different research approaches, from laboratory brain research to experimental field studies. According to McMillan and Schumancher (2001), a problem that is not delimited is one of the common weaknesses of qualitative research proposals. They state, "Designs cannot yield valid data for every possible variable, nor can qualitative researchers encompass extremely broad questions in a single study" (p. 582). Conceptually and methodologically, this study was delimited in two ways. First, the study focused primarily on Taiwanese mothers' subjective experiences regarding their children's early schooling. Second, the main participants were mothers who have children enrolled in both preschools and cram

schools, and mothers who have children only in preschools. Mothers were chosen as the main participants because they are believed to be the most knowledgeable and informative about the phenomenon being investigated. The other participants (children, teachers, and administrators) were recruited for they also lived with the phenomenon on a daily basis and could enrich the understandings of being sought.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this dissertation, these key terms are defined as follows:

Competent Child – the notion that children are innately equipped with all sorts of behaviors that scientists had once assumed to be learned at a later developmental stage (Hymowitz, 1999). It refers to a positive perspective on early childhood "head start," namely "the earlier the better" position.

Hurried Child – the way parents, schools, the media, and modern technology rush children through their childhood in the pursuit of excellence and a jump start on the competition (Elkind, 1993). This view reflects the concerns about potential negative effects of imposing overwhelming educational activities on children's overall development, the "too much too early" position. The term is usually translated into a well-known Chinese phrase "pulling up the seedling hoping to make it grow better."

Preschools – all the educational institutions (including private and public kindergartens and nursery schools) that provide primary care and education services to young children under the age of six in Taiwan. Nine-years compulsory education starts at age 7 (Grade One) and ends at age 15 (Grade Nine) in Taiwan (Ministry of Education, 2004).

Cram Schools – refers to "private supplementary tutoring" schools which include academic, natural science, information, home economy, arts, and business schools that provide lessons (Ministry of Education, 2004).

Summary

It is noted that more and more young children around the world, including in Taiwan, are engaged in structured learning activities. Despite the importance and controversial nature of involving young children in more schooling activities, there is limited research directly examining this phenomenon. The purpose of this study was to

explore the personal perspectives of Taiwanese mothers, children, teachers, and administrators on young children's early schooling involvements. In this dissertation, Chapter One offers an introduction to the background of the study including information on Taiwan's social context; presents the problem and purpose of the study, the research questions, and an overview of the research methodology. In Chapter Two, an overview of relevant literature regarding the topic is provided. Chapter Three contains a detailed description of the methodological approach used, including procedures for participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. In Chapter Four, the summary of the research data is presented in order to reflect the participants' views of the topic. Last, the study findings (themes) are discussed in Chapter Five; limitations, implications, and future research direction of the study are also outlined.

Chapter Two ~ Review of Literature

This research study explored mothers', children's, teachers', and administrators' perceptions of early schooling experiences in Taiwan. Based on the review of literature, empirical research that directly addressed and examined the topic is very limited in North America and even scarcer in Taiwan. As a result, this chapter is a review of broad historical background information and related research findings on the topic of young children's early schooling experiences, mainly from North American studies. The literature on parenting advice and relevant Chinese cultural studies is also included in order to understand the social context of the phenomenon being studied.

Parenting Advice Literature

In a content analysis study on advice given to parents, Wrigley (1989) found that a dramatic change occurred in perceptions about children and their needs for cognitive stimulation from the 1900s to the 1980s in the United States. She and her colleagues found that the early emphasis on hygiene during the early 1900s shifted to a broader view of infant intellectual development in the 1930s. In the 1960s, nearly half of the articles analyzed were on young children's cognitive development. During the 1970s and 1980s, experts increasingly portrayed cognitive stimulation as vital for young children's development, and this topic emerged as a dominant focus in the literature. The most vocal advocates of this view were Doman and his colleagues (Doman, Doman, & Aisen, 1985). They suggested that intellectual gains could be even greater if formal education were to begin even earlier. By this account, they laid out a curriculum in which parents begin at infancy to teach children to read, to develop a vocabulary, and to do math, claiming that "babies can learn absolutely anything that you can present to them in an honest and

factual way and they don't give a fig whether it is encyclopedia knowledge, reading words, math, or nonsense for that matter" (p. 18).

In the 1980s and 1990s, our knowledge of brain development and its relation to cognition increased dramatically, and this was due primarily to the new technologies that permit the imaging of brain activities. For example, new neuroimaging techniques that include electro-encephalography (EEG), positron emission tomography (PET), and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), have allowed scientists to explore the relation between brain and cognitive development. As a result, in the mid-1990s, the early development of, and discoveries about, the human brain during the early years dominated the early childhood literature (Hymowitz, 1999; Fogel, 2004). The new focus on neuroscience caught the attention of many developmental and educational psychologists and educators. Public awareness of brain development in the early years was increased with the help of Hollywood celebrity Rob Reiner, and the "I Am Your Child" national campaign that included extensive news media attention; a White House Conference on Early Childhood Development and Learning in 1997; and a widely disseminated report on the results of brain research (Shore, 1997). This research suggests that even a newborn can be regarded as a "scientist in the crib" who possesses an innate ability and drive to learn through interactions with the environment (Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Kuhl, 1999).

In 1996, each of the major weekly news magazines in the U.S. (*Newsweek, Time,* and *U.S. News & World Reports)* had special issues on the new brain research as it relates to young children. For example, *Newsweek* devoted a special edition to the critical first three years of a child's life and indicated that during these years there is a "window of

opportunity" (Begley, 1996). The article indicated that the experiences of childhood help form the brain's circuits for music, mathematics, language, and emotion. In Canada, the article titled "Baby's Brainpower is Set by Age One" by Blakeslee (1997) urged parents to be talkative and articulate as some neurological scientists believe that the number of words an infant hears each day is the most important predictor of a child's later intelligence, school success, and social competence. As a result, the image of the "helpless infant" in the early 1900s has by the end of the 20th-century been transformed to "the scientist in the crib."

Research over the past 50 years has given rise to concept of the "competent child," which was greeted enthusiastically by the American general public when numerous books by that name were published (Bremner & Fogel, 2004; Hymowitz, 1999). These types of books continue to dominate today's popular advice literature market. For example, *Baby Signs: How to Talk to Your Baby Before Your Baby Can Talk* by Acredolo, Goodwyn, Abrams, and Hansen (2002), which was on 2002's bestseller list of parenting advice publications, echoes the belief in the "competent child" and fuels the anxiety of falling behind at the beginning of the race. In addition, numerous books on, and educational materials for, building young children's brain plasticity can easily be spotted in the parenting advice sections of bookstores. The advice literature interprets the brain research discoveries, and attempts to turn parents into personal cognitive trainers for the infant cerebellum. For example, *How to Have a Smarter Baby* (Ludington, Hoe, & Golant, 1990) recommends a fifteen-minute-a-day program to exercise the baby's senses so as to "increase his concentration span" (p. 1). In the book, the authors stated that the training should begin before birth by placing headphones on the mother's belly so that the

fetus can hear a tape of personal messages and classical music. Thus, there is a growing market for "brain-based" programs and products that design their advertising to appeal directly to parents, educators, and caregivers (Davis, 2001).

On the other hand, a growing number of articles and books warning of the negative impact of the "hurried child" lifestyle have appeared in the parenting advice literature. Articles such as "False Promise" (Kelly, 2000), "The Parent Trap" (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 2001), and "The Quest for a Superkid" (Kluger & Park, 2001) in popular magazines question the effects of early attainment in all aspects of child development. In addition, three Harvard professors wrote a paper (Fitzsimmons, Lewis, & Ducey, 2000) to urge students to slow down, discover their true passions, and resist the resume-padding game. Important books on the topics include *The Hurried Child* (Elkind, 1981), *Endangered Minds* (Healy, 1990), *Disappearance of Childhood* (Postman, 1982), and more recently, *Ready or Not* (Hymowitz, 1999), *The Over-Scheduled Child* (Rosenfeld & Wise, 2001), *Putting Family First* (Doherty & Carlson, 2002) and *Reclaiming Childhood* (Crain, 2003). These books describe a serious decline in children's overall health and make concrete suggestions for healthy changes in families, school, and communities. In brief, the central message is clear: childhood is endangered and children need our protection and healing. For example, Postman (1982) argued that children are without childhood because there is an "end of secrecy" where parents are no longer protecting their children from what was once considered adult, especially sexual, information. Television, Postman believed, is "a total disclosure medium" (p. 81) that makes formerly taboo knowledge available to the youngest children.

Perhaps the most troubling twist from "too much too soon" comes from David Elkind. Elkind's books, *The Hurried Child* (1981) and *Miseducation: Preschool at Risk* (1987), described the growing numbers of parents who enroll their preschool children in adult-directed lessons, drill them in academic skills, and value their offspring for the glory their accomplishments may bring to the parents. Elkind believed "the hurried child" was the offspring of "stressed-out", overambitious parents responding to an increasingly competitive society. He argued that children are rushed through their early years and pushed to grow up too fast in pursuit of academic achievement and a jump start in an increasingly competitive economy. In this speed-up pace of childhood, children are left with no time to play, no time to be bored, and no time just to be. The consequences of "hurrying" are severe from physical fatigue to depression and even suicide, according to Elkind.

Alvin Rosenfeld, a child psychiatrist and co-author of *Hyper-Parenting* (Rosenfeld & Wise, 2000) and *The Over-Scheduled Child* (Rosenfeld & Wise, 2001), is an active advocate of family time and relationships that he believes are more crucial to healthy lives than scheduled activities. The term "hyper-parenting" is used to describe a style of child-rearing that is practiced by many middle and upper middle class families. In these families, parents become involved in every detail of their children's academic, athletic and social lives. They enroll their children to numerous adult-supervised and extra-curricula activities that aimed at improving the academic, social, sporting, cultural or psychological skills of their children. These parents are portrayed as believing they have the power to craft the perfect childhood for their children, one that will guarantee a successful adulthood in the competitive new world. Rosen and Wise stated that such

"hyper-parenting" could damage children's self-esteem and contribute to increasing incidents of teenage depression, substance abuse, and sexual "acting out." A website titled *Hyper-Parenting* (www.hyper-parenting.com) was created by Rosenfeld to raise national awareness about the impact of over-scheduling and to promote the importance of family times through his campaign for National Family Night.

Both Elkind and Rosenfeld have been actively advocating the need to reclaim childhood and protect children in an increasingly competitive environment. In searching for the causes of the "hurried child" phenomenon, they believe that the changes in social and family environments over the past two decades, the overexposure of children to media and technology, the extensive commercialism directed at children, the emphasis on early academics, the advances in technology, and the societal need for efficiency and productivity are the major underlying factors in creating a generation of over-stressed and over-achieving children. Elkind and Rosenfeld warn continuously of the negative impacts of exposing children to pressures including high risk of substance abuse, depression, and psychological problems. However, both Elkind and Rosenfeld have not provided credible research to support for these negative effects of the "hurried child" as these claims are mainly based on their clinical observations of experiences.

Historical Perspective

As suggested by the previous section, the historical changes in beliefs about children during the 20th-century were largely due to an increase since the mid-1900s in scientific studies of infancy (Bremner & Fogel, 2004). It was only 50 years ago that the assumption that human newborns were deaf and blind was entrenched in medical books (Fogel, 2004). This view gradually diminished with the advance of technology sensitive

enough to reveal infants' sensory and cognitive abilities far more sophisticated than anyone had imagined. Much of the pioneering research on infant cognition that began in the 1960s focused on the early development of visual and auditory perception (Bremner & Fogel, 2004). Since the 1960s, many relevant infant studies have been reported that establish that newborns can indeed hear and see. For example, the studies on newborn's responses to voice in the 1970s showed that young infants (3-4 weeks of age) would respond preferentially to their own mother's voice (e.g., Mehler, Bertoncini, & Barriere, 1978; Mills & Meluish, 1974). With advances in technology, several controlled studies in recent years have provided evidence that by the sixth month of gestation, the fetus responds to loud sounds from the extrauterine environment, and by the ninth month the fetus discriminates among sounds differing in frequency (e.g., Cheour-Luhtanen et al., 1996; Kisilevsky, Muir, & Low, 1992; Lecanuet, Graniere-Deferre, Jacquet, & DeCasper, 2000). As a result, some educational programs, such as Prenatal University in California, have been created to teach mothers how to make their babies smarter while they are still in the uterus (White, 1999). Studies on infant's visual perception also led some researchers to conclude that infants do understand object constancy (e.g., Ballargeon, 1987; Rivera, Wakeley, & Langer, 1999) and can discriminate between two colors (e.g., Hainline, 1998; Mandel, Jusczyk, & Pisoni, 1995).

Thus, between 1950 and 1970, the number of publications concerned with infancy exploded with some 800 works about very young children (Bremner & Fogel, 2004). The preponderance of research studies on infancy marked the mid-1900s as the Infant Era. As early as 1966, Bower concluded that "infants can in fact register most of the information an adult can register but can handle less of the information than adults can register" (p.

92). In 1973, Stone, Smith, and Murphy collected several hundred research articles that they saw as justifying their title, *The Competent Infant*, which reflected a desire by the scientists to discover early signs of intelligence in infants. The new baby was crowned the "competent infant," and the old notion of the almost empty, needful, and cognitively incompetent infant has become a memory. Furthermore, the "competent infant" progressed to the "rational infant" with Bower's book, *The Rational Infant*, in 1989. After a review of the evidence, Bower (1989) announced that:

> What we will accomplish in theory and practice will, I am certain, depend on what we can bring ourselves to accept of the idea that the infant we know so well, the beautiful baby we all adore, is, as well as all that, a rational infant. (p. 160)

Scientific research on infants' cognitive development concluded that the early years are important. Even in infancy, children are active participants in their own development. Moreover, the advances in experimental research on development in infancy have played a critical role in spurring on and reinforcing the perception of the "competent child." It is the concept of the "competent child" that largely guides the process of inducing infants and young children to acquire knowledge that is typically acquired at a later developmental stage (Hymowitz, 1999). As a result, many parents have placed their infants into structured programs designed to teach reading, music, and mathematics before the age of three years.

In the field of early childhood education, a focus on cognitive skills also occurred in the late 1950s when American views of education were affected by the Soviet Union's launching of Sputnik in 1957 (Zigler, 1984). The Americans' self-criticism about education led to a massive curriculum revision movement in order to improve the

nation's competence (Goffin & Wilson, 2001). A return to the "3Rs" was treated as a way to build American superiority in the world. Another factor that influenced efforts to enhance American children's competence was the civil rights movement which attempted, through early education, to eradicate poverty and minimize social inequality during the 1960s (Zigler, 1984). As a result, with the needs for educational reform and civil rights recognized, the well-known Head Start Project was launched to help "disadvantaged" American children.

By the 1960s, the emphasis on cognition was further accompanied by the rise of prominent cognitive behaviorists or "environmentalists" who believed that environmental interventions during early childhood could dramatically increase children's cognitive functioning. Researchers gathered a considerable amount of evidence in support of the importance of education in the early years of life. For example, a book by Joseph McVicker Hunt, *Intelligence and Experience* (1961), announced that with the right environmental stimulation during the early years children's IQ could be raised as much as 30 to 70 points. Benjamin Bloom, another important researcher who supported this environmental theory, wrote an influential book, *Stability and Change in Human Characteristics*, in 1964. In his extensive analyses of empirical evidence, Bloom concluded that the first five years of life were a critical period in a child's intellectual development. In addition, Bloom pointed out that half of the variance in adult IQ scores appeared by age four. This statement, however, had been misinterpreted by some popular press accounts to suggest that half of the child's learning is over by age four (Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2004). As a result, many parents and educators felt compelled to teach children as much as possible and as early as possible (Hymowitz, 1999). Thus, Bruner's

(1960) often quoted statement that "the foundation of any subject may be taught to anybody at any age in some form" (p. 12) became a touchstone of the new conceptualization of the child.

The effects of early schooling for young children have been hotly debated since the launching of the Head Start project in the 1960s. For example, in the book *Early Schooling: The National Debate* (Kagan & Zigler, 1987), many child psychologists such as Elkind and Sigel asserted that teaching academics to preschool children is dangerous and puts the child at risk intellectually and socially. The concluding statement in the book made a strong plea for "developmentally appropriate" programs for young children. The debate on the topic continues today, in particular with the launch of the new policy "The No Child Left Behind Act" in 2001 in which the Bush administration initially planned to change Head Start's comprehensive program to a focused literacy program (Strauss, 2003). In response to the new policy, Elkind (2001) argued in an article titled, "Young Einsteins: Much Too Early," that young children do not attain the level of reasoning necessary for formal instruction in reading and mathematics until the age of five or six. According to Elkind, that is why the early childhood development pioneers (such as Froebel, Montessori, Piaget, and Vygotsky) all emphasized the importance of hands-on experiences for young children and the dangers of introducing formal work with symbols too early in life. On the other hand, Whitehurst (2001), who was appointed director of the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education by President Bush, gave a counterpoint. In an article, titled "Young Einsteins: Much Too Late," Whitehurst argued that children's early reading skills are critical to later academic performance and success. Hence, the "content-centered" approaches that focus on academic content are

believed more likely to facilitate children's literacy learning, and in return to enhance their later schooling and learning.

In brief, the emerging concept of child competence may be traced to several factors including international competition, social changes, technological advances, and related research interests since the 1950s in the United States. Today, the trend of rushing children through their childhood in the pursuit of excellence and a head start is often reflected in the use of the terms "competent child" (in a positive sense), or "hurried child" and "over-scheduled child" (in a negative sense). These terms refer to a new phenomenon in which parents involve their children in numerous adult-supervised and extra-curricular activities, aimed at improving the academic, artistic, social, sporting, or psychological skills of their children.

Academic Studies

Although the so-called "competent child" or "hurried child" is an important topic in the early childhood education field, very little empirical research directly examining this issue exists in the literature. The following section presents a review of a variety of relevant studies on the topic.

Studies on the Effects of Changes in Children's Use of Time

In a national U.S. study of the children's time and family life, researchers Hofferth and Sandberg (2001) reported a major change in children's use of time between the years 1981 and 1997. They noted that children's free time had declined by 16%; that the time spent in school increased from 21 to 29 hours per week; and the largest increase was in the time preschool children spent in child care or preschool. Participation in organized sports has nearly doubled for children, and unstructured outdoor activities (e.g., walking,

hiking, and camping) have fallen by 50%. Passive leisure (not including time spent viewing television or playing video games) such as watching a sibling play structured sports has increased five fold, and studying has increased by almost 50%. In addition, family times including household conversation, mealtime, vacations, and religious practices all have declined over the period studied.

The most significant change in recent years has been in children's free time, which has become increasingly structured and is more likely to be spent in child care, preschool, after-school programs, or sports activities (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). Although the effects of these changes on children's time are only beginning to be studied, research has identified some positive outcomes from time spent in these activities. More recently, researchers have begun to focus on the relation of extracurricular activities to school achievement and other developmental outcomes. A large body of evidence has shown that participation in extracurricular activities is related to academic achievement in students (Holloway, 2000), enhanced self esteem (Hill, 1999), increased academic self-concept (House, 2000), protection against early school dropout (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997), prevention of delinquency and crime (Cassell, Chow, Demoulin, & Reiger, 2000), increased leadership ability (Dobosz & Beaty, 1999), and that such participation acted as a moderator of antisocial patterns (Mahoney, 2000). For example, a study by Mahoney and Cairns (1997) has shown that participation in extracurricular activities, even during the years prior to high school, was a protective factor related to continuing in school and to not dropping out of the school before senior year. One significant outcome of the study showed that as activity levels increased for the students who would be at highest risk, there was a reduction in the school dropout rate.

However, some researchers (e.g., Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Hunt, 2005) have warned that the positive outcomes of extracurricular participation should be viewed cautiously as most of these studies have been cross-sectional. The cross-sectional studies provide good evidence of an association but weak evidence for an actual casual inference. Hunt (2005) further pointed out that, although cross-sectional and mixed longitudinal and cross-sectional studies generally have found positive effects, with larger effects found in cross-sectional studies, the few longitudinal studies have produced mixed results. For example, Larson (1994) used a longitudinal design to study the association between sport participation and delinquency in high school, and found that the protective relation of sports to lower rates of delinquency actually reflected the negative impact of delinquency on sports participation. In other words, adolescents engaged in delinquent behaviors drop out of school athletic participation over time. The study concluded that participation in sports does not lead to a decline in engaging in delinquent activities. As a result, Hunt (2005) stated that the literature is inconclusive as "the weaker the designs, the larger the effects" (p. 419). Therefore, more longitudinal studies with appropriate controls for selection factors are needed in order to find the mediating mechanisms between extracurricular participation and development.

Studies on Early Life Experience and Brain Development

As mentioned previously, advances in technology have provided us with greater knowledge and a better understanding of brain function and human development. However, much of the understanding of the effects of early experience on brain development comes from animal studies. There are a number of studies with mice, rats and monkeys (e.g., Black, Jones, Nelson & Greenough, 1998; Greenough, Black &

Wallace, 1987; Meaney, 1988) that have examined the effects of early life events on brain development, brain characteristics and function later in life. For example, the experiments by Black, Jones, Nelson, and Greenough (1998) had shown that rats and mice raised in enriched environments (animals raised together in larger cages that were filled with a variety of objects with which they could interact) were superior at a wide range of complex tasks, such as maze learning. They further pointed out that adult rats exposed to similar environments also showed the formation of new neurons and increased neural connections. In addition, the changes were faster and greater in younger rats than adult rats. The study by Greenough, Black, and Wallace (1987) also found that enriched animals had heavier and thicker neocortexes, larger neurons with more dendrites, and more importantly, more synaptic connections.

One of the most provocative finding from brain research has been the identification of critical periods in brain development (Fischer & Rose, 1998). In a study with young children having histories of seizures, Chugani (1998) used modern neuroimaging to provide the basis for identifying the periods of exuberate neural connectivity associated with the windows of opportunity. The study indicated that children's brain activity levels stayed at a much higher level than adults'. Furthermore, the study showed that repeated use of neuronal pathways would result in certain connections being strengthened as other connections were lost. Thus, early life experiences serve not only to create new connections, but also to make other ones impossible or less likely. However, the research did not show what kinds of activities or experiences create stronger connection, and did not explain why some connections are lost (Davis, 2001).

The evidence from these scientific studies demonstrated that early life experiences influence brain development and that this early development affects behavior, learning, health and memory in later life. In other words, positive early life experiences forge the foundations for lifelong learning and behavior, and a rich nurturing environment is required and critical in optimizing the development of each child (Fischer & Rose, 1998). However, it should be noted that how these new findings are translated into more practical information about cognitive development and education is very challenging. Therefore, other researchers (e.g., Bruer, 1998; Kagan, 1998) warn about the implications and applications of brain research to educational practice, as human cognitive development is complex and multifaceted. For example, Bruer (1998) suggests that the most solid conclusion that can be drawn from the studies on brain development and critical periods is that it is vital that sensory problems such as cataracts and chronic ear infections be identified and treated as soon as possible in young children. In addition, Gopnik, Meltzoff, and Kuhl (1999) caution that while we know that extreme deprivation can do horrible harm to an infant, we do not know that extra stimulation beyond what most infants would experience in any "normal" environment will have any permanent benefits.

Studies on Effects of Early Academic Learning

Since 1960s, much has been researched and written concerning the effects of the academic structure of preschoolers, including the different types of curriculum, on children's later performance. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the debate over which teaching methods are most appropriate for young children continues today in the United States as the Bush administration promoted the new educational reforms that focused on

cognitive development, literacy, and numeracy. The tension has been between advocates of what is considered "developmentally appropriate practice" and proponents of an "academic" curriculum approach (Goffin & Wilson, 2001). The term "academic," which is modeled after elementary school practices, has been used to describe early childhood curriculum that is aimed to help children master the basic skills involving literacy and numeracy (Jacobson, 1996). From the academic perspective, young children are seen as dependent on adults' instruction in the academic knowledge and skills that are critical for later academic achievement. This perspective is in contrast to the "developmentally appropriate practice" approach that sees young children as active constructors of knowledge. Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) is described as methods of instruction that are designed to meet the developmental level of young children by encouraging learning through hands-on, constructive activities, and creative play (Goffin & Wilson, 2001). Through the National Association for the Education for Young Children (NAEYC), guidelines for DAP instruction addressing children's individual needs and skills were established (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

The dispute over curriculum and teaching methods goes back a long way in the early childhood education field. Over the past two decades, some comparative studies have been conducted (e.g., Marcon, 2002; Rescorla, Hyson, & Hirsh-Pasek, 1991; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997; Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995). The results of these comparative studies have suggested that children, who attend preschool programs that stress academics, demonstrate no long-term gains and have a less positive attitude about school than children who attend nonacademic preschool programs. For example, in the study conducted by Rescorla, Hyson, and Hirsh-Pasek (1991), they found that there

were no lasting academic advantages for those who received early academic training and that academic program orientations provided no advantage to children's intellectual development. Furthermore, in the correlational analyses, higher academic program orientations were related to less creativity, higher levels of test anxiety, and less positive attitudes toward school. They concluded that children who attended the so-called developmentally appropriate schools were more likely to have a positive attitude toward school than were their peers who attended the academic programs.

A longitudinal study on the consequences of three preschool curriculum models on participants through age 40 conducted by Schweinhart and his colleagues (2005), reported that the adult participants who had attended the direct-instruction (academic-oriented) programs engaged in twice the number of delinquent acts, participated less in sports, and had lower educational expectations than did those who had attended the developmentally appropriate programs. However, this longitudinal study was based on a well-planned, well-funded and high quality preschool intervention program for a relatively few African American children from urban and low-income families. Hence, caution with respect to its generalizability to local and non-experimental programs is the most frequent warning associated with reports of this study (e.g., Haskins, 1989).

In studies conducted by "academic" or "didactic" approach supporters, academically oriented programs have been found to improve the school achievement of low-income and minority children (e.g., Becker & Gersten, 1982; Bereiter, 1986; Gersten, Darch, & Gleason, 1988). These researchers argued that the basic skills learned in the programs allow children to experience success in school and this, in return, enhances their learning and self esteem. The effective schooling research that developed

over the past two decades has found significant short-term effects on measures of cognitive skills, noting dramatic increase in IQ and achievement scores with children's preschool attendance (Barnett, 1995; Karoly et al, 1998). Of the various curriculum models used in preschool programs, the greatest short term benefits were obtained when children participated in "didactic" programs that have a pre-academic focus (e.g., Marcon, 2002; Schweinhart et al., 2005).

However, as mentioned above, comparative research has also shown that "academic" oriented practices may have some negative effects on children's development. For example, a study conducted by Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, and Milburn (1995), compared child-centered and didactic curriculum approaches in lower-class and middle-class preschool and kindergartens to examine the effects of different early childhood curriculum approaches on children's achievement and motivation. They found that children in didactic programs had significantly higher scores on measures of academic skill than did children in child-centered programs. Being enrolled in didactic programs, however, was associated with negative outcomes on most of the motivation measures. For example, children in didactic programs rated their abilities significantly lower and expressed lower expectations for school success. In contrast, children in child-centered programs appeared to worry less about school and have higher expectations for success. The results were consistent between economically disadvantaged and middle-class children in both preschool and kindergarten. Rescorla, Hyson, and Hirsh-Pasek (1991) reported similar findings.

Studies on Chinese Emphasis of Academic Achievement

Cross-cultural research findings indicate that Chinese parents have distinctive patterns of belief, attitude, and style in parenting compared with other ethnic groups (Chao, 2001; Coll, et al., 2002; Lin & Fu, 1990; Tamis-LeMonda, et al., 2002). For example, Chinese parents were often found to be more authoritarian and directive (Chen et al., 2001; Leung, Lau, & Lam, 1998; Lin & Fu, 1990). In addition, Chinese parents believed more in "training" of their children (Chao, 2001; Lin & Fu, 1990), held higher expectations of their children in academics (Lin & Fu, 1990; Ran, 2001; Tamis-LeMonda, et al., 2002), and were found to use more formal and adult-directed instruction to teach their children (Chen & Stevenson, 1995; Huntsinger, Jose, & Larson, 1998). Researchers attributed this pattern of parenting to the traditional Confucian principles.

For two thousand years, Confucian doctrine has had a pervasive influence in East Asia. One of the most basic Confucian principles is the belief in human malleability and potential for change. With respect to child development, Confucians emphasized the undeveloped capacities of human life at birth and the perceived necessity of culture and education to educate children to be fully human. A child's intellectual, moral, and biological development is the accumulation of a long, gradual process of educational transformation (Kinney, 1995). In other words, the nature of the child was believed to be malleable and in some sense incomplete at birth, and as Confucius once said, "By nature, people are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart" (Legge, 1966, p. 318).

The malleable nature of the child is further emphasized by a Chinese philosopher, Liu Xiang (79-8 BCE). Liu Xiang used the metaphor "dyeing" to depict the gradual transformation and the importance of early environment in formatting the personality:

"Dyed in indigo, it becomes indigo; dyed in vermilion, it becomes vermilion . . . Dyeing must therefore be done with extreme caution" (Sun, 1978, p. 11). In addition, Liu Xiang's book, *Lei Nu Zhuan* or *Biographies of Virtuous Women* (Chang, 1993), stated that a child's disposition begins to develop before birth and during gestation, a condition that suggested the need for "womb education" or "tai jiao" in Chinese. When a woman got married and became pregnant, she was put into the school of "womb education" in order to impart to the child a proper disposition before the child was born. According to Liu Xiang, pregnant women were required to restrict their activities, such as avoiding spicy food, and encouraged to listen refined music, to shape the character of the upcoming child. After the child was born, parents were responsible for providing the correct environment for the child. As a result, the process of learning to become human must begin at very early ages in the family, and it is the responsibility of the elders to teach, discipline, and govern their children (Liu Xiang). A common Chinese proverb summarized this emphasis on early education: "To educate a daughter-in-law, one must begin on the first day of marriage; to educate a child, one must begin with infancy" (Xuan, 1999).

The Chinese concept of child development seems to share the same underlying mechanism of the Western environmentalists of the 1960s who emphasized the importance of the environment in shaping the expression of human potential. In addition, the practice of "womb education" in ancient China can be easily equated with the western practice of "fetal learning." However, unlike the western concept of the "competent child," Chinese children traditionally were viewed as passive and dependent creatures. Young children in traditional Chinese culture were thought to be incapable of

understanding or making independent decisions, and therefore they should not be responsible for their failing to meet expectations (Ho, 1994).

In the Chinese culture, it is a deeply rooted tradition to stress and demand academic achievement. Education has always been an important means of personal advancement. From the seventh century until 1905, examinations were used as the sole criterion for selection of officials in the Chinese civil services (Smith, 1991). For scholars and their families, the opportunity to take these examinations was probably the most critical event in their lives. Scholars could achieve their prestigious position through fair competitive examinations open to virtually all male members of the society. Social and economic mobility has been part of Chinese society. The knowledge that any man, regardless of his social and economic background, could achieve great success through fairly administrated examinations has helped "to obfuscate rigid class lines" (Smith, 1991, p. 55). Today, examinations still remain the primary path of upward mobility in modern Taiwan.

Furthermore, educational attainment is not only for social and economic mobility, but also for self-improvement. Chinese philosophy has stated that societal improvement must begin with self-improvement. The Confucian doctrine was to cultivate yourself, regulate your family, govern your state well, and then order the kingdom well. Chinese children are taught that high educational achievement is an important form of self-improvement. As a result, Chinese parents place great importance on their children's academic achievement as a means to acquire personal improvement, higher social status, wealth, and respect in Chinese society.

The emphasis on academic achievement in traditional Chinese culture is visible in the studies on Chinese parental views about young children. However, there is a little research data available in Taiwan as most of the studies on the topic have been conducted in China, Hong Kong, or Singapore. A recent study by Beckert and his colleagues (2004) is an exception. The study investigated how 423 Taiwanese parents with children in preschool viewed their child-rearing strengths and weaknesses, and found that the amount of time of spent with a child, household income, and parent education significantly influenced the dependent variable creativity. The researchers concluded that the Taiwanese parents tend to focus more on the outcome-based effects of academics in the early years of schooling than the possible positive effects of creativity for their young children. In a cross-cultural study on the comparison of child-rearing practices among Chinese, immigrant Chinese, and Caucasian-American parents, Lin and Fu (1990) reported that Chinese parents in general tended to rate higher on emphasis on achievement than Caucasian-American parents. In particular, the 44 Chinese parents from Taiwan, who had children from age 2 to 6, were found to rate academic achievement more highly than did immigrant Chinese. The study concluded that the Chinese cultural value on education still has an important influence on Chinese child-rearing practices.

An ethnographic comparative study, conducted by Tobin, Wu, and Davidson (1989), studied preschools in three cultures: China, Japan, and the United States. In the study of preschools in China, the researchers stated that Chinese respondents chose "to give children a good start academically" (p. 193) as the top reason to have preschools. The study indicated that part of the reason for the Chinese emphasis on academics is the Confucian cultural tradition of highly valuing early and strenuous study. In addition,

urban Chinese parents in China were also investing heavily in fine-art extracurricular lessons for their children because this was seen as an indication of intelligence and potential in cognitive development.

The comparative educational surveys on teacher and parent expectations of young children in 15 countries including China and Hong Kong, conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement (IEA),is another notable study. As an ongoing international study, the IEA Preprimary Project has been investigating the nature, quality, and effects of experiences of children prior to formal primary education. The research project has three interrelated phases examining the experiences and lives of young children across the world. Phase 2 of the project, with data on teacher and parent views about the importance of various areas of development for four-year-olds (Weikart, 1999), is relevant to this present discussion. Regarding parent expectations, the project reported that at least 50% of parents across the 15 countries rated language skills, self-sufficiency skills, and social skills with peers as the most important skill categories. However, almost a third of countries reported that at least 50% of parents ranked preacademic skills among the most important. In particular, 59% of parents in both China and Hong Kong ranked preacademic skills (referring to children's number, prewriting, and prereading skills) as the most important, followed by language skills and self-sufficiency skills. Also, like the majority of the parents in other countries, most parents in China and Hong Kong ranked self-assessment skills and self-expression skills as the least important.

The IEA Preprimary Project also found that there was low-congruence between the rankings of parents and teachers in both China and Hong Kong. Teachers in both

countries ranked language skill as the most important category, followed by self-sufficiency skills. Teachers and parents agreed that both language skills and self-sufficiency skills rank as the most important. However, they held opposite opinions about preacademic skills, with parents ranking this category among the most important and teachers ranking it as the least important. Furthermore, the preacademic skills category was predicted by teachers in both China (77%) and Hong Kong (100%) to be the top priority of parents. As for the parents' predictions about teachers' priorities, parents in Hong Kong predicted preacademic skills and those in China predicted language skills. The project concluded that teachers' predictions of preacademic skills and language skills could be the result of the public emphasis on the areas of development which was brought to the attention of parents by the popular press. On the other hand, parents' predictions of teachers' priority on preacademic skills could be based on their own priorities. In other words, parents may project their own priorities when making predictions about teachers' priorities.

Studies on parental views of young children in Singapore also reported similar findings (Ebbeck & Gokhale, 2004; Hoon, 1995). For example, in a study conducted by Ebbeck and Gokhale (2004) where 40 Singaporean Chinese parents were interviewed, the results indicated that 85% of the parents rated academic skills as an important aspect of an early childhood program. Interestingly, the study also reported that almost all the children had received supplementary tutoring lessons in preparation for formal schooling in their final year of the preschool program. Many parents commented that the informal form of learning at the preschool centers had worried them about their children's readiness for the rigors of primary school in Singapore. The researchers concluded that

the large number of parents who supplement the preschool program with private tutoring revealed the parents' concern about their children's academic achievement at an early age. This finding further confirmed Hoon's (1995) study. Hoon found that parents in Singapore, regardless of their social economic status, agreed unanimously that preparing children for school in terms of acquiring the basic cognitive skills and language competence was the most important reason for sending children to kindergarten. The study also reported that approximately 60% of parents acknowledged the social pressure of enrolling their children in kindergartens so that they could secure a head-start advantage for their children. Thus, parents in Singapore generally had a defined idea of the kind of kindergarten education they wanted for their children, which was an academically focused curriculum program.

Studies on Supplementary Tutoring

The number of private supplementary tutoring services in many East Asia regions, including Taiwan, has increased dramatically during the last few decades (Bray, 2001; Kwok, 2001; Zeng, 1999). As a result, the cram industry has become a billion-dollar business in Taiwan (Hsieh, 2003). Despite the fact that private supplementary tutoring is a huge enterprise in many countries, it has received little attention in the research literature. Based on my literature review, only a few cross-cultural and intra-cultural studies on supplementary tutoring have been identified (e.g., Bray & Kwok, 2003; Kwok, 2001; Rohlen, 1980; Zeng, 1999), and none of these studies examined private supplementary tutoring at the pre-primary levels. In these studies, supplementary private tutoring (or "cram") is usually defined as extra and tuition-charged academic teaching for full time students studying in regular school instructional or syllabus programs at primary

and secondary school levels. It is academically-focused, with content and assistance that aim to help students master skills that are related to daytime schooling and to pass the entrance examination to university. Supplementary tutoring also exists at the pre-primary and post-secondary levels in East Asian countries, however, it is less vigorous at these levels than at primary and secondary levels.

Two studies conducted by Rohlen (1980) and Bray and Kwok (2003) were intracultural studies, with Rohlen in Japan and Bray and Kwok in Hong Kong. Two other studies, Zeng (1999) and Kwok (2001), were comparative studies that were conducted mainly in East Asian countries including Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. These studies highlighted the nature and determinants of demand for private supplementary tutoring. They concluded that supplementary tutoring is more likely to be widespread in Confucian heritage cultures where effort for self-improvement is stressed and valued more than innate abilities. Due to the focus and context of this dissertation, the studies conducted by Rohlen (1980) in Japan and Kwok (2003) in Hong Kong are not discussed. Instead, the two comparative studies that had included Taiwan in their studies are reviewed in the next section.

Zeng (1999) conducted an ethnographic and cross-cultural study of cram schools in three East Asian cities (Seoul, Taipei, and Tokyo). The three countries were chosen for their similarities in terms of social, cultural and economic characteristics, particularly because Korea's and Taiwan's public education systems were established by the Japanese during the colonial period when the merit-based entrance exams were introduced. As a result, Zeng reported that there were more commonalities than differences among these three countries' growing demands for cram schools. For example, Zeng noted that the

high demand for supplementary tutoring schools was related to some important socio-cultural and socio-economic characteristics of the three countries' formal school curricula and features of entrance examinations. The merit-based university entrance examinations for upward social mobility, cultural and institutional structures of credentialism, and economic affluence of families were the key factors leading to growing educational expenditure on schooling children. Zeng also pointed out that Taiwan, as a Chinese culture, accepted the exam-centered system more than did Japan and Korea. Based on a telephone survey conducted in 1991, approximately 71% of Taiwanese people supported the national entrance exam and only 15% wanted to abolish it. Another difference was that Taiwan's entrance exams were relatively more difficult as the Taiwanese grading system was harsher and the exam content was more diverse than in Korea and Japan.

The study conducted by Kwok (2001) has brought the supplementary tutoring study to another level. The study was based on ethnographic research, documentary analysis, participatory observation, and semi-structured interviews during field trips to five East Asian cities (Hong Kong, Macau, Seoul, Taipei, and Tokyo) from 1998 to 2000. Kwok explored the dynamic interactions of key areas such as socio-cognitive modes of examination-oriented learning, impacts of local popular culture, degree of impact of transmitting heritage culture, and the value transformations induced by cram schools. The socio-cultural and socio-economic factors such as the nuclear nature of tutees' families, accessibility and affordability of tutoring services, and insufficiency of low levels of free academic guidance from daytime schooling have speeded up the growth and popularity of tutorial schools in East Asia. Kwok also noted that the demand for tutoring was more likely to be originated from the awareness of examinations, societal stresses being

internalized by the individual, examination-driven school cultures, meritocratic societies, credential inflation, and Confucian heritage cultural influence in these five East Asian cities. In conclusion, Kwok called for more research on this topic as private supplementary tutoring has major social and educational implications. For example, supplementary tutoring may have impact on social inequality as it is more easily available and accessible for the rich families than for the poor families. If this pattern became extreme, it could threaten the stability of a society. Moreover, Kwok explained that some daytime school teachers found difficulties in daytime teaching after doing private tutorial schools after school, and their daytime students were cared for less well. Students who attended private tutorial schools were also found to pay less attention to daytime lessons. As a result, the continuing existence of tutorial schools may pose challenges to educational systems as they may distort positive values of daytime teaching and learning and change students' daytime learning attitude.

Summary

In summary, the review of historical background, parenting advice literature, and academic studies indicated that young children's early schooling involvements has become a widespread social phenomenon in many countries including Taiwan. The literature review also suggested some key factors related to the phenomenon. Although young children's early schooling involvement has been a controversial issue for decades, limited empirical information is available addressing the critical questions surrounding the topic. In particular, advanced brain research has provided important new findings on the topic but the practical implications and applications still remain uncertain; several longitudinal studies of early schooling experiences on later developments have provided

mixed results; and direct studies on parents' perspectives on the research topic simply do not exist in the literature. In conclusion, this literature review underscores a great need to investigate the Taiwanese' perceptions and experiences on the topic.

Chapter Three ~ Methodology

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of Taiwanese mothers', children's, teachers', and administrators' perspectives and experiences regarding the "more schooling" involvements of young children. When deciding which methodology to adopt for this study, it became clear that the most appropriate methodology to explore these perceptions and experiences was a qualitative one. In this chapter, an explanation of the research approach used and processes for participant selection, data collection, and data analysis are presented and discussed. In addition, a reflection on trustworthiness and a consideration of bias as related to this study are also included.

Research Approach

In general, a qualitative approach was used in this study. Qualitative research is the term used to describe a broad range of research methods, designed to study social phenomena from the perspectives of those experiencing them (Cresswell, 1997; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Qualitative design involves certain assumptions and characteristics, which differentiate it from quantitative research. Typically, the research focus in a qualitative design is on participants' perceptions and experiences of the particular phenomenon under study, with the goal of elucidating the subjective meaning of the phenomenon and the context in which such meaning is shaped. Qualitative methods are designed to allow participants to express fully their thoughts about the research topic, thereby allowing for freedom of response and richness of data. The underlying research questions tend to be general, exploratory and descriptive in nature, and the research process is open-ended. In qualitative research, relatively unstructured

data gathering techniques are employed to elicit individuals' perspectives and explore the social or cultural contexts.

In particular, this study took a phenomenological approach by focusing on the lived experiences of the participants. According to Giorgi (1997), the fundamental characteristic of phenomenology is that it "thematizes the phenomenon of consciousness, and in its most comprehensive sense, it refers to the totality of the lived experiences that belong to a single person" (p. 236). From the perspective of a qualitative paradigm, and especially of phenomenology, reality is subjective and multiple (Denscombe, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). In a phenomenological study, qualitative researchers aim to discover subjects' experiences and how subjects make sense of these. The challenge of qualitative research is to develop an understanding of the topic under investigation based on the multiple realities experienced by participants. In order to meet this challenge, a researcher must fully explore the topic in the context of everyday experience by understanding and presenting a detailed view of people's experiences.

The present research was developed to examine the experiences and perceptions of Taiwanese mothers, children, teachers, and administrators related to early schooling involvements. Given the nature of the research described above, a qualitative design (with a phenomenological orientation) was deemed appropriate for this study as it is one of the approaches that strive to ensure participants feel free to express their understanding in their own words.

According to Morse and Morse (2002), qualitative study is strengthened through triangulation to verify, illuminate, or challenge alternative interpretations that are derived from the study. The use of multiple methods (i.e., focus group, individual interview, and

content review) and different data sources (i.e., mothers, children, teachers, and administrators) within the current study were designed to enhance the trustworthiness of the information. The following is a further description of each method used in the study.

Methods

There are several methods commonly used in qualitative research such as participant observation and one-to-one interviews. In this study, two main methods of data collection were focus groups and individual interviews which allow participants to talk at length in their own words and at their own level of understanding (Denscombe, 2003; Morgan, 1988). The interview is a form of conversation, based on the art of asking questions and listening. However, it is not normal conversation because the interviewer creates the reality of the interview situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kvale, 1996). Interviews are a particularly useful method to ascertain participants' thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and retrospective accounts of the phenomenon of interest (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). The researcher is more likely to gain important insights based on the in-depth information gathered from the knowledge of "key informants" than from other methods such as observation. In interviews, informants have the opportunity to expand and explain their views, ideas, and opinions. In the process of data collection, interviews are flexible in allowing interviewers to adjust to the lines of enquiry during the interview itself. In addition, direct contact with subjects means that the accuracy and relevance of data can be checked during the interview process. In the next sections, the definition, features, and limitations of focus groups and individual interviews are further discussed.

Focus Groups. Focus groups are considered to be a combination of participant observation and the one-to-one interview (Morgan, 1988). Fundamentally, focus groups

are "a way of listening to people and learning from them" (p. 9). In general, focus groups consist of a small group of people who are brought together by a researcher to explore perceptions, feelings and ideas about a topic (Krueger & Casey, 2000). A description of focus group process is given by Krueger (1994):

> The focus group interview . . . taps into human tendencies. Attitudes and perceptions relating to concepts, products, services or programs are developed in part by interaction with other people. We are a product of our environment and are influenced by people around us. (p. 10)

This description links to one of the key features of the focus group, which is group interaction. In the group context of a focus group, group interaction is explicitly used to generate data and insights (Morgan, 1988). Participants in focus groups present their views and experiences, but also hear from other people in the group. They typically listen, reflect on what is said, ask questions, seek clarification, comment on what they have heard, and prompt others to reveal more. As a result, additional information is triggered by this group process (Krueger, 1994).

In addition, the interaction among participants replaces some of the interaction that would come from an interviewer in a one-to-one interview (Morgan, 1988). In other words, the effect of the moderator in a focus group is more easily lessened than the effect of an interviewer in a one-to-one interview. Krueger and Casey (2000) comment that this lessened effect results because participants in a focus group partially assume the role of the interviewer. Thus, the researcher potentially has less effect on the data. The relative loss of control may result in data that places more emphasis on the ideas and perspectives

of the group, and as a result, the data may more realistically represent the participants' views than data from one-to-one interviews.

Another feature of focus groups is that groups are natural settings for human discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2000). According to Krueger (1998), focus groups are "carefully planned discussions designed to obtain perceptions on defined areas of interest in a permissive and non-threatening environment" (p. 18). The idea of using groups is that the natural environment of group process can help people to explore and clarify their perceptions in ways that would not be easily accessible in a one-to-one interview; in a focus group the participants are influencing and influenced by others in the group. Some of the studies that have been conducted on focus groups show that group participants report that the experience is more gratifying and stimulating than one-to-one interviews (Krueger & Casey; Morgan, 1988).

In addition, a focus group is more efficient than individual interview because it involves more participants at any one time. It can provide a good deal of general information about participants' perspectives. Thus, focus groups enable researchers to gather large amounts of information in a limited period of time.

Although there are important features or advantages to using focus groups, there are also several disadvantages. First, researchers have less control over the data generated by the participants in focus group research than in the one-to-one interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2000). In the one-to-one interview where the interaction occurs only between the interviewee and the interviewer, the interviewer has more control over the discussion.

Second, focus groups may not produce constructive group interaction, thus richness of data is not guaranteed (Krueger & Casey, 2000). For example, some people may be

more inhibited in a focus group than in a one-to-one interview, while others may view themselves as experts and dominate the conversation.

Third, a focus group is more difficult to moderate when compared to interviewing an individual (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Moderators need to know when to pause, probe, and move onto the next topic. For example, moderators must be able to detect when the group has finished discussing an issue and ensure that everyone had a chance to make a contribution. At the same time, moderators must also ensure that no individual dominates the discussion.

Fourth, analyzing focus group data can be very difficult (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The focus group transcription can be more complex than in one-to-one interviews because two or more participants may talk at the same time and participants' voices may not be clear on the audio tape. Also, during the analysis, comparing focus group data with data from other focus groups can be difficult. This is due to the moderator's limited control over the focus group discussion, thus the information gained from focus groups may not be as easy to compare as that from one-to-one interviews (Morgan, 1988).

The fifth disadvantage of focus groups is that assembling groups of people can be time consuming (Morgan, 1988). Although focus groups allow researchers to examine a numbers of participants at one time, assembling participants can be difficult due to participants' busy lifestyles.

Finally, other disadvantages of group discussion include limited time and depth of involvement, particularly with certain types of people and sensitive issues (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999). As described previously, a focus group may provide general information about participants' perspectives and behaviors which individual interviews

cannot elicit. However, the topic may be sensitive to some participants and might limit their willingness to contribute to the group discussion. One way to resolve this problem is to use individual interviews as a follow-up method. Individual interviews may provide much greater detail into particular perspectives and the explanations for these, especially when the issues might be too sensitive for some participants to discuss in a group. In this study, individual interviews were conducted to explore fully and effectively the meanings and differences of participants' views on the issues.

Individual Interviews. An individual interview involves a meeting between one researcher and one informant. Usually, one-to-one interviews achieve a high level of co-operation (Denscombe, 2003; Morgan, 1988). The individual interviewers can probe in much greater detail into particular perceptions and experiences as well as elicit additional information that was missed or was not available during the focus group.

Compared to focus groups, the advantages of using individual interviews are that they are relatively easy to arrange as only two people are involved, and they are easy to control as the researcher only has one person's ideas to grasp and guide. In addition, the views and perspectives expressed throughout the interview come from one source, and this makes it easier for researchers to link specific ideas with a specific participant.

A major difference between individual interviews and focus groups is that the latter place more control in the hands of the participants rather than the researcher (Denscombe, 2003; Morgan, 1988). Thus, the effect of the interviewer in a one-to-one interview is more likely to increase compared to the effects of the moderator in a focus group. Other disadvantages of individual interviews include the time and cost involved in conducting them and in analyzing the transcripts. Although assembling groups of people for focus

groups can be time consuming, the costs of interviewer's time, of travel and of transcription can be relatively high with individual interviews as more informants are typically involved at different times.

The two methods of interviewing were combined in this study to cross validate the data that derived from both focus groups and individual interviews. As the main focus of this study was understanding the subjective experience of the phenomenon, focus groups and individual interviews were appropriate choices.

Content Review. In addition to the focus groups and individual interviews with the participants, a content review of the parental advice literature in Taiwan was conducted. The main focus of this content review was on the attitudes toward children's early learning development in the Taiwanese context. The content review on the parenting magazines, books, and flyers of promoting early learning programs (such as English and music lessons for young children) assisted in understanding Taiwanese perceptions on the topic. However, the content review served only as complementary data to the study as critics of parental advice literature have pointed out that parents do not necessary follow the advice in the literature (e.g., Wrigley, 1989). There were two criteria employed in this study for selection of the content materials. First, the materials would reflect the main sources of information on the topic. In Taiwan, parenting magazines, relevant books, and program flyers are the most common printed information for parents and educators. Second, the available materials would reveal the most recent views on early learning. Thus, relevant advertisement flyers that were collected over a one-year period, four popular parenting magazines from 2000 to 2004, and parenting books that were available to parents at major bookstores in this particular city were reviewed by the researcher.

Site Selection

The main focus of the study was to explore Taiwanese perspectives and experiences of young children's early schooling involvements using a qualitative research approach. An important element in a qualitative research undertaking is determining and describing which persons and sites are to be studied (Denscombe, 2003). The site selection and sampling in this study was designed to obtain small samples of information-rich cases of individuals (i.e., mothers, young children, preschool teachers, and administrators).

The study was conducted in two preschools in Changhua City, Taiwan. The city is an industrial city located in the west-central part of Taiwan. There were three reasons for selecting Changhua as the research setting. First, according to Lee (1999), Changhua's enrollment of children in preschools and cram schools was among the highest for cities in Taiwan. As a result, the city was an appropriate site that was more likely to yield relevant and rich data. Second, because the researcher's access and relationship to the setting were evaluated as important criteria in selecting the setting (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996), the researcher's previous work experiences in the city and personal relationship (i.e., home town) to the city helped facilitate the study. The third reason for selecting this particular city was to conduct the research outside of Taipei. As most general research on early childhood education has been conducted in Taipei, there is a greater need to conduct research elsewhere in order to have a better understanding of the broader Taiwanese context.

Two preschools, one public and one private, were selected for this study. The rationale for this selection was to allow for variation in terms of the participants' family income levels, educational backgrounds and employment status. Both preschools were

popular in this city, and had high student enrollment numbers. The selected public preschool was one of the few public preschools in the city. This public preschool, like most public preschools in Taiwan, was known for its high teacher qualifications and low tuition. During the time of data collection, the public preschool had approximately 240 students. Five and six years old children attended either morning or afternoon classes. The parents paid approximately $2,500 per month (equivalent to $108 Canadian dollars). The private preschool was considered by the City Bureau of Education to be one of the best private preschools (it has won the "Kindergarten Excellence Award" for four years) and, with approximately 400 children, had the largest number of students in the city. This preschool was licensed for children from ages four to six years and it charged much higher tuition (approximately $8,300 per month; equivalent to $360 Canadian dollars) than the public preschool.

Prior to the actual data collection, a number of preliminary tasks were completed in order to legitimatize the research. First, initial cover letters asking for permission to conduct the study were mailed to the two preschools (see Appendix C) and the City Bureau of Education (see Appendix D). In Taiwan, every city has a City Bureau of Education that is in charge of the city's education system including early childhood education. The cover letter was sent to the director in the City Bureau of Education that was charged with the early childhood education division at the time of the study. Second, a research request with the written approval from the two participating preschools and the City Bureau of Education was submitted to the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Victoria. All research included in this dissertation was granted approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Victoria (see Appendix O).

All potential ethical issues, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity were addressed in the ethical review.

Participants

In general, phenomenology is an approach that investigates how social life or an event is constructed by those who participate in it (Denscombe, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In other words, the focus is on the way people interpret events and make sense of their personal experiences. The main purpose of this study was to understand how the phenomenon of involving young children's early schooling activities was experienced and interpreted by those involved. Taiwanese mothers, as the primary decision makers with respect to their young children's early childhood care and education (Ho, 1994), were recruited for the study and considered the key informants in providing information about their own ways of making sense of the phenomenon. Children, teachers, and administrators, who also lived through the experience, were interviewed and served as the secondary set of data sources in an effort to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Thirty-two mothers were involved in the four focus groups and 3 preschool teachers were involved in the individual interviews. Of the 32 mothers who participated in the focus groups, 4 mothers were later invited to participate in individual interviews, and 10 mothers gave permission to have their young children involved in child-pair interviews. In addition, two preschool directors and one director at the City Bureau of Education were invited to participate in the individual interviews. Detailed background information about the participants is provided in the following sections.

Mothers

Focus Groups. Focus groups were the primary data source for this study because the researcher wanted to encourage participants to share their experiences with one another and thus generate a broad range of perceptions related to early learning (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The present study employed a "criterion" sampling approach which identified individuals who met some specific criterion (Cresswell, 1997). Two criteria for selecting the participants from the above preschools were that they be: (a) mothers of young students aged five and six as the public preschool only recruited children from ages five to six; and (b) mothers whose children attended both cram school and preschool, or mothers whose children attended only preschool.

The initial sampling plan was to include mothers of children who attended both cram school and preschool and mothers whose children attended preschool only. The underlying assumption for selecting these two categories of mothers was that they might reflect two different orientations to and experiences of early childhood education. In this study, 32 mothers were grouped into two categories based on their preschoolers' early schooling involvements: (a) mothers who had children in preschool (preschool-only) or in preschool and also in one "non-school" related (one-talent) lesson; and (b) mothers who had children in preschool and also in more than one lesson (non-school-related or school-related lessons). The "one-talent" group referred to children who were taking only one non-school related lesson at the time of the interview. In the second category of participants, mothers were further divided into "talent-only" and "talent-and-cram" groups. "Talent-only" referred to mothers whose children attended multiple non-school related (talent) lessons such as art, music, and dance. Consequently, the "talent-and-

cram" group included mothers who had their children in both non-school related or talent (e.g., art) and school-related or cram (e.g., mathematics) lessons.

The above categorization was due to the small number of "preschool-only" mothers who volunteered in both preschools (only 3 from public and 2 from private). As both directors at the preschools commented, a large number of children in their schools were involved in some type of talent or cram school activities outside the regular school hours. This is indicative of the widespread social trend of involving young children in more formal schooling activities at early ages in Taiwan.

In total, 5 mothers were identified as "preschool-only," 7 as "one-talent," 9 as "talent-only" and 11 as "talent-and-cram" group. A total of four focus group discussions were conducted for this study. The number and category of the participants in the two preschools and the date of the focus group interviews are shown in Table 1 below (see Appendix A for demographic information).

Table 1: Category of Focus Groups for Mothers

Type of School	Children in "talent-only" and "talent-and-cram" schools	Children in preschool-only and "one-talent" schools	Total (N = 32)
Public Preschool	Focus Group #1 (n = 7) March 4, 2004	Focus Group #2 (n = 8) March 12, 2004	n = 15
Private Preschool	Focus Group #3 (n = 8) March 18, 2004	Focus Group #4 (n = 9) March 25, 2004	n = 17

This categorization was not only for research convenience, but also based on homogeneity consideration. The homogeneity of the group was taken into consideration

when grouping the participants. Krueger and Casey (2000) stated that focus group participants should have several important characteristics in common. The problem with a heterogeneous focus group is that some participants may become intimidated by others who appear to be more experienced, knowledgeable, or more highly educated (Krueger & Casey, 2000). In this study, some attempts were made to ensure that focus group participants shared some characteristics in order to create a sense of homogeneity within the group: (a) mothers of five-year-old or six-year-old young children; (b) mothers of children from the same preschool; and (c) mothers of children with similar schooling experiences. The separation of two categories was to ensure that the participants within each group had similar backgrounds and experience in their children's early schooling involvements. That is, relatively, mothers who had their children only in preschool may have had more in common with mothers who had children in preschool and only one "talent" lesson than with mothers in the other category. In addition, as Morgan (1988) and Krueger and Casey (2000) comment, a focus group should have no fewer than 4 participants and no more than 12 participants; each focus group in this study contained at least 7 participants. As a result, the number of people in the group and the homogeneity of the group were taken into consideration when categorizing the mother participants.

An *Information Sheet* (see Appendix J) was given to all the focus group participants at the end of each focus group session. The *Information Sheet* was designed to provide background information for data analysis. It contained questions on the participants' backgrounds and an invitation to individual interviews for mothers and pair interviews for their children. The background questions were developed to gain information on the participants' educational level, personal experience with talent/cram school, employment

status, and their children's age and gender. More importantly, the sheet provided information on the types, numbers, and lengths of children's involvements in talent/cram school programs.

Based on the information provided by the *Information Sheet*, 8 of the 32 mothers had taken some types of lessons in their own childhoods. However, the number might actually be lower than eight. Due to the lack of age indication on the question of "Did you attend a talent/cram school as a child" some mothers checked the box "yes" while actually taking lessons during the elementary school years. In fact, some mothers mentioned during the focus group discussions that they took lessons when they were in elementary school rather than in preschool. The completed education level of the mothers was mostly postsecondary education. Twenty-two mothers earned junior college degrees, seven earned college degrees, two had high school diplomas, and one had a junior high school diploma. In terms of working status, 11 mothers had full-time jobs, 5 had part-time jobs, 5 owned their own business, and 11 were full-time mothers.

Individual Interviews. From the respondents' Information Sheet, 6 of 32 mothers volunteered to participate in the individual interviews. However, only four mothers were invited to the individual interviews for several reasons. First, as the follow-up method was intended to verify and extend information obtained from the focus groups, mothers who were believed by the researcher to be able to provide additional information were selected. Based on the review of focus group transcripts and notes, mothers whose perspectives seemed to be lacking, unclear, and insufficient were invited to the in-depth interview. Second, mothers who were believed by the researcher to have provided sufficient information during the focus group were not selected, as the individual in-depth

interview was to ensure that all the participants had ways of communicating their points of view. In other words, mothers whose participation was limited during the focus groups were invited, to seek further understanding of their perceptions. Third, in order to have an equal number of representatives from each focus group, one mother from each of the four groups was recruited. Last, due to the limitations of time and financial resources for this study, only a small number of participants were included. As a result of the above considerations, the two mothers who seemed to have struggled with some issues that were raised in the focus group, and the two mothers who had little opportunity to express their thoughts were invited to participate in individual in-depth interviews. All four mothers agreed to participate.

In brief, of the 32 mothers that participated in the focus groups, 4 mothers (one from each focus group) were invited to an in-depth individual interview with the researcher. Two of these mothers had their children in both non-school-related and school-related lessons, one in a non-school-related lesson, and one had not been involved in any types of lessons. The interview content was directly related to the topics that were discussed during the focus groups. (Interview procedures and questions are discussed later in this chapter.)

Children

Children, as important informants who had lived the experiences on a daily basis, were included in this study. The recruitment of children whose mothers had participated in the individual interviews was done in order to gain insights into children's perspectives, to verify the data gained from their mothers, and to enable the researcher to understand more fully the topic under study. The participants in the focus groups were

given the *Information Sheet* (see Appendix J) to request permission for pair interviews for their children.

With the mothers' and children's permissions, ten children (three female and seven male) were involved in the pair interviews (see Appendix B). Seven of the ten children in the interviews were six-years-old, and three were five-years-old. In addition, three of the ten children in the interviews were not involved in any lessons. In total, two pair interviews were conducted in the public preschool and three in the private preschool. Children were paired with other children who had similar early learning experiences. For example, children with "cram" school experiences were grouped as a pair.

As indicated by the *Information Sheets*, the 32 mothers who participated in the focus group discussions, had 37 children reported to be in the preschools (see Appendix A). All the mothers in the public preschool had only one child enrolled and five mothers in the private preschool reported that they had two children in the same preschool. In total, 15 children were male and 22 children were female, and all were between the ages of five and six.

The data derived from the *Information Sheet* (see Appendix J) across the four focus groups revealed that the most frequent activity in which the 37 children were involved was arts (n = 23) such as drawing lessons. The second most frequently engaged in activity was music (n = 17) particularly playing musical instruments such as piano and drum. It should be noted that some children might take two "arts" or/and "music" at the same time. For example, one participant's child was taking drawing, "paper clay" and piano concurrently. Because all the children in the private preschool had English as a part of the curriculum, English was perhaps the most frequently engaged in activity.

Among the 22 children in the study, 8 were in the "bilingual class" where children had an English lesson everyday taught by a native-speaking teacher. As for the other 14 children, they were in the class that had an English lesson two times a week taught by a native Chinese-speaking English teacher. The next most frequent activity was "abacus-mental math" (8 of the 37 children). This mathematics-based program is about teaching children to use the Chinese abacus to calculate rapidly and accurately and then eventually to calculate mentally. Only 6 children of the 37 children were not involved in either "talent" or "cram" school programs.

Professionals

For the secondary set of data sources, three teachers and two directors from the two preschools and one director from the City Bureau of Education were selected and recruited for 30-minute individual interviews. As the purpose of this study was to understand Taiwanese perceptions of young children's early schooling experiences, it was important to include the individuals who could provide meaningful information, such as early childhood education teachers and administrators. However, due to the nature of the study (qualitative study), the complementary feature of the second data source, the time and financial resource limitations of the study, only a relatively small number of these individuals was interviewed.

The invitation letters were distributed to all the preschool teachers. Three teachers volunteered to participate in an individual interview. The directors from the two preschools (there was only one director in each preschool) were also interviewed for their knowledge of the field and front-line experiences in supervising the preschools. In addition, the director from the City Bureau of Education, who was in charge of the city's

early childhood education division (there is only one director in this division) at the time of the study, was invited to be interviewed. All the preschool teachers and directors in this study were female and had at least eight years of teaching experience. The director at the City Bureau of Education was the only man interviewed in the study and he had been in the position for three years.

In summary, the following participants were included in the study: thirty-two mothers in four focus groups; four mothers from each of the focus groups; ten young children whose mothers had participated in the study; three teachers; two directors from the preschools and a director from the City Bureau of Education.

Protocols and Questions

In qualitative research, multiple skills and strategies rather than standardized instrumentation are usually employed in exploring the participants' experiences and the related social contexts (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Typically, a broad topic guide is used to conduct the study and a more detailed agenda emerges throughout the process of the study (Cresswell, 1997). In this study, the two main methods of qualitative data collection were focus group discussions and individual interviews. A set of protocol questions initially guided the focus group and individual interview process, but participants were encouraged to talk about those issues that affected their lives most directly (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although the questions used in both formats were established prior (except for the individual interviews of the four mothers, where the questions were based on the focus group discussions) they were open-ended and allowed participants to supply the depth and breadth of information they wanted to share (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Focus Group Questions

The focus groups were conducted with the mother participants. The goal was to understand the participants' views of young children's early schooling involvements. The protocol (see Appendix I) guided a conversation seeking the participants' general opinions and experiences about young children's "more schooling" involvement (Creswell, 1998; Krueger & Casey, 2000). In the focus groups, the framework for questioning followed general guidelines for facilitating focus group discussions. This framework was further modified after the pilot study.

After gaining permission from the university ethics committee, a small pilot study was conducted in mid-February in Taiwan. Four mothers who had similar backgrounds (i.e., mothers of children aged four to six years who had children either in preschool-only or non-school and school-related activities) as the targeted participants for the main study were involved to clarify the language and meaning of the focus group interview protocol. Participants from the pilot study were asked to comment on the appropriateness and clarity of the wording and the content of focus group questions. The protocols proved to be appropriate as the mothers were able to understand and participate in the discussion. However, some changes were made to the wording and order of the questions based on the responses from the pilot study participants. For example, as suggested by the mothers, the question on participants' personal experiences with young children's early schooling involvements was asked first rather than the question on the descriptive definition of the term "the earlier the better." In addition, the word "talent" was added next to the word "cram" in both protocol and *Information Sheet*, as the mothers pointed out that the two words were used reciprocally in Taiwan.

In this study, the discussion began with introductory information about topics and purposes of the focus group, explanatory information about the confidentiality of the study, ground rules for participating in the discussion, proceeded to key questions, and concluded with a debriefing of the summary of the discussion. The debriefing at the end of the focus group was to clarify the participants' input and solicit any additional thoughts (Krueger, 1998).

The focus group protocol is not intended to dictate the order or the specific content of the discussions, but rather to help the researcher focus on the discussions. The eight open-ended questions related to the research questions were developed to encourage the participants to provide the researcher with rich information (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

The participants were first asked to share their personal experiences of their young children's early schooling activities. This opening question was designed to help the participants connect with each other by sharing experiences. The questions on the reasons, meanings, and concerns for enrolling or not enrolling children in early schooling activities were developed to identify the benefits and problems that the participants perceived with enrollment. In the focus group, each participant was asked to define or describe what the term "the earlier the better" meant to her. The descriptive definitions of the term would provide information on how the participants were different and similar in their understandings and perceptions of the phenomenon of involving young children in more early schooling activities. Then the participants were asked to describe children's most and least favorite activities; this question was aimed at exploring the participants' understanding of their children's early schooling activities, and to check if the answers were consistent with the children's responses in the children's pair interviews. The

participants were also asked if there were changes in the perceptions of their young children's early schooling involvements. In addition, the participants were also asked to provide information about their family's expenses for children's early childhood education programs. This question was mainly developed from a review of literature regarding the high amount Taiwanese families spend on children's educational programs and activities.

Mothers' Individual Interview Questions

The individual interviews with an "interview guide approach" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) took place after the focus group discussions were transcribed in order to use the focus group information to construct interview questions and cross-validate the focus group information. The main purpose of the individual interviews with four mothers who participated in the focus groups was to further understand the mothers' perceptions of early learning which may have been either limited or hidden during the focus group discussion.

Like the focus group protocol, the purpose and voluntary nature of the interview were outlined and explained to the participants at the beginning of the interviews (see Appendix K). The opening question was designed to give the mothers the opportunity to expand, clarify, or comment on the focus group discussion. The specific questions asked in these interviews were based on each mother's responses to the focus group discussion. The questions varied from seeking additional information on an issue, to clarification of a term, to verification of a perception. The mothers who did not say much in the focus group were asked to talk more about their personal understanding and perception of the issues that were discussed in the focus groups. For instance, one mother was asked to

respond to the term "the earlier the better" and elaborate on her own understanding of the term. Some mothers were asked to clarify terms that were mentioned in the focus groups. For example, one mother was asked to clarify and explain the term "readiness" that was mentioned by a mother during the group discussion.

At the conclusion of each individual interview, the researcher reviewed and summarized the interview in order to clarify the participants' input. All individual interviews were audiotaped, and notes were taken during interviews to ensure accurate data collection.

Children's Interview Questions

In addition to the mother focus group and in-depth interviews, children whose mothers had participated in the focus groups were asked to participate in pair interviews. With young children, informal interviewing in pairs is considered to be more effective than conducting individual interviews (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). Children are more relaxed when in the company of other children and they also tend to keep each other on track and truthful (Walsh, Tobin & Graue, 1993). Therefore, children were interviewed in pairs in this study.

The main purpose of the children's interviews was to gain insights into children's perceptions and understanding of the topic of early schooling involvements as they were the key informants who lived the experiences on a daily basis. Moreover, the information gathered in the children's interviews was used to cross-validate the data gained from the mothers in the focus groups and individual interviews.

An interview protocol with specific questions regarding children's experiences and feelings about early schooling involvements was developed to guide the interview

direction (see Appendix L). Prior to the data collection, two five-year-old children (one was involved in two non-school related activities and another was not involved in any activities) with backgrounds similar to the targeted participants were interviewed to clarify the language of the interview protocol. The interview protocol was modified by adding the word "talent" to "cram" school activities as the two terms were used reciprocally by the children.

The children-pair interviews began with the introduction of the researcher, an explanation of the purpose of the interview, and a confirmation of the voluntary nature of the interview. The opening questions about the preschool activities were asked first as they were easily understood and responded to by the children. The question on the most and the least favorite talent or cram school activities and the question on having the choice to go or not go to the activities were developed to explore children's "true" feelings toward the lessons and also to verify the data gained from the mothers. At the end of the interview, the children were asked why some children go or do not go to talent or cram school. This question was designed to discover the children's understanding of involvement in more early schooling activities.

The interviews with children were not audio recorded as a tape recorder may have been a distraction to the children (Walsh, Tobin & Graue, 1993). Instead interview notes were taken by the researcher to record the interview conversations.

Professionals' Interview Questions

Three preschool teachers, two preschool directors and a director of the City Bureau of Education participated in individual interviews. The researcher conducted these interviews seeking an understanding of what professionals in early childhood education

thought about involving young children in more early schooling activities. The information collected from the professionals was used for comparison with the data from the mothers.

The interview protocol for the professionals consisted mainly of a brief introduction to the purpose and confidentiality of the study, followed by semi-structured questions regarding the issues of young children's early learning experiences (see Appendices M and N). The question on children's required skills for primary school was developed to examine the similarities and differences among the professionals and between the mothers group and the professionals. The role of cram school and the differences in the agendas of preschool, ministry and cram schools were also asked in order to explore the professionals' insights about and attitudes toward the phenomenon. The last question on the influences or impacts of the Ministry of Education on preschools and cram schools was designed to gain a general picture of the relationship between the three educational institutions (the Ministry of Education, preschool, and cram school). The questions were slightly different for the preschool educators and the director of City Bureau of Education. This difference was due to their different roles in the early childhood education field as the preschool educators were the practitioners and the director was the educational policy administrator. For example, the director at City Bureau of Education was asked to explain how the ministry implemented the guidelines.

The researcher used a probing and conversational style similar to that used in the focus groups. Like all the adult interviews, the professional interviews were audiotaped and notes were taken by the researcher during the interviews.

Procedure

The following section describes the data collection procedures for the focus groups and interviews (i.e., with mothers, children, teachers, and administrators). In addition, the procedure for the content review of parental advice literature in Taiwan is also presented.

Focus Groups

The two participating preschools were contacted in person to arrange the recruitment procedures. First, an invitation letter explaining the purpose and method of the study and requests for background information on children's early schooling involvement were distributed to all the classes of children five to six-years-old in both the public preschool and the private preschool (see Appendix E). After a week, the mothers who had returned the invitation letters (26 returned volunteer responses from the public preschool and 30 from the private school) were contacted by phone to schedule focus group interviews. Due to time conflicts and other reasons such as family issues, 17 mothers (8 from the public preschool and 9 from the private preschool) had chosen not to participate in the study. Based on the number of participants (39 mothers) who agreed to participate, four focus groups were arranged. Participants were told that the group would be informal and about eight people like themselves would discuss the topic. Three days before each focus group, a card giving the time and place of the discussion, instructions on how to get there, and the researcher's name and telephone number were given to the participants. Before the day of the focus groups, four mothers (two from each preschool) had called the researcher to withdraw from the study due to some personal or family reasons. In addition, three mothers did not attend the focus group meeting and a grandmother attended to represent the mother. As a result, a total of 31 mothers (14 from

the public preschool and 17 from the private preschool) and 1 grandmother were involved in four focus group discussions.

As explained earlier, mothers were divided into two categories: mothers of children in preschool-only and mothers of children in preschool and "one-talent" schools; and mothers of children in "talent-only" and "talent-and-cram" school.

Focus groups lasted from 90 to 120 minutes and were always held in the community centre where there was a quiet and comfortable meeting room to minimize disruptions. The community center was selected after consideration of the need for a "neutral site" where the participants would not feel influenced by the surroundings (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999). The community center's availability, accessibility, and neutrality for the participants and the researcher made it an ideal place for focus group discussions. In addition, refreshments were served for group meetings as this is expected in Taiwan. Child care service was also provided as some mothers required child minding during the focus group discussions.

The four focus groups were conducted by a moderator (the researcher) and an assistant. Each focus group discussion was guided by a protocol as described earlier. The researcher gave an overview of the study, distributed and explained the consent forms, and discussed the importance of maintaining the privacy of comments made within the group. In order to ensure that participants understood the voluntary basis of their participation in the study, they were told at this time that they could choose to withdraw from the study, if they wished, with no negative consequences to themselves or their children. The participants were asked to value all comments, to respect a variety of perspectives, and to keep confidentiality within the group. In addition, all participants

were asked to choose a pseudonym at the beginning of the focus group discussions to keep their identities confidential.

As the purpose of the study was to learn from the participants, the researcher's (moderator) involvement was kept at a level to allow the participants to carry on the conversation and at the same time to guide the direction of the discussion. The researcher adapted questions as needed to enable the direction of discourse to be shaped by the participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000). For example, probes could be utilized to expand or clarify participants' meanings on an issue, and further discussion might be based on the modified questions that reflected participants' perspectives. To ensure consistency across focus groups and to make comparisons among focus groups, the same questions were asked at each focus group meeting. At the end of each focus group discussion, the researcher summarized the discussion to check participants' perceptions and to allow the group to add or delete from that summary.

A multidirectional audiotape recorder was used to record the focus group discussions. In addition to audiotaping, an assistant moderator was recruited. The assistant moderator was a female college student with a major in early childhood education. She attended all the focus groups to take notes in Chinese that identified each speaker (this information is often not obvious from just listening to the audiotape) and to record each speaker's main points during the discussions. These notes were useful for the transcribing of the focus group recorded audiotapes and also served as backup data in case of audiotape technical problems.

Finally, a children's story book was given to each of the participants in the focus groups. In addition, an *Information Sheet* (see Appendix J) that contained questions on

the participants' backgrounds and an invitation to individual interviews with mothers and pair interviews with their children was given to each participant to complete at the end of the focus group. The *Information Sheets* were collected by the researcher in order to recruit some mothers for individual interviews and children for pair interviews.

At the end of each focus group discussion, the notes recorded by the researcher and assistant were reviewed and verified. In addition, the research assistant transcribed the focus group discussion immediately afterwards. After the completion of verbatim transcription of each focus group, all the participants were informed about the availability and accessibility of the transcription. In total, five mothers (including two who were involved in individual interviews) requested to read the focus group transcription, and they made no requests for changes to the original focus group transcripts.

Individual Interviews with Mothers

In this study, four mothers were recruited from the participants of the focus groups to participate in individual interviews. The four mothers were contacted by phone to schedule individual interviews. The individual interviews were held in the locations identified by the mothers as most comfortable for them. Two interviews were held in participants' homes and the other two in the preschool's conference room. The four interviews each lasted approximately 30 minutes. A verbatim transcription of the focus group discussion was offered to the mothers who wished to read it before the individual interviews. This was to invite further exploration and discussion of the issues that were not explored in the focus group discussion. Two mothers had read the verbatim transcript before the interview.

Similar to the focus groups, the individual interviews started with the distribution of the consent form where the confidentiality and right to withdraw from the study at any time were explained to the mothers by the researcher. A set of protocol questions, based on each individual mother's responses and reactions during the focus group discussion, guided the interview process. The participants were encouraged to talk about the issues that they would like to clarify or discuss further. Each interview was audiotaped with the mother's permission and then transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Once the interviews were transcribed, copies were given to the participants who were asked to clarify any of the content that seemed unclear to them. No changes to the content in the transcripts were requested by the mothers.

Children's Pair Interviews

Children whose mothers had participated in the focus groups and had checked "yes" on the *Information Sheet* for agreeing to have their children participate in a paired interview were included in the study. With the mothers' permissions to conduct pair interviews with their children, two copies of the child consent form were given to the mothers to sign (one for the mother to keep and another to return to the interviewer) prior to the interview. After receiving the consent forms, pair interviews with children were arranged based on the children's schedules. This was to avoid withdrawing children from major activities or lessons. The interviews were approximately 15-minutes in length. All the children's pair interviews took place in the preschool's conference room as this is part of the children's familiar school setting.

The children's pair interviews were guided by a protocol (see Appendix L) with a brief introduction of the researcher and an explanation of the purpose of the study.

Children's participation in the study was completely voluntary. They were told that they could withdraw from the study at any time without explanation and consequences. As described previously, the seven questions were developed to gain information about children's feelings and understanding of their early schooling involvements. During the interview, the conversation was not tape-recorded and only field notes were taken by the researcher. However, at the end of each session, the researcher read the notes back to the children and asked the children if the notes were accurate in reflecting their thoughts. No child asked to make any additions or changes to the notes. After the interview, the children were given a sheet of stickers as the reward for their participation in the study. Moreover, reflective notes based on impressions and observations of the interviews were recorded in writing by the researcher immediately after each pair interview.

Professionals Interviews

An invitation letter with a description of the study was distributed to all teachers of five-year-olds and six-year-olds in both preschools. Four teachers (two teachers from each preschool) voluntarily accepted the invitation to participate in the study. However, one public school teacher canceled the meeting later due to an unexpected family event. Three preschool teachers, two preschool directors, and one director at the City Bureau of Education were recruited for individual interviews in this study. The professionals were contacted by the researcher to schedule the interviews. The interviews were scheduled to suit the professionals' accessibility in terms of time and place. All the individual interviews took place in the participant's office or classroom as they requested. The interviews varied in length from approximately 30 to 60 minutes.

In general, the interviews were guided by the protocols (see Appendices M and N) where the purpose and confidentially of the study were first explained to the professionals. The key questions in the protocol were developed to gain the professionals' insights into the phenomenon under study as discussed in the previous section. All the interviews were audiotaped, and notes were taken by the researcher during interviews to ensure accurate data collection. After the completion of data transcription, a verbatim transcription was given to each professional to clarify the contents. No one asked for any changes in the verbatim transcription. A "thank you" card was mailed to the professionals for their participation in the study.

Content Review

In this study, relevant advertisement flyers, four popular magazines, and parenting books were examined. The advertisement flyers were collected over a one year time period by the researcher's sister. As a mother of a 7-year-old boy and a 6-year-old girl who lives in the city where the study was conducted, the researcher's sister has received many commercial/advertisement flyers related to early childhood education through mail or street distribution around the school areas. As a result, an accumulation of approximately 50 related flyers was collected. The majority of the flyers promoted early learning programs such as English and brain development programs. In Taiwan, flyers are often used as a tool for advertising products, from selling a house to promoting a musician. They are usually distributed through the mail and on the busy streets or in the areas where the targeted population is more likely to be present.

In addition to the flyers, four popular parenting magazines, and approximately 40 books identified by the researcher on visits to three major bookstores in Changhua City

were reviewed. The contents of four popular magazines (i.e., *Baby Life, Mom & Baby, My Baby, and Preschool Education*) from 2000 to 2004 were reviewed to examine how early learning was reported and portrayed. Among the large number of parenting books that were published in Taiwan, only the parenting books that were available in the three visited bookstores that focused on young children were reviewed in this study.

In this study, the data were collected in Chinese and only representative quotations and statements used and reported in the study were translated in English. All the letters (contacting and recruiting letters), consent forms and interview protocols were translated from English to Chinese. Moreover, back translations (from Chinese to English and from English to Chinese) were conducted by the researcher and a Chinese psychology Ph.D. student, who is fluent in both English and Chinese, to clarify the language and verify meanings.

Data Analysis

The data elicited through qualitative research methods are generally the participants' accounts of their experiences, reactions, understandings, and perceptions of particular phenomena (Creswell, 1997). Qualitative data analysis is an inductive process, in which the transcribed data are analyzed to discover recurring patterns, issues, and essential themes which characterize the participants' perspectives and experiences (Morse & Morse, 2000). A deep analysis and synthesis of all data are involved in the process.

In this study, the analyses involved drawing together and comparing discussions to reveal similar patterns (e.g., general themes), and also examining how the findings were related to the variation among individuals and among groups. The procedures of data

analyses in the study were conceptually adopted from Giorgi's (1997) description of "five basic steps: (1) collection of verbal data, (2) reading of the data, (3) breaking of the data into some kind of parts, (4) organization and expression of the data from a disciplinary perspective, and (5) synthesis or summary of the data for purposes of communication to the scholarly community" (p. 237).

First, the verbal data were collected by a combination of the focus groups and individual interviews. As described earlier, the questions were generally open-ended so as to provide a sufficient opportunity for the participants to express their experiences and perspectives (Giorgi, 1997). In this study, the focus group sessions and interviews were transcribed at the end of each session into verbatim transcripts by the research assistant using a Chinese word processing program. For the focus groups, after the verbatim transcripts were available, the mothers were informed and those who wished to read the transcript could contact the researcher. For the individual interviews, the verbatim transcripts were given to all the participants to clarify the contents.

Second, it is important that the researcher read through all the data before beginning any analysis as the phenomenological approach is holistic (Giorgi, 1997). In this study, the researcher read each transcript three times in order to gain a "global sense" of the data. According to Giorgi (1997), the global sense is important in determining how the parts are constituted.

Third, the data were divided into parts based on the global reading where the parts relevant to the research topic were highlighted for analysis. In this study, the first step for dividing the data was to abridge the transcripts. The transcripts were abridged by the researcher where only comments that directly related to the topic were retained in the

transcripts. The abridged transcripts were read several times by the researcher to further gain a sense of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Notes were written to record the impressions, ideas, and thoughts of the researcher that may be relevant to the study.

After reading the transcripts several times, data reduction and content analysis were conducted on each individual session (4 focus groups and 10 individual interviews), using each question as a separate entity. The "meaning condensation" (Kvale, 1996) was implemented to reduce large interview texts into briefer formulations. In other words, long statements were compressed into shorter phrases or "meaning units" (Giorgi, 1997) that captured a certain meaning which was relevant for the study and needed to be clarified further. In this study, the long statements of the participant's responses were placed in the right-hand column and their "meaning unit" was presented in the left-hand column (Kvale, 1996). For example, a statement from a mother in a focus group,

> The lesson that my daughter is taking now is full of fun. They sing songs, listen to stories, and play games. There is no homework and no test. Most importantly, she could still recognize and read each English alphabet letter. I think that's great.

was placed in the right-hand column, and the short phrase "value learning through play" derived from the original statement was presented in the left-hand column. As a result, each question contained a list of "meaning units" that directly related to the question. The "meaning units" that were not related to the questions were placed under "emerged topics" for further analysis.

In addition, the data were compared within a group and among groups. The computer files of the transcripts were merged by moving all the answers (to a particular question) from all the groups to the same spot. The same process was conducted for all

the interview questions. This process resulted in a master transcript where one document contained all the relevant responses. At the same time, the number of times that a topic or concept had occurred, and the number and type of participants who had talked about the topic within a group and across groups were noted.

Fourth, the raw data needed to be organized and expressed in disciplinary language. According to Giorgi (1997), all the established meaning units needed "to be examined, probed, and re-described so that the disciplinary value of each unit can be made more explicit" (p. 258). In this study, all the responses to a particular question were first examined by looking for patterns or trends across responses. In this stage, categories were formed, the boundaries of the categories were established, data segments to categories were assigned, and the content of each category was summarized (Krueger, 1998). For example, the "meaning units" were categorized according to their underlying focus and associated meanings. The phrases "value learning through play," "the importance of learning, not just playing," and "the need to play without a learning purpose" therefore were all placed into the category of "play and learning." Then a brief description of each category was provided and followed by verbatim quotes that illustrated a particular pattern.

Fifth, the final stage of data reduction and analysis, called "integrating categories and their properties," (Krueger, 1998) or "synthesis" (Giorgi, 1997) led the researcher to identify themes by combining categories with similar properties. In other words, it involved clustering or combining categories into larger patterns (i.e., themes). The interpretive stage of the study was built upon the foundation of the descriptive statements and then suggested what the findings meant. During this process, the researcher looked

for themes or interconnections that recur between the units and categories that emerged. In this study, a final analysis of the interpretation of the results was conducted to refine further the categorized data into more cohesive and defined themes (general themes) that reflected how the Taiwanese participants view young children's early schooling experiences in general.

Content Review Analysis

In this study, the content review was designed to capture an overall sense of how young children's early schooling involvement was reflected in the advertisement flyers, parenting magazines, and books. After an initial review of all the documents (i.e., flyers, magazine articles and book descriptions) that were relevant to the study, the documents were first grouped into types. For example, the relevant articles from the four parenting magazines were divided into the topics that were covered from 2000 to 2004, including brain development, intrauterine education, and multiple intelligences. The flyers were also grouped into the types of early programs, and books were grouped by the topics. The next phase was to examine how each type of document portrayed early learning experiences by writing down the key words/phrases that summarized each document's messages. The key words were further reviewed for identifying categories and patterns relevant to the research. Representative quotations and commercial slogans were also noted during the review process.

Establishing Trustworthiness

To really understand the Taiwanese participants' perceptions of young children's early schooling experiences, it is important to minimize the chance that the researcher's interpretations might be wrong. In qualitative study, the word "trustworthiness" is a

commonly used term in describing whether the researcher's interpretations of the data are appropriate. Regarding the enhancement of trustworthiness, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) explained the concept of "triangulation" as collecting data from a diverse range of sources using a variety of methods. In this study, the trustworthiness of the findings was strengthened by using several data sources (i.e., mothers, young children, teachers, and administrators), multiple methods (i.e., focus groups, interviews and documents), and member checking (Morse & Morse, 2002; Patton, 2002). In addition, the procedures of data collection and analysis were spelled out in detail in this chapter to maximize the transparency of the study.

In order to verify the collected data, member checking was employed in this study. The adult participants were provided with a copy of their interview transcriptions. The interview notes were read back to the children as the children could not read. For the focus group transcriptions, mothers were informed about the availability of the focus group transcript and one or two mothers from each focus group had read the transcripts. During the member checking process, the participants were asked to read through the interview transcripts and to inform the researcher if there was anything they wanted to add, change, or delete. In addition, each participant was sent a tentative summary of the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the focus groups and individual interviews along with a cover letter, a one-page response form, and a self-addressed and stamped envelope. Participants were asked if the summary was a reasonable interpretation of their perspectives, and whether important points were left out. Two participants replied, and their responses did not suggest any revisions to the results as the comments were mainly on their positive experiences with the focus group discussions. For example, both

participants stated that the experience had provided them some guidelines in making the appropriate decision for their children's early schooling involvements.

The term "transferability" is used in qualitative study to discuss the external validity on the possibility of generalizing the research findings to other populations. Due to the nature of the research and small sample sizes, qualitative research is rarely statistically representative. In other words, the goal of qualitative research is not to produce laws of human behavior that could be generalized universally but to capture the complex assumptions, meanings, and contradictions of the process of experiencing the phenomenon of interest (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In qualitative research, the inquirer can offer readers thick descriptions that represent the multiple layers of realities where readers can make inferences to other contexts of the same phenomenon (Denzin, 1994). In this study, therefore, the reporting of the results included extensive quotations gathered from thick descriptions.

Bias Statement

In a qualitative study, the researcher is the primary instrument where his or her own experiences and insights constitute important data sources (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). Understandably, an awareness of the researcher's potential biases and life experiences regarding the phenomenon is an important part of the research process. The following are some reflections in this regard.

Like many children in this study, I also took numbers of "talent" and "cram" school lessons while growing up in Taiwan. However, the ages of taking the lessons were much older than for many of today's children in Taiwan. During the elementary school years, I took two years of piano lessons and one year of abacus-mental math. The piano lessons

were taken mostly due to the availability of a piano at home. I stopped taking the lessons when I was going to junior high school as there would be relatively less time for "talent" related lessons. As for the abacus-mental math, my parents enrolled my brother, my sister and I in these lessons as a result of their friend's recommendation. After a year, the abacus-mental math lessons were stopped because my brother refused to go to the lessons. Due to the inconvenience of transportation and schedule conflict, both my sister and I also quit the abacus-mental math lessons. I remembered being sad about not going to the abacus-mental math lessons, not because of the lesson, but for not being able to shop in the department store that was right below the abacus-mental math center.

Once I was in junior high school, I joined a majority of students in the world of "cram" schools. On the odd days I would have math lessons and even days English lessons. These lessons were taken after school, from 6:30 to 8:00 in the evening from Monday to Saturday. After taking the "cram" lessons for two years, my parents forced me to quit the lessons mainly due to my physical condition, at the time as I was having a chronic stomach ailment. Being a minority in the class for not taking any "cram" school lessons, I was afraid of not being able to keep up with other classmates. In the end, my parents hired a private tutor for me at home.

While working in a preschool in Taiwan, I was also teaching "creativity" lessons to five- and six-year-old children in a "cram" school that was affiliated with the preschool. The cram school had sent me along with other two teachers to a one week workshop on how to teach "creativity" to young children. The lesson focused on developing young children's "creativity intelligence" (CQ) through games and activities. After teaching for

over a year, I resigned mainly because of lack of time for preparation and questions about the effectiveness of the program.

The above experiences of being a "talent" and "cram" school student and a "cram" teacher have shaped my perceptions of involving young children in early schooling, and consequently generated a personal interest in exploring and understanding the topic. Reflecting back to the early experiences, I was never really motivated or passionate about the piano lessons and I never applied the mental calculation in any mathematics related situations. As for the "cram" school lessons during the junior high school years, my feelings were mixed. As I was enjoying being with a group of friends, I was also suffering from the stomach pains and lacked time for studying and doing homework.

The experience of being a cram school teacher teaching creativity to a group of young children was another mixed one. While enjoying the process of designing activities and admiring children's creativity, I often struggled with the effectiveness and nature of the program. In addition, I was uncomfortable with the high tuition for the creativity lessons.

Throughout the research process, I have made intentional efforts to clarify my own perceptions which might creep into the collection and interpretation of the research data. For example, I have tried to reflect and write down personal bias, and to avoid expressing personal views in order to maintain a neutral position during the study. Another way to ensure that the data are reflective of participants' experiences and perceptions is through member checking. In this study, the focus group and individual interview transcripts were given to the participants to clarify the contents. In addition, a tentative summary of the

interpretation and conclusions of the study was also mailed to the participants for further verification.

Summary

To explore the Taiwanese participants' perspectives of young children's early schooling experiences, a comprehensive research strategy that included the use of both multiple data sources (i.e., mothers, children, teachers, and administrators) and multiple methods (i.e., focus groups, interviews, and content review) was employed in this study. Thirty-two mothers, ten young children, and six professionals from two preschools in an industrial city in Taiwan were recruited and interviewed for data collection. A broad topic guide (protocol) was developed based on the research questions and used in focus group discussions among mothers, and the modified protocols were used in individual interviews with mothers, professionals, and pair interviews with young children. The researcher served as the moderator and interviewer in the study, while reflective notes and audiotaping were made by the researcher herself and an assistant. A five-step analysis procedure was employed for interview data reduction and synthesis. A complementary content review with Taiwanese advertisement flyers, popular parenting magazines, and books was conducted. In addition to several data sources and multiple methods, member checking was also employed to establish the trustworthiness of the study. The researcher's personal experiences and perceptions regarding the topic were explored in order to deal with the potential bias. The results of the data analysis are reported in Chapter 4.

Chapter Four ~ Findings

The main purpose of this study was to explore Taiwanese mothers', children's, teachers', and administrators' perceptions and experiences regarding young children's early schooling involvements. In the study, focus groups served as the primary data collection method to obtain a descriptive understanding of the perceptions of young children's more early schooling experiences. In addition, in-depth individual interviews with mothers, preschool teachers and directors and the City Bureau of Education director also were conducted. Moreover, preschool children also were interviewed in pairs to gain insights of children's perception of their early learning experiences.

In this chapter, the results of content review of parenting and program information findings are presented first. Next, the different types of early childhood programs (preschool and cram school) are reported to provide a basis for understanding the main findings. Then, the qualitative data derived from the focus groups and individual interviews are presented to answer the four research questions of the study: (a) definitions of "the earlier the better", (b) perceived benefits and problems, (c) source of information, and (d) changes in mothers' perceptions. Last, the new emerged topics and patterns are depicted. The topic organization of this chapter is for efficiency; the patterns and questions are not separate entities, but rather interrelated and reciprocally interacting.

Results of Content Review

The content review of available parenting information sources provided an additional perspective on how early learning experience was viewed in the social context experienced by the participants in this study. The main criterion for selection of this information content collection was the accessibility and availability of the parenting

information to the participants, particularly mothers, in this specific city. Three sources (advertisement flyers, magazines, and parenting books) that were reviewed and examined in this study were derived mainly from a one-year collection of advertisement flyers, a content review of four major parenting magazines, and a review of parenting books based on visits to three major bookstores in the city where the study was conducted. The findings of the content review reveal that there are numerous reports and discussions about the relationship between "brain development" and young children's early learning experiences. In the following section, the nature and extent of this "brain phenomenon" will first be summarized by each resource type and then discussed when it reflected participants' perceptions of early learning.

Advertisement Flyers

The collected advertisement flyers were mainly from English language, math-related and fine-arts programs, with an increasing number for the newly established "brain development" centers. The flyers that promoted English programs comprised a large portion of the collected flyers. However, regardless of the type of flyers, brain development is frequently used as a way of promoting the programs or products. In examining the contents of the flyers, the word of "brain development" could be found in almost all flyers from early learning programs to milk formula advertisements. For example, the abacus mental-math centers often stated in their flyers that the abacus method of mental calculation is "effective in the development of the right brain" for its verbal thinking and image processing. For music-related programs, music was reported to be processed in the same side of the brain as math and language. As a result, the early exposure to music plays a critical role in children's math and language skill development

according to these flyers. In addition, young children's "phenomenal rate" of brain growth was frequently referred to as the "critical period" or "window of opportunity" for early learning. The flyers targeted young children from newborns to 6-year-olds, with more programs designed for children from three to six years of age.

A growing number of brain development based centers was also discovered through the examination of the flyers. The centers, such as *Infant/Child Developing Potential Centre*, *Harvard Brain Development Centre*, and *Whole Brain Development Training Centre* have made their way to the city and joined the early learning program market. These centers claimed to be able to "accelerate children's brain development" and "enhance children's unlimited learning potential" through the programs' whole-brain curriculum design and multiple intelligence teaching approach.

In addition to brain development, words such as "holistic" and "pluralistic" were frequently used to describe programs' teaching approaches and curriculum design that aimed to enhance whole child development and multiple intelligences. For example, a "whole-English" (i.e., English speaking only preschool) program depicted the school's heuristic instruction, holistic curriculum, multi-cultural experience and integrated English environment as the foundations for creating a happy English learning environment for young children. Thus, Howard Gardner's (1993) multiple intelligences theory was often related to the topics of brain development, whole child development and curriculum development. Many programs stated that they offered innovative and fun programs through the integration of games, physical movement, drama, music, and language to "promote the development of multiple intelligence" and interests.

The message of the advertisement flyers clearly states that parents can increase their children's innate intelligence or skill development with enriched and accelerated learning programs that utilize brain development and multiple intelligences. The advertisement phrases that were frequently used in the collected flyers (such as the following) further indicate "the earlier the better" phenomenon in Taiwan's early childhood education:

- Let your baby win at the beginning of the race
- The program that will change your child's life direction
- Enhance your child's brain capacity to create a blueprint for success in your child's future
- By the age of three, the circuitry of the child's brain is almost finished
- Three-years-old: lay the groundwork of your child's future
- Start Early, Finish Strong: the program that will make your smart child a genius and your average child a smarter child
- Get a head start in life and master the skills necessary to compete in the globalized world

Magazines

An examination of four popular parenting advice magazines from 2000 to 2004 was conducted to provide a better understanding of how early learning was viewed by the experts from different disciplines. The magazines, *Baby Life* and *Mom & Baby* (from the same publisher), were mainly targeting parents of children from zero to three years of age with information on topics related to childcare including breastfeeding, childbirth, pregnancy, nutrition, and baby care. The newly established magazine, *My Baby*, also provided childcare based information to mothers of children age zero to six. The last magazine that was examined, *Preschool Education*, was the only magazine that targeted the development, education and learning aspects of young children zero to six years of age. The magazine has a reputation for its "professional" view of child-rearing practice

and education as it has won six outstanding awards presented by National Press Council of Taiwan. For being the oldest early childhood magazine (established in 1978) and actively involved in the promotion of healthy childhood, the magazine is acknowledged as the pioneer in Taiwan's early childhood education field.

From the magazine cover to the "experts" in the reviewed magazines, the first three magazines (*Baby Life, Mom & Baby, and My Baby*) were identical in many ways. The covers of the magazines were usually photos of some famous public figures such as actors and their young children. The "experts" or authors of the articles were often from medical fields, such as pediatricians, or program developers from private educational institutes. In contrast, *Preschool Education* often used "average" children on their magazine covers and the "experts" were mainly university professors from academic fields. The contrast between these two types of magazines was further evident in their publication of parenting books. The publishers of *Baby Life* and *Mom & Baby* have published many books such as *How To Multiply Your Baby's Intelligence* and *How to Teach Your Baby To Read* that were related to Glenn Doman's theory of "the earlier the better." The publisher of *Preschool Education*, Hsinyi Publication, is the publisher of parenting books (e.g., David Elkind's *Miseducation* and *The Hurried Child*; Alvin Rosenfeld's *Hyper-Parenting* and *Overscheduled Child*) that warn of the dangers of involving young children in formal schooling by "too much too soon."

The topic of brain development and its relationship to early learning was the most reported and discussed issue in all the four reviewed magazines. For example, all four magazines established a new column that addressed the issues of brain development and multiple intelligences. *Mom & Baby* magazine had established a new column, titled

"Stimulating the Young Brain" that provides information regarding children's brain development. *Preschool Education* also established a new column in 2002, "Brain Development Myths," to address the public misconceptions about brain development and research. A comparison of the contents of articles on brain development in the two types of magazine further indicated the different messages that the magazines intended to deliver to the public.

The brain-related articles published by the first type of magazine (*Baby Life, Mom & Baby, and My Baby*) were focused mainly on the development of the "whole brain," particularly the right brain development. In these articles the brain research was often cited as evidence of the importance of early learning experience to a child's developmental outcome. The Japanese expert, Dr. Makoto Shichida's theory of "lightening-rapid" learning abilities through "high-speed automatic process functions" which are performed in the right brain, was reported by the magazines to provide a "key" to unlock the potential of the child. The articles stressed that the whole-brain learning with balance between the two hemispheres of the brain is critical during the first years of a child's life. Thus, in the review of parenting books, Dr. Shichida's books (*Babies are Geniuses*, *Super Brain Revolution* and *O-Year-Old Education*) were found in the three bookstores and listed as bestsellers. In addition, the Infant Stimulation Program and Glenn Doman's Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential were also reported to "maximize and accelerate brain synapses." As one of the articles summarized, "newborn children have a genius potential that, if developed, can exceed Leonardo da Vinci and Albert Einstein" (Ching, 2002, p. 15).

On the contrary, the articles published by *Preschool Education* often carried the message of "too much too soon" and warned the public of the misinterpretation of brain research reporting some educational products and programs. For example, in an article by Hong (2004), she reported breakthrough research in revealing the development of human brains and stressed the lack of direct application of brain research to educational practice. She argued that early childhood education should be based on play and on creating a developmentally appropriate learning environment. The magazine often depicted the current practice of involving young children in more formal schooling as taking away children's rights to play and grow naturally. The phrases such as "artificial growth conditions are inimical for humans," "winning at the beginning, exhausting at the mid-way, and dying at the end," "start early and fall first," and "genius is a minority" carried a very different message from "the earlier the better" view.

Despite the different views of early learning, all experts agreed that parents play a critical role in their children's development. From sending the child to a brain development centre to playing games with the child, parents were depicted as the cause of their children's developmental outcomes. For example, one article reported that the recent brain research indicated that "parents are truly their children's first teachers and what parents do or don't do has a lasting impact on their children's learning skills" (Ko, 2004, p. 6). The message was clear that parents need to provide or create an enriching early environment where all the child's senses can be stimulated. As for the experts featured in *Preschool Education*, parents were often advised to "be natural" and "spend time" with the child in order to have a healthy and whole child.

Parenting Books

A visit to three major bookstores in the city was conducted by the researcher to gain a sense of the types of parenting books that were available to the public. Besides the general parenting books on child development (e.g., *What to Expect in the Second Year*) and health issues (e.g., *Nutrition and Healthy Start for Your Child*), there was a large number of books on "brain development" and "multiple intelligence." Books with titles like *Brain Power: Brain-building Games for 0-3*, *Aiming at Harvard: Brain Stimulation DIY*, *Raising High EQ Children* and *A Genius is at Your Home*, that claimed to "enhance the child's brain capacity" and "cultivate otherwise untapped potential" could easily be found in the bookstores. By contrast, the number of books that raised the concern of involving young children in more formal schooling "too much too soon" was relatively small. Books including *Kid Stress*, *Toilet Trained for Yale*, *Who Says You Have To Go To Harvard*, and *Wise Parents Raise Their Children at a Slow Pace* were among this minority group. Like the flyers and magazines, the parenting books also described "play" as the best method for encouraging learning during the first critical year of life. For example, one book explained that "the value of play with purpose can help your children get off to a good start."

Different Types of Early Childhood Education Programs

Before reporting the overall patterns for each research question, it is important to note that the majority of comments made by the mothers in this study were linked to their definitions of different early childhood education programs. As the coding structure evolved, it became apparent that in all the focus groups, mothers had largely categorized and defined their young children's early schooling experiences into three types:

preschool, "talent" school, and "cram" school. Generally, "talent" was positively viewed while "cram" was viewed negatively and as inappropriate for young children by a majority of the participants. In other words, young children's early schooling involvements are likely influenced directly and indirectly by their mothers' positive and/or negative views of the different types of program. For example, mothers who gave more positive views on the "cram" school programs would be more likely to enroll their children in these programs.

This does not mean that the mothers' definitions and perceptions were always clearly indicated by their children's involvements in early childhood education programs. There were some interrelated patterns between the groups and individual differences within a group. The salient point of this finding is that the mothers in all the focus groups had relatively common understandings and definitions of the different early childhood education programs. Therefore, reporting the results by the school type is the framework used in this study that aims to explore and understand the participants' subjective perceptions of the phenomenon. In the following section, each early childhood education program is discussed and explored separately.

In the following sections, direct quotations from the participants in the focus groups and interviews are used to clarify, understand, and explore the participants' subjective perceptions of the phenomenon. For referencing the quotation, a participant's focus group number, ID number and the line number of the transcript are in parentheses before or after a quotation. For example, (M24, 17) refers to a mother participant in Focus Group Two with ID number 24 (the first digit represents the focus group number) and 17 is the line number of the quotation excerpted from the interview transcript. Participant numbers

coincide with the numbers in Appendix A. In the study, M is used for mother participants, C for children, T for teachers, D for preschool directors, and E for City Bureau of Education director. In addition, responses from the participants are reported proportionately and representatively in this study. In other words, the participant who gave more responses during the focus group interviews would be quoted and reported more often, and the participant whose comments signify a theme or a pattern would also be included.

Preschool

As the study was conducted in two preschools (one public and one private), all children who participated in this study were in preschool. The public preschool is a half-day program that enrolled children from ages four to six. The private preschool is a full-day program and licensed to enroll children from age three to six. When talking about the reasons for choosing the preschool, "open education" was mentioned frequently by mothers in both public and private preschools. As one mother stated, "I chose the preschool for its active, open, and theme-oriented teaching approach" (M28, 11).

Many mothers (10 of the 15) listed the pressure-free learning environment, self-disciplined training, and lack of writing and phonetics teaching practices as their major reasons for choosing the public preschool. In contrast, several mothers (5 of the 15 mothers) worried about the preschool's lack of phonetics and English teaching. One mother described her worry, "I asked around and found out that many preschools are teaching English and phonetics, so I am afraid that my child has been already falling behind" (M14, 19). Some mothers responded that they used the preschool's half-day

program to enroll their children in other "talent" and "cram" school programs such as English. For example, one person's comments illuminated the idea:

> That's why I sent [my child] to the half-day program preschool. In that I could still see my daughter, and send her to lessons in the afternoons. If I sent her to the whole-day program, she would be taking the lessons at the evenings and then there won't be much time for us to be together. (M16, 7)

However, the preschool director had pointed out in the interview that the half-day program was first initiated to provide more time for parents and children to interact rather than to facilitate sending children to talent and cram school lessons.

The private preschool, like most of the private preschools in Taiwan, offers a comprehensive program that provides a wide range of activities such as language (English and phonetics), fine arts, mathematics, and sport. As the directors of City Bureau of Education and the private preschool stated, the extracurricular activities are implemented in the preschool setting due to the results of parental and market demands. When asked about the conflicts between the Ministry of Education and preschools, the director commented on the need for private preschools to meet parents' demands in order "to survive and compete" in the early childhood education market. Thus, some mothers described the comprehensive program of the preschool as meeting their needs for having their children in the full-day program and having more options with their children's early learning. For instance, one working mother spoke about the convenience and benefits of the private preschool service: "Having my child taking rollerblading and abacus-mental math lessons in the preschool saves me a lot of time and money" (M37, 6). In counterpoint, a few mothers complained about the preschool's use of classroom time in implementing the "talent" lessons. One mother remarked, "I stopped [my son's] art lesson because his talent lessons were taking too much of his classroom time" (M31, 10).

Talent School

During the focus groups and interviews, the "talent" lesson was positively defined by a majority of participants as a program that puts an emphasis on interest-based and play-oriented learning experience. As one mother stated, "the Chinese Classics Recital lesson is very playful and does not force children to memorize poems" (M24, 12). The Chinese Classics Recital is the program that teaches children to "recite" many classics such as Confucius and Three Characters. Another mother reasoned that, "through the talent lessons the child will develop interests which in return will help the child to cope with future life stress" (M31, 20). Most mothers described the "talent" lessons as nonschool-related learning such as sport, music, art, and dance. During the individual interview, M38's definition of "talent" lesson as "entertaining" further elaborated the defined "pressure-free" nature of "talent" lessons.

In this study, the two most frequent "talent" lessons taken by the children were arts and music. Arts included drawing and "paper clay" lessons, and music was primarily piano learning (11 of the 37 children were taking piano lessons). However, the inconsistent definition of "talent" held by the mothers displays the lack of clearly defined boundaries within the group. In particular, the distinction was not always clear when the mothers talked about English learning in the early years. Across all focus groups, several mothers repeatedly stated that their children were not involved in any academic-oriented activities even though their children were enrolled in English schools. A typical comment made by one mother was, "we haven't been involved in the academic-oriented lessons, like math and Chinese. We don't have those yet" (M12, 3); however, her child was in the English-only language school for five afternoons a week. Like these mothers, the director

at the private preschool also held the same view by describing "we [the preschool] treat English lessons as 'talent' because the lessons are "playful" and there is hardly any writing required" (D2, 13). The data made evident that the definition of "talent" lesson is more complicated than it may appear.

Cram School

A majority of participants defined "cram" or "private supplementary tutoring" school as an academic-oriented and cognitive-focused program that includes mathematics, science, Chinese, and other school-related subjects. The two most frequent "cram" lessons were English and abacus-mental math. English was the most popular lesson in this study. In Taiwan, English programs ranges from one-to-one tutoring-based to English-only franchise language schools, and the teaching approaches vary from school to school. The collection of advertisement flyers also revealed that English programs were the most advertised, and they targeted a wide range of students from young children to adults. In the school district, where this study took place, most of the elementary schools start teaching English at Grade-One while only a few schools start at Grade-Three. Abacus-mental math was the other frequently engaged in lesson among the preschoolers. Both English and abacus-mental math have periodically been evaluated by standardized examinations for testing students' language and abacus acquisition. Students as young as four-years-old were reported to take these tests. Moreover, some English and abacus-mental math programs would use the number of children that passed the proficiency tests in their flyers as their commercial strategy in attracting parents to enroll their young children in the programs.

In general, "cram" school was viewed negatively by the mothers as "inappropriate" for the preschoolers. As one of the mothers stated, "cram school is a money-making business and children are under a lot of pressure when taking these lessons" (M28, 8). On the other hand, a small number of mothers reported some positive aspects related to "cram" school. One mother explained, "through abacus-mental math lessons, my son is more able to concentrate and put more effort into learning" (M37, 14). In addition, a few mothers viewed some of the "cram" lessons as "talent" lessons. For instance, three mothers described abacus-mental math as "talent" lesson because it is not a school subject taught in the elementary school.

Like most of the mothers, all the teachers and directors interviewed in both preschools also highlighted the "open-education" teaching approach and "developmentally appropriate practice" of their preschools. When discussing the differences between preschool and "talent" and "cram" schools, they further emphasized the importance of "whole-child development" and "healthy learning environment" that the preschools aimed to provide and implement. It is suggested that the Taiwanese professionals' perceptions on the "talent" and "cram" school lessons were largely based on their understanding of the function and goals of preschool.

The professionals in this study were well aware of the trend of involving young children in "talent" or "cram" school activities; as one teacher stated, "many children in my class are running between lessons, like in show business" (T3, 19). In general, the preschool teachers and directors gave more positive comments on the interest-based "talent" lessons and more negative ones on the academic-oriented nature of the "cram" school lessons. As a teacher in the private preschool defined, "To me, 'cram' is about the

supplementation of the schoolwork deficit and 'talent' is about the cultivation of an interest which is more appropriate for preschoolers" (T2, 17). When discussing "talent" lessons, none of the professionals objected to children being involved in "talent" lessons as long as the lesson is taken based on the child's interest and will and the family's financial and time availability. The "cram" school was rejected by all of the professionals for its lack of age and developmentally appropriate practices and learning environment for young children. The public preschool teacher's response described this perception, "I totally object to cram schools because they are inhuman because they only care about children's grades and performance in order to satisfy the parents" (T1, 19). Furthermore, a cram school's teaching approach is often depicted by the professionals in this study as "forced."

However, the teachers and directors also emphasized the potential harm and danger of taking numerous "talent" lessons and the "product-oriented" nature of some "talent" lessons. For instance, the private preschool director pointed out the similarities between "talent" and "cram" school programs. She explained,

> In order to survive in the market, many "talent" schools would turn themselves into another type of "cram" schools that focused mainly on the "products" rather than the learning process. For example, many "talent" schools would have the end-of-the-year performance, such as dance performance, in order to show the parents how much their children have progressed and learned in these lessons. As the result, children are under a lot of pressure. (D2, 20)

This view was further echoed in the City Bureau of Education director's definition of "talent" program. The director stated that "talent" school is a kind of cram school because it is registered and licensed under "private supplementary tutoring" and the name "talent" is just a business means for promoting the school.

Participants' subjective definitions and perceptions of the early childhood education programs provide a diverse and dynamic picture. It is also important to note that the participants' responses to the research topic could be classified into positive and negative views. For example, in discussion about the definition of "the earlier the better," mothers gave both positive and negative views about the phrase. As a result, the school-types and positive/negative views will serve as the basic framework for organizing and reporting participants' subjective perceptions. In the next section of this chapter, patterns that emerged from the qualitative data are presented and discussed to address the four overall research questions.

Definitions of "the earlier the better"

The responses to the question about the definitions of "the earlier the better" are organized into three sections. The first section illustrates the common views that were shared by all mothers across groups. In section two, the positive views of the term, derived from mothers with children in different school types, are presented. The third section reports the different groups' negative views of the term. Finally, the responses from preschool teachers and directors and the City Bureau of Education director are reported.

Common Views

When asked to comment on the term "the earlier the better," many mothers across focus groups and interviews mentioned individual differences and confusion as their common responses. Individual differences were frequently discussed by the mothers (27 of the 32) across schools and groups. Many participants often indicated each individual child's differences in inborn ability, potential, developmental maturation, personality,

character, family background, and learning experience as the "conditions" for deciding their children's early schooling involvements. As one mother summed up at the individual interview, "I think that learning really depends on the child's ability, personality, interest, and absorption" (M35, 26). The following two examples explain the point further:

> [Learning] should depend on the child's conditions, such as the child's natural gifts and personality. Like my older child, he is shy and not interested in taking lessons, so I didn't let him take lessons when he was in preschool. My second child is quite different; she is more curious and interested in everything. So I let her take and try different kinds of lessons since she was three-years-old. And I found that the second child is much more active than her older brother. (M12, 35)

> My son is the quiet type and he would cry if I asked him to take lessons. Like last time when the classroom teacher asked him if he wanted to join the English lesson, he rejected her right away. When I tried to talk him about it, he CRIED. So I don't want to force him at this young age. (M42, 29)

In addition, several mothers (7 of the 32) also mentioned their children's ability in absorbing the learning materials and lessons. For example, a mother's metaphor of "sponge" indicated the concept of "the earlier the better,"

> My daughter's memory is very good. Well, it's like SPONGE. She is able to absorb whatever I give her. For this type of child, I will take her to different lessons because she is able to absorb all of them. (M16, 1)

Through the data analysis it was revealed that children whose mothers had commented on their "sponge-like" abilities in learning were taking more lessons than other children in the study.

Most of the preschool teachers and directors and the City Bureau of Education director also pointed to individual differences when discussing "the earlier the better" phrase. They agreed with the mothers that each child's individuality is the main criterion in deciding on early learning involvements. As the public preschool director commented:

> There is a huge individual difference; some children are born with good motor skills and the ability to concentrate. If you don't give lessons to these children earlier, it would be such a waste of time. Therefore individual difference is very important. (D1, 20)

Mothers frequently expressed their struggles and confusion in deciding on their children's early schooling experiences. Over half of the participants across the focus groups talked about their struggles between a child's overall well-being or development and educational attainment. As one mother remarked about her struggle between the two forces, "it's just like playing the tug-of-war, you know, pulling between [the child's] psychological well-being and early learning" (M12, 3). Some mothers also mentioned their struggles with the media's portrayal of early learning and how they were affected by spending a great amount of money on buying "educational materials" and sending their young children to lessons or activities for early brain stimulation. Four mothers reflected their struggles in the following quotations:

> With those media slogans, such as "brain development" and "not losing at the beginning of the race," I really struggled and often wondered if my child would lose the race. I struggled, so I thought that I should have him start taking lessons earlier. Well, you know, I am AFRAID. (M13, 14)

> Everyone is telling you different stories about when, what, and where of taking the lessons. I don't know how to grasp all of these messages. Well, I am still exploring it and it is not easy at all. (M27, 16)

> Everyone is saying that "0-year-old education" is the most critical period. As the result [I] found myself spending a lot of money on buying those teaching materials such as the Mozart CDs and sending him to "music and body movement" class at the age of three. But I am still very CONFUSED, and I really don't know if earlier is better. (M31, 29)

> The commercial slogans such as "golden opportunity" and "start from zero" are very alluring. I would ask myself if I should provide [my children] with more lessons. Is it appropriate for them? You know, I am still thinking and questioning them. (M48, 11)

Thus, the phrases that the mothers mentioned in the above comments could easily be spotted in the advertisement flyers, magazines and parenting books. From promoting an educational program to a milk formula, the phrases often implied "the earlier the better" practice and indicated that the early learning experience will set the stage for children's success in school and life. With the dominating message of "the earlier the better," making appropriate judgments and balancing the child's learning and developmental well-being were the challenges that were repeatedly mentioned by the mothers. As one mother summed up at the end of the last focus group, "the whole thing is really about testing parents' wisdom" (M49, 31).

Positive Views

In this section, the participants' positive views of the term "the earlier the better" will be reported mainly from the two school-types (mothers who had children in talent schools and mothers who had children in talent-and-cram schools). The results revealed that mothers of children in talent-and-cram schools were more likely to give positive definitions of the term. In contrast, based on the data analysis, the mothers who had their children in preschool-only gave only negative views to "the earlier the better."

Four patterns of positive perceptions of "the earlier the better" emerged from the mothers in one-talent (children who were involved in one talent-related activity), talent-only (children in multiple talent-related activities) and talent-and-cram school (children in both talent and cram activities) groups. The first pattern was the importance of interest cultivation in the early years. Many mothers (11 of the 16) across the focus groups talked about using early childhood, which was perceived as having comparatively more free time and less school-related pressure than later years, as the period to cultivate the

children's interests. One mother in the fourth focus group explained why she wanted her child to take "talent" lessons during the early childhood period:

> I know that I hold a different view than most of the people, but . . . I totally agree with start early . . . I want [my daughter] to have the opportunity to cultivate an interest. If she starts taking talent lessons during her primary school years, the pressure from the school would be too great for her to focus on cultivating an interest. (M45, 8)

In the fourth focus group, where a majority of the mothers were either in "preschool-only" and "one-talent" groups, the group discussion was often surrounded the possible negative effects of early schooling involvements. However, M45 was outspoken in sharing her different view of supporting children's early multiple learning experiences during the early childhood period.

Several mothers (6 of the 27) in "talent-only" and "talent-and-cram" groups viewed interest as a channel for coping with emotions and other unpleasant life events. The topic was especially discussed in the third focus group where the participants' children were involved in multiple lessons. The following dialogue between two mothers illustrates their perspective:

> M31: I am focusing more on children's EQ. I mean, that the major reason I sent my children to those "talent" lessons is hoping that in the future they will be able to cope with their emotions and feelings in a more positive way. (24)
>
> M33: Yes, it is about having more opportunities to experience different things. Like what the mother just said, at least when facing with frustrations and challenges they would be able to find a way to cope with these emotions. (26)

The second pattern was regarding the need to stimulate a child's brain development at an early age. Almost half of the mothers (12 of the 27) commented on the importance of their young children's brain development in the early years. It was frequently

mentioned that creating and providing a stimulating environment would maximize a child's brain development. The following are the two examples of this view:

> I know some experts said that early brain stimulation would be better for later brain development. You know, children's potentials are endless . . . if you start early the potential is even greater. (M24, 8)

> The educational view these days is to give more stimulation to the brain and then it will develop. This is the message that we are receiving and we are just following it. (M37, 3)

The concept of brain stimulation in the early years as the most critical time for shaping future development was mentioned and discussed among the mothers of different groups. Phrases like "brain power," "potential stimulation," and "brain stimulation" recurred with different topics and across all focus groups. The mothers' discussions on brain development were reflected in the content review of parenting advice resources where brain development was the most reported topic for the last five years in Taiwan. Brain stimulation was often reported as the "key" to "unlock childhood genius" which led to "a smarter, happier and healthier kid" as one advertisement flyer stated. The new "brainy" phenomenon is clearly a dominant force in Taiwan's early childhood education.

Third, when talking about their views of the term "the earlier the better," some mothers (11 of the 27) from both "talent-only" and "talent-and-cram" groups emphasized that some specific areas should be learned at the earlier ages. English and music were the two major areas that mothers listed as "necessary" to learn during the early childhood period. Particularly with English learning, more mothers agreed that English learning in the early years is a "necessary evil." Several mothers mentioned the current trend of English learning among young children. For instance, one mother shared the following information with the group: "I heard from some experts that second language learning

should start before the age of six" (M12, 30). Another mother reflected on her experience with her first child,

> English learning is a necessity. I mean, you have no choice. My first child started taking English lesson at Grade-Two, and she was among the last few in her class to take the lessons. More than half of her classmates started the English lessons when they were in preschool. We could not afford to have this discrepancy. (M34, 37)

Seven mothers further elaborated the need to develop children's confidence in learning English by strengthening the child's basic listening and speaking skills at the young ages. The abilities to be able to communicate in English with foreigners, to speak without fear, and to speak with "native-like" intonation were listed by the mothers as their reasons for enrolling their young children in English lessons. As one mother commented, "my daughter is very shy so I thought that I should let her take English lessons at the earlier age otherwise she would be too afraid to open her mouth later" (M17, 15). Another mother shared, "I felt my son's English intonation is more accurate and smoother after being in the English class for six months" (M43, 18). The private preschool director also held the same perception on the topic of English learning at a young age, as she stated:

> Is it really bad to let children learn English at younger age? Actually not necessary bad . . . Like my son, his pronunciation is very good because of his early exposure to English native speaking teacher. So with English, if it is based on "play-oriented" teaching approach, then earlier could be better. (D2, 43)

Thus, through the content review of parenting resources, the window for learning a second language was often stated to be between the ages of three-to-six by some advertisement flyers and magazines. This statement was based on the development of language in a child's brain which was reported to be critical between the ages of one-to-four. If the child learned a second language before the age of four, the child would speak

like a native and the second language would become a second "mother-tongue" language as one article reported. This indication of a "learning window" for English seemed to have an impact on some mothers and educators in this study.

Music is another area that some mothers believed should be learned earlier, particularly if they wanted the child to pursue music as a future career and profession. In this regard, one mother expressed her struggle with her daughter's piano lessons:

> [My daughter] doesn't like to practice piano at all. But, you know, you have to force her if she wants to be in the "music-talented" class. Well, it seems this is the only way, and everyone else is doing it. I mean, you have to start early in order to have a better chance because the competition is very high. (M16, 9)

This view was also echoed by the public preschool teacher who said, "I would tell parents if they are going to treat the "talent" as a profession or future career, then they should start early" (T1, 25). Furthermore, the teacher also stated that she would encourage parents to push their children to the "gifted" or "talent" class "because of these classes' accessibility to a diverse learning environment and educational resource" (T1, 40). In the school district where this study took place only one elementary school offers "music-talented" class (starts at Grade-Three) that requires students to take tests to demonstrate their skills and talents in music. The competition is open to the public and each year many parents sign up hoping for a seat for their child in the "music-talented class."

In Taiwan, generally speaking, "giftedness" refers to inborn abilities while "talent" refers to exceptional performance or high potential in particular areas such as music and dance. However, the two terms are usually used together to describe children who have high ability, good achievement and excellent performance (Sin, 2003). For example, one participant (a junior high school teacher) in the fourth focus group explained, that based on her teaching experience, many parents told her that the music class was equivalent to a

"gifted" program where an enriched learning and stimulating environment was provided. She concluded that many parents see the young child's ability to play a musical instrument or sing a song as an "indication of intelligence and potentials in other cognitive areas" (M42, 10).

In this study, piano was the most frequently engaged lesson among the group. Ten children (all girls) in the study were taking piano lessons and a few were also involved in other music-related programs such as drums and music-and-body activities. Compared with the girls, only two boys in the study had taken "music-and-body" lessons (the program that teaches children to integrate music and body movement). In fact, three mothers mentioned that the gender of their children was one of the reasons that they enrolled the children in piano lessons. Furthermore, two mothers stated that "children who learn piano would not turn out bad" when speaking about their children's early experiences with musical instruments. The phrase was also used in the flyers of some music-related programs.

The last pattern was the view on "give but not oppress." When responding to the question on "the earlier the better," five mothers stated that they would give the lessons to children at earlier ages but they would not put pressure on these early learning experiences. As one mother put it, "Actually I think it is OK to give [lessons] earlier, but not to oppress them" (M32, 27). M13's statement was a typical example, "I want to give [my son] as many as possible and as early as possible, but I will not force him if he doesn't like them" (19). As previously discussed, mothers' perceptions of their children's personalities, abilities, and developmental maturation served as the basis of decision making about their young children's early schooling involvements. As the result, mothers

who mentioned their children's individual differences in personality and ability were also more likely to talk about the "give but not oppress" view.

Negative Views

In contrast to the previous section, there were more responses from the preschool-only and one-talent groups than from the talent-and-cram group on the negative views of "the earlier the better." Developmental maturation and having a happy childhood were the two major concerns that were frequently mentioned at the group discussions and interviews. Across groups and schools, 12 of the 32 mothers talked about the child's level of maturity as their major criterion for deciding on their young children's early schooling involvements. One mother explained her definition of maturation in the individual interview:

> To me, the "maturity readiness" means that a child is able to control the emotions. I mean, if the child is constantly unreasonable, then [he/she] couldn't learn anything. The child needs to be able to "sit still" for a period of time, well, maybe for about 30 minutes. (M23, 8)

These 12 mothers reported that if the child is not developmentally ready for learning, early schooling involvement might be harmful. Some mothers spoke about the negative effects of learning at such young age, such as on physical development, concentration level, and learning attitude or effectiveness:

> I disagree with the view of sending children to English cram school at such a young age. Because I believe that if [the child] learns later, [he/she] will be better and faster in memorizing the 26 alphabet letters. (M23, 19)

> I feel that it is not good to let a child start taking drawing and using their hands at such a young age. The child's fine-motor skill is not fully developed yet, and taking the lesson might hurt or delay the motor skill development. (M44, 11)

> Children who have learned phonetics in preschool would be more likely to be "careless," not concentrating, and not putting effort into learning while in Grade-

> One. Well, you know, they thought that they had already known the phonetics. (M27, 9)

When asked to comment on the term "the earlier the better", one mother in the talent-and-cram group used "balloon" as the metaphor to illustrate her perception. As she remarked, "[the term] sounded like oppression to me. Don't treat children like a balloon, blown up until it explodes" (M33, 38). Throughout the group discussion, she repeatedly talked about her view of the phenomenon and sometimes questioned other mothers' practices with their young children's early involvements. For example, when M34 was talking about her Grade-Two daughter's experience with piano and English learning, she (M33) asked the mother (M34) if the child was able to "absorb so much and she could handle them well" (M33, 11). However, M33 was the only one in the group who mentioned her daughter's change of sleeping pattern due to the number of lessons taken. This statement was further confirmed by the child's response to her least favorite activity during the children-pair interview. As the child responded, "I want to quit abacus-mental math class because it takes too much time to count and too much homework to do. But Mom said I have to continue and I have to go" (C33). In fact, M33's daughter was taking more lessons (rollerblading, abacus-mental math, English, and drumming lessons) than M34's daughter and was physically tired from taking the lessons, as pointed out by the mother.

Across preschools and groups, over half of the mothers expressed sympathy for today's children. The term "poor kids" was used in all the focus groups and recurred in different topics. Many mothers explained their opinion that today's children are under a lot of pressure from schools and society at large. As one mother said,

> I feel that kids nowadays are very "poor." If schools [education after preschool] and the big environment are going to force us to send our children to talent or cram school lessons later on . . . if this is the case, then I would rather give my children a happy childhood now. (M24, 16)

With this point of view, many mothers (including several mothers in the talent-and-cram group) emphasized the importance of "having a happy childhood", because they believed that early childhood might be the only period that their children would be able "to play" and be "free" from the school-related pressure that they would have to face later on. In other words, they were afraid that taking too many talent and cram classes would "take away children's time to play" (M27, 35) and diminish normal childhood.

In addition, three of the five mothers from the preschool-only group shared the view of "parental projection" on "the earlier the better" term. These mothers expressed the view that the term was the projection of adults' needs and fears. To illustrate her point about parental projection, one participant said:

> I think it is the adults who give kids these views. Because we are facing pressure at work and finding it difficult to get a decent job, so we thought that it is important to cultivate the abilities earlier on. Then because of the work pressure, we thought that we don't have an interest to enjoy, in that we should cultivate an interest earlier on. All because of our thinking and views, we told our kids that they should learn English earlier in order to find a job in the future and should take piano lesson earlier in order to be able to play piano while facing the work pressure. (M42, 3)

Like some mothers, the professionals also talked about the developmental issues with taking too many lessons at a very young age. The phrase "pulling up the seedling hoping to make it grow better" (the Chinese term for the "hurried" child phenomenon) was often used by the professionals in this study to describe their perception of the negative impacts of involving young children in too many lessons at young ages. For example, the private preschool teacher explained, "basically children have their own developmental stages to go through. If the learning is beyond the developmental stage of

the child, then the effect of that learning is rather poor and could be harmful to the child's well-being" (T2, 9). In addition, the director at the City Bureau of Education also mentioned the lack of evidence in proving the advantages claimed for children who have started early with school-related learning. As he reflected,

> Through my encounters with the elementary school teachers, I was told that there was no distinct gap between those who have learned earlier and those who have not. In other words, those who started learning in the preschool period do not seem to be "faster" or "better" than those who didn't in preschool. I mean, we didn't see any big effect of early learning on the later elementary school performance. (E1, 25)

The professionals' perception of the phenomenon was reflected in the *Preschool Education* magazine that advocated for developmentally appropriate practice and was concerned about the negative impacts of involving young children in more formal schooling. The similarities between the professionals in this study and those published in *Preschool Education* are evident. As mentioned earlier, *Preschool Education's* pioneering and active role in the promotion of healthy childhood seemed to have a strong impact on the professionals' perception and understanding of early learning.

Teachers and directors in both preschools also mentioned that the term "the earlier the better" was created by parents themselves due to their lack of time, fear of putting their children at disadvantage, and peer pressure. For example, the public preschool director commented, "some parents would think that learning English at younger ages seemed to put their children ahead of others" (D1, 33). The private preschool teacher further elaborated on the view, "Parents are the ones who created the phenomenon. Because they don't have the time, are afraid of lagging behind, like to make comparison with others, and hear about it all the time" (T3, 27). This view was supported by the three mothers' comment on the "parental projection" of the term "the earlier the better"

described above. However, two professionals (T1 and D2) also agreed with some mothers' view on the early childhood period as the critical time for learning music and English.

Benefits and Problems of Early Schooling Involvements

In the following sections, mothers' perceptions of the benefits and problems of their young children's early schooling involvements are presented. Due to the similar responses of mothers of children in talent or/and cram schools, the two school-types' similarities and differences in perceiving the benefits are discussed first. Preschool-only group's perceived benefits are not reported separately but are integrated with the talent and cram groups as the preschool-only group was relatively small. In the second section, the same format was used for reporting the perceived problems of children's early schooling involvements. Finally, other sources' (children, teachers, directors, and administrator and content review) responses related to the topics are also integrated and discussed.

Perceived Benefits of Early Schooling Involvements

The patterns that emerged from mothers' perceived benefits of their young children's additional schooling involvements are organized into the categories of pre-academic skills, interest cultivation, and competition. These patterns are discussed in the order of frequency. For example, pre-academic skill is presented first because more mothers across the different focus groups and interviews mentioned it.

Pre-Academic Skills. Pre-academic skills that included motor, social, emotional, language, and self-independent skills were the most frequently mentioned benefits by most mothers (20 of the 27) across all the focus groups and interviews. For example,

children were taking chess class to improve their "logical thinking" (M13, 5) and "to use their brain" (M37, 17). English was taken to give the children the opportunity to learn a second language while abacus-mental math was taken to improve children's mathematical skills. Moreover, a few mothers stated that through piano lessons, children's listening skills would be enhanced and in return this would help children with later school learning. As one mother explained,

> I let my first child start piano lessons at age of 4, you know, to develop his listening skill and music rhythm. I found these piano lessons were good because his phonetics were very accurate. From this experience I would make sure that all my children take piano lessons at age of 4. (M15, 21)

Drawing, as the most frequently engaged in "talent" lesson among the preschoolers, was the most talked about activity among mothers of different school-types and focus groups. Almost all the mothers, regardless if their children were taking these lessons or not, spoke about the importance of drawing in young children's lives. Some mothers mentioned that drawing lessons were taken to develop children's fine-motor skill, creativity, and also to prepare for elementary schoolwork. Four mothers from different focus groups mentioned the heavy reliance on drawing in elementary schoolwork. One mother elaborated this view by sharing her sister's experience with the group:

> My sister's daughter is in the elementary school now. She told me that drawing skill is very important because most of the schoolwork in the elementary school required students to draw. That's why I want my daughter to be ready and prepared." (M36, 29)

However, over half of the mothers emphasized the importance of drawing as the way that young children express their feelings and imagination. Several mothers (8 of the 32) described how their children used drawing to express their emotions. For example, one mother said, "drawing is [children's] emotional outlet, and I could tell my children's

feelings by looking at their drawings" (M15, 12). Furthermore, six mothers from the preschool-only group and talent-only groups, talked about how they tried to provide the environment that would encourage their children to freely explore their creativity and imagination through drawing. As one preschool-only mother commented:

> Well, I don't think it is necessary to take drawing lessons. You know, sometimes you just need to give [children] the opportunity to experience different environments and to see different things. And they will be able to express what they have seen in drawings. I think this is the best way." (M23, 26)

During the group discussions, more than half of the mothers (none from the preschool-only group) described their children as being "too active" and hoped that taking lessons would help their children to "sit still" and "calm down" in order to adjust to later school learning environments. For example, one mother explained why she enrolled her child in abacus-mental math class: "my daughter is too active, so my husband and I thought that by taking the abacus-mental math lesson she would learn how to sit still and concentrate in class" (M34, 16). The grandmother agreed and commented that "the child is too active so I thought that taking piano lessons would give her the time to calm down" (M11, 19). Other words, such as endurance and perseverance, were also referred to by some mothers when discussing the prerequisite skills for later school learning. For instance, one mother talked positively about chess lessons. She said, "chess is a great activity in cultivating children's perseverance which I think is a very important skill to have in later school learning" (M17, 4).

When asked "What does the experience of more early schooling involvement mean to you and your children?" many mothers, including some mothers in the preschool-only group, expressed the importance of providing an environment that would help the child to function effectively in school and later in society. Habit-training for self sufficiency, self

discipline, emotional maturity, and habits of wholesome social adjustment was viewed as the essential component of early learning and development. More than half of the mothers (19 of the 32) mentioned the abilities to follow rules, to be disciplined, to be independent, to learn about self and others, to make and maintain friendships, and to be able to regulate emotions as reasons for enrolling their young children in early childhood education programs. This is evident in the following comments:

> I told some preschool teachers that my child is here to learn how to follow rules and be disciplined. To me, being good at study is worthless when a child's manner is bad. (M11, 9)

> Before my daughter started preschool, I sent her to different "talent" lessons such as paper clay, drawing, and piano lessons when she was about four-years-old. At that time my intention was not for her to learn anything, but very much for her group-life social skills. (M16, 27)

> My child is very aggressive when playing with other kids and he doesn't know how to control himself. That's why I want him to learn how to control his emotions and be more independent. Because he is the only child on my side and my husband's side of the family, he is very spoiled and dependent. (M24, 35)

Comparatively speaking, mothers from the public preschool were more likely to talk about the habit-training than were mothers in the private preschool. For example, they were more likely to report that one of the reasons to engage children in talent and cram activities was to develop children's socioemotional skills. In the third focus group discussion and also in the individual interview with M45 (from the private preschool), the topic was more focused on cultivating and having interests as emotional outlets rather than on taking interest-based lessons to help children regulate their emotions.

In addition, three of the five mothers in the preschool-only group expressed their emphasis on their children's interpersonal relationship skills. They viewed a child's social skill in making and maintaining friends as "the key to success" (M25, 4) and the

preschool period as the time that a child starts to learn and build his/her interpersonal skills. One mother's comment on her goal for her preschooler further elaborated this view: "I am not expecting my child to learn those cognitive things in the preschool, but more on learning how to be in a group environment and how to be friends with others" (M48, 23).

Teachers and directors also highlighted the same "pre-academic skills" in their discussions on the skills that children need to develop before entering elementary school. Like most of the mothers, the professionals strongly emphasized the development of appropriate attitudes and personal habits rather than on learning specific information and knowledge during the preschool period. For example, the private preschool director explained that it is the preschool's job "to maintain the physical and mental health of children, to develop good personal habits, to enrich children's daily experience, to promote children's ethical concepts, and to develop their prosocial and group behavior" (D2, 16). In addition, the City Bureau of Education director focused further on "life skills" development in the early childhood education as:

> The basic "life skills" such as self-sufficiency and basic social skills needs to be developed in the preschool period in order to prepare children for the "cognitive learning" in elementary school. . . . I mean, I believe the "life skills" are the most important and critical skills for elementary school readiness. (E1, 27)

More often, however, the professionals stated that the basic "life skills" could not be learned in the "talent" or "cram" schools as the majority of these schools were not designed to meet the needs of young children. Teachers and directors across the preschools questioned the appropriateness of the "talent" and "cram" school practices. For example, to illustrate the view, the private preschool director explained:

> I don't think those "talent" and "cram" schools really design their programs to meet the developmental needs of preschool children. They might make some minor changes such as simplifying the curriculum for their young students. . . . I mean, after all, they are more "business-oriented," and the teachers don't have the training and qualifications in teaching young children. (D2, 19)

Despite this view of the developmentally inappropriate practice of the "talent" and "cram" schools, the professionals did describe the positive aspects of involving young children in "interest-based" lessons. The perception of interest development during the preschool period leads to the next emerging pattern of "interest cultivation."

Interest Cultivation. The importance of cultivating children's interests during the early childhood period was mentioned by 12 mothers (n = 27) from the talent and cram school groups. During all the focus group discussions, the pressures that exist in today's education system, work environment, and the pressures that children may face in future were mentioned by mothers of different groups. Five mothers stated they had placed their children in "talent" classes in order to use the children's interests as channels for coping with future school-related pressure and other life stressors. For example, M31 said, "To me having my children taking these lessons is not about 'jumping ahead,' but about knowing how to cope with their emotions" (28). The view was further echoed in M45's individual interview:

> I feel that we are under a lot of pressure these days and the pressure will be greater. . . . You know, children are so "poor" nowadays because of their school-related work. I think that having an interest is very important because the interest will help the child to cope with the pressures. Yes, it's more about having a channel to release the pressures. (M45, 26)

Mothers who shared the same view on interest cultivation argued that early childhood education is the best period to discover and cultivate children's interests. They elaborated that they would give their preschool children the opportunities to explore and

experience different things as a way of finding their children's areas of interest. As one mother put it, "I think that children should have multiple learning experiences so that they will learn and know a little bit of everything, which I found very important in my working environment" (M33, 30). As mentioned earlier, four mothers in the public preschool listed the half-day program as the main reason that they chose the preschool in order to have more time to enroll their children in "talent" and other lessons. The following focus group dialogue depicted this view:

> M12: I think that the early childhood period should be more diverse. When [my daughter] goes to elementary school I will let her continue the lessons that she was most interested in. That's why I am enrolling her to these lessons now because I want to find out her area of interest. (22)
>
> M13: Yes, I thought that I haven't found my son's area of interest yet, so I will let him try all different kinds of lessons. I thought of music lessons, not about expecting him to be a musician, but more as an interest or skill. (24)

Relatively speaking, children in the preschools have more free time and less pressure from schoolwork than children in elementary schools in Taiwan. One mother talked about the experience of her elementary school-aged niece. She said, "My niece really rejects all the lessons that she has to take after school. She often complains that she doesn't have enough time to do her schoolwork and enough time to play" (M45, 16). This experience had further confirmed the mother's decision on cultivating the interests of her child during the early childhood period. During the individual interview, the mother shared the same view with some mothers in the public preschool as she planned to transfer her child from the full-day program to a half-day program where she will enroll her daughter in different lessons including both "talent" and "cram" lessons. M45's daughter is the youngest child of those in the children pair interviews and also the youngest in her class as the mother wanted the child to finish the preschool a year earlier

in order to attend some talent and cram schools before entering primary school. During the pair interview, the child first seemed to be confused with the questions as she was often shaking her head and smiling in response to the questions. With the older child's presence and comments on the questions, the child started to talk more about her favorite dance lessons and her feeling about taking drawing lessons. However, with the questions on reasons for taking lessons, the head shaking was the reply. As the result, how the child felt about the lessons is not clearly stated.

As some mothers (mostly from the talent-and-cram group) were treating the preschool period as the period of interest discovery and exploration, other mothers from the talent group, particularly those who have children in only one "talent" lesson, were providing a different perspective. These mothers repeatedly emphasized the importance of focusing on "one interest" or "one specialty" at a time. Two mothers' dialogue in the first focus group best reflected this "one at a time" view:

> M21: I feel today's children are under a lot of pressure. As the result, I want to give my children a "happy childhood." To me, you just need to learn one thing at a time and be good at that one instead of taking so many and not be good at any one of them. (20)

> M28: Yes, I agree with you. Many mothers in my daughter's piano class asked me why my daughter is learning so well in piano class. Then I told them that piano is the only lesson that we have now, and we just need to concentrate on this one. And they told me that they should probably need to cut down their children's lessons from four to one or two. Well, if learning one lesson is not enough, then how many will be enough? (23)

Relatively, mothers in the preschool-only group treated the existing pressures in school and the work environment as their main reason for not having their children in any extra "talent" or "cram" school lessons. To these mothers, the preschool period is the only period that the children could really be free from school-related pressure and have time to

really "play." For example, one mother explained how she related to this as "I don't know about the future, and I don't know if my child will succeed or not in this competitive society. But at least when looking back on their early years, my children can say that they had a happy childhood" (M48, 32).

Furthermore, some mothers spoke about the need for "multiple intelligences" in today's education system. One mother described her view on the education system like this:

> With the current educational reform movements, we are constantly hearing about the need to have "multiple intelligences" from the news and other media. I mean, at the end you really think and worry about it. Does this mean that I have to start sending my children to "talent" lessons? (M34, 36)

As the content review of parenting resources indicated, "multiple intelligences" was repeatedly used with the topic of brain development. The development of the "whole brain" which stressed a balance between the two hemispheres of the brain was reported frequently to "cultivate otherwise untapped multiple intelligences" that endows each child. Furthermore, some programs stated that their "holistic curriculum" design was built based on the theory of Howard Gardner's (1993) "multiple intelligences" in order to meet the new education policy of "multiple-entrance" in Taiwan. The new educational reform of "multiple-entrance" to high school and college is to ensure that students will be evaluated not solely on their "academic" grades, but also on other intelligences such as languages, arts and music. This topic was discussed especially among the mothers in the second and third focus groups. Toward the end of second focus group discussion, the mothers were visibly excited about sharing their similar views and stories about the current "multiple-entrance" educational reform. One mother shared a story about a girl who was rejected by the "Taipei First Girl High School" (the most prestigious high

school for girls in Taiwan) due to the girl's lack of "talent." The following dialogue depicted these mothers' feelings toward the educational reform:

> M22: In the old days, if you had what it took to succeed in school, you went to college by passing the entrance examination regardless if you were poor or rich. (8)
>
> M24: Now it is different. You have to be rich to go to school. (9)
>
> M23: The higher the SES is, the better chance of getting into good schools. (10)
>
> M26: You know, the school teachers even told me that those rich people's children, who were taking those talent lessons since the very young ages, would have better references and resumes to go to a good school. (11)
>
> M27: Now, you feel that you have to send the children to the "talent" lessons in order to get into the good schools. (13)

Interestingly, the public preschool teacher also mentioned the need to have "multiple intelligences" due to the current education system. When asked about the role that "talent" and "cram" schools play in young children's early learning experiences, the teacher replied, "I don't object on sending young children to talent schools. Actually the enhancement is pretty good for the children especially under the current educational implementation where 'multiple talents' are valued" (T1, 9).

At the end of the third focus group discussion, two mothers' comments summed up their feelings toward the "multiple-entrance."

> M31: Yes, with this "multiple-entrance" children are forced to take "talent" lessons besides the school-related lessons. You have to go in order to add more points to your child's resume for later high school and college entrance. (23)
>
> M32: Now the "talent" lessons have turned into another type of schoolwork. This is sad. (25)

However, as the private preschool director and the City Bureau of Education director mentioned in their interviews, many parents had misunderstood the "true essence" of the

"multiple-entrance." In fact, M23 shared a similar view with the directors on the educational policy of "multiple-entrance" at the end of the group discussion:

> Actually I see this "multiple-entrance" policy differently. The new reform is different from our present one, the latter was more passive and narrowly focused on academic learning. I mean, my interpretation is that knowledge and intelligence should come from all different places not just from school. You might have to go to the library, on-line, or to the field to observe all the living things around us. Yes, my children might not turn out to be good at school learning, but I will still try to let them be exposed to many different environments. So, you know, I am not that anxious about this multiple-entrance. (15)

Teachers and directors also agreed with the mothers that early childhood was the period for developing and cultivating young children's interests. In addition to personality and character development, the professionals talked about "interest development" and "aptitude exploration" during the preschool period. However, the professionals were more likely to talk about interest as a motivation for learning rather than as an emotional channel or a way of cultivating "multiple intelligences." For instance, one teacher described her view of interest development in the early years as follows:

> I think interest is very important because it is the motivation for learning. I would tell parents to use their children's interests as the criteria for deciding the early schooling involvements. As long as the child wants to learn, I don't object to sending the child to "talent" lessons. (T2, 13)

In addition, like some mothers, the professionals also emphasized the importance of involving young children in one or only a few activities at a time. As the public preschool director put it, "less is more" (D1, 17).

Competition. Young children's early schooling involvement was perceived by all the mothers in this study as a widespread social phenomenon. Thirty-one of the 37 children in the study were engaged in some forms of adult-structured activities outside of

regular preschool programs. Mothers across school-types and focus groups were aware of the mainstreaming practice of sending young children to "talent" and/or "cram" school programs. As one mother commented to M23, whose child was not in any lessons, "To my knowledge and the people around me, almost every child is taking some types of talent lessons, and it is hard to find child like C23" (M24, 28). A second mother's phrase of "generation of cram school" (M15, 33) portrayed this widespread social trend. In addition, another mother's reflection of her early educational experiences further revealed the trend and fear of putting the child at disadvantage:

> My husband and I never went to "talent" and "cram" schools when we were young. And he has a master's degree and I have a post-secondary degree. But, you know, it is not the case with today's children. Every child that I know is in some kinds of lesson. If you are not, it seems that you are falling behind. (M37, 45)

The mainstream practice in Taiwan of sending children to lessons during the preschool period was in part a reaction to the competitive learning environment of the elementary school. As reported earlier, some mothers mentioned that the competition in elementary schools was one of the main reasons that they wanted their children to start taking the lessons during the preschool years. The following two quotations further illuminate the competitive learning environment in elementary schools in Taiwan:

> I am glad that [my oldest daughter] took piano lessons when she was four-years-old. To my knowledge, almost everyone in her Grade-Two class plays at least one musical instrument. Those children without any talent would envy those who have. And you know, these children may develop a lower self-esteem down the road. (M34, 16)

> I think you should let the children take "talent" classes in the preschool period because the competition is very high among the children in elementary schools. Sometimes when the child got 99 instead of 100, she would be automatically placed in the C-Group instead of A-Group. Yes, the competition is very HIGH. (M35, 30)

As the result, some mothers (6 of 27) from the talent-only and talent-and-cram school groups felt the need to provide their children with a skill that would help them to succeed not only in schools but also in the competitive society. When talking about the growing number of early childhood education programs that existed in the market, one mother responded "it's about competition, I'm afraid that the child doesn't have what it takes to succeed" (M15, 29). Another mother concurred with this view,

> Now that the "big" environment is bad, children cannot survive without skills. So if children have extra skills they might be able to survive and compete with others. Well, for instance, the child might compete with other candidates by having one more skill, let's say computer skill, during a job interview. We hope [our children] will be a little bit better than others and have more things to put on their resume. So, I thought that I should let my children learn something and not lose out. I mean, more or less, you do feel this way. (M17, 22)

Hence, several mothers in the focus groups talked about "creating the path" for their children in music, dance, or other art related areas. Music, in particular piano, was the most popular "path" for the mothers who planned to have their children in "music-gifted class" in the elementary school. In addition, one mother shared her friend's experience with the group, "my friend is enrolling her son into many art-related lessons, because she thought that if the child is not good at school later on at least he will have a skill to survive" (M43, 4).

The described mainstreaming practice of involving young children in structured activities, the learning environment in elementary schools, the educational reform of "multiple-entrance" and stressful work environments have made mothers across groups anxious about their children's future. As one mother best summed up in the group discussion, "being Taiwanese mothers and children is just too damned hard" (M28, 9).

Perceived Problems of More Early Schooling Involvements

In addition to possible negative impacts reported in the previous sections, four general patterns that emerged from the focus groups and individual interviews outline the problems that the participants experienced with young children's more early schooling involvements. The mothers listed (a) peer pressure, (b) demands on the parents, (c) parental dilemma, and (d) intergeneration gap as the main problems that they had encountered. Interestingly, most of the perceived problems were derived mainly from the mother's "conditions" rather than the child's "conditions." In the following section, each topic is presented and discussed separately. The similarities and differences among groups and individuals are reported and integrated into each related topic discussion.

Peer Pressure. As mentioned earlier, all the mothers were aware of the mainstreaming practice of engaging young children in adult-structured "talent" and "cram" school activities. Almost all mothers from different school-types and focus groups expressed their concerns about the impact of this peer pressure of involving their young children in more structured "talent" and "cram" school activities. Some mothers in the talent-only and talent-and-cram groups mentioned that the existing social trend had forced them to send their children to lessons, as they were afraid of putting their children in a disadvantaged position. The comparisons between parents and the messages passed around parents had created problems for many mothers. The problem was particularly evident for those mothers who did not enroll their children in "talent" or "cram" schools. All the mothers in the preschool-only group had expressed their frustrations with the peer pressure and the judgments that others had placed on them. For instance, one mother explained how she related to these:

> People around you are telling you all kinds of scary things. Such as that the Grade-One class is not teaching phonetics anymore so you better send your kids to phonetics lessons ahead of time. And they said that the basic math skill is not taught effectively in elementary schools, so you should hurry to enroll your kids in abacus-mental math lessons. I mean, you feel scared just to hear about all of these things and eventually you start to wonder if you should send your kids to those lessons or not. (M48, 22)

Another mother elaborated her frustration of being a "minority,"

> People are always very surprised to find out that my children are not taking any lessons. They would say things like "you are fooling around with your children's education" or "your children will fall behind". But, you know, I am confident with my children, and plus we are not really "fooling" around. (M23, 9)

The professionals were also aware of the current mainstreaming practice and its pressure on parents to involve young children in the "talent" and "cram" school programs. Both public and private preschool teachers and directors emphasized the large number of children involved in "talent" and/or "cram" lessons in their classes and schools. As the public preschool director pointed out, "today it is hard to find children without any lessons. Almost every child in the school is involved in some form of lessons" (D1, 16). In addition, the public preschool teacher's and director's comments on mainstream practice further indicated the influence of peer pressure on parents' decision about their children's early learning experiences:

> Parents make comparisons between their children and others' children because they are afraid that their children might be falling behind. When they send their children to the lessons, they don't think about if the lessons are good for the children or not. . . . I mean, they only think about not being able to catch up with the others. (D1, 16)

> Parents are hearing about children's involvements in talent and cram school lessons all the time . . . and they started to question if they are doing the best for their children's education. So those who used to object to the idea of sending young children to talent or cram lessons are giving these lessons a try. (T1, 9)

With the understanding of parental peer pressure, the professionals reported that they would advise parents to enroll children in lessons based on the criteria of the child's interest and family resource availability.

Demands on the Parents. When asked to comment on the problems regarding more early schooling involvements, many mothers described the availability of time, transportation, supervision, knowledge, money, and a support network as the critical elements in their decision-making. A lack of these resources may affect mothers' decisions on their children's more early schooling involvements. As previously discussed, the private preschool's comprehensive program provided the service that would relieve the busy parents from running between work and their children's early education classes. However, a small number of mothers still enrolled their children in the programs outside of the preschool as mentioned in the previous section.

In terms of time management and commitment, some mothers (11 of the 27) mentioned the need to balance each child's schedule with their own work. For example, one single mother talked about her struggles in balancing the two children's lessons because of the lack of a support network:

> My daughter is taking English, ballet, and piano lessons now. However, since I am a single mother, sometimes I find it very difficult to match two children's schedules on top of my own schedule. That's why I have to stop my daughter's art lesson because of schedule conflicts. Now, she is talking about taking chess lessons, but I don't know if I can manage that. (M12, 14)

Several mothers also expressed the need to treat all their children equally in terms of the number of lessons taken per child. They described that children would compare among themselves and sometimes they would ask to take the lessons that the other siblings were taking. As one individual put, "I think it needs to be fair between the kids. You cannot

spend all the money on the brother and nothing on the sister" (M31, 7). However, three mothers spoke of the fairness from a different perspective. They believed that the decision should be made based on each individual child's needs and personality rather than on fairness. M32 gave a typical response. She said,

> I think each individual child has different needs and personalities. Like my second child, she is the type that you cannot force to do anything she doesn't want to. So I am not forcing her to take any lessons. I mean, it's not about fairness but about individual differences. (26)

Transportation was the other problem that some mothers faced in having their children in lessons. Mothers need to have the time and a vehicle to transport children to lessons. Sometimes they travel a great distance or make numerous trips between children and lessons. One working mother's description of her evening illustrated this problem:

> Right now, I have to take my son to his lessons four evenings a week and I am not sure if I could manage to have his sister taking dance lessons in the evening. Because, I feel I am riding the scooter from one place to another and all day long. Well, it's pretty tiring after a day of work. (M31, 20)

Several mothers also mentioned that the location of the lessons was one of their reasons in selecting a particular center or school. They were more likely to send their children to lessons in the neighborhood. For example, one mother admitted that the child was in math lessons because it was located "in the same building as his English lessons" (M13, 17).

Many mothers across groups (including mothers in the preschool-only group) discussed the need for parental supervision and interaction with the child in order to make learning more effective. The following dialogue from the fourth focus group reflected this view:

> M42: With all lessons, if the parents don't guide or supervise their children's learning, then the results are not going to be that good. (7)

> M47: Yes, you still need to interact with the child when [he/she] comes home. Like English, you have to be able to say something in English to them. (8)
>
> M48: It seems that you have to learn with the child. It's not just the teacher's responsibility because you paid for it. No, it's not like that at all. (9)
>
> M42: This means that parents HAVE TO supervise and interact with children for effective learning. So, if you cannot do that, then what's the point of sending the children to those lessons? (10)

The professionals agreed with these mothers on the importance of parent-child interaction and the active role that mothers need to play in the child's early education. The private preschool teacher used English as her example in illustrating the view on parental interaction. She stated,

> Some parents would complain to me that their children don't speak English at home. I would ask the parents if they have interacted and communicated in English with their children at home. This is very important, you know, you cannot rely totally on teachers for all the learning. Parents are an important part of young children's early learning. (T3, 18)

Throughout the individual interviews with the professionals, the importance of parent-child interaction was often emphasized and valued. The professionals were afraid that children's talent and cram school activities would occupy the already limited time with their parents. As the director at the private preschool commented, "the time to interact with the child is very critical as parents are the most important teachers of the child's life" (D2, 31). Again, the professionals' perception on the importance of family time was reflected in the *Preschool Education* magazine's frequent advice to parents to spend time with their children rather than sending them to "talent" or "cram" schools.

Some mothers expressed their frustration in supervising their children's learning due to their lack of knowledge, time, and skills. Six mothers from different focus groups reported their inability in supervising and interacting with their children due to their lack

of English skill. For instance, one mother said "my daughter asked me to speak English with her at home, but I told her I don't know how. My English is not good at all" (M12, 16). A second mother replied, "My child too, he would sing and talk in English at home. But that means I have to learn as well in order to sing or read with him. So I feel that it is more demanding on my part because I don't have the teacher to teach me" (M13, 9).

Educational expense was another issue that mothers discussed in the focus groups. Almost all the mothers agreed that a child's early childhood educational expense is relatively and comparatively high. They used "mini-college" and "need for dual-income" to indicate the high cost of their children's early educational expenses. Mothers from the private preschool were more likely to complain of the expense due to the higher tuition of the private preschool compared to the public preschool (the difference between the two preschool's tuition is about three to four times). However, several mothers (5 of the 15) in the public preschool mentioned that their children's educational expense was the same or even higher than the average private preschool's tuition. The following dialogue between the grandmother (M11) and M13 in the first focus group gave a brief impression of the group dynamics in the discussion of educational expense:

> M13: Well, because [my son] was not in the preschool until five-years-old, I sent him to lessons. I am giving him more lessons now, so the monthly expense is about the tuition of a private preschool. (15)
>
> M11: You (M13) thought that you are already saving the preschool money, so could afford to send the child to different lessons. You know, you are going to save more money once your son enters elementary school and then you can send him to more lessons. (17)
>
> M13: No, that's not what I think. I mean, I still take the money issue into consideration. If the fee is out of my estimation I will not send my son there. (19)

When asked about the percentage of the family income spent on children's early schooling activities, a majority of mothers did not directly answer the question as this could be a sensitive topic to reveal to a group of strangers. Those mothers who had their children in both "talent" and "cram" lessons would describe the expense as high but manageable and affordable. A few mothers expressed the opinion that the money is secondary and more important is that the child is learning something. M35's comment on the issue of expense during the individual interview illuminated the importance of learning over the money factor:

> As parents, we would try our best to educate our children, as long as the children are willing to learn. Like [my daughter's] drawing lessons, the fee is pretty high and some mothers asked me if I thought that was too much. Actually to me, well, the more important thing is that they are learning or not. I mean, money is secondary. Like this time, the drawing teacher selected my daughter's drawing to be in some art exhibition. I think it is pretty good as long as the teacher is able to fully bring out my child's talents. (M35, 1)

In contrast, a few mothers from the preschool-only and talent-only groups had also suggested "money as secondary" but from a slightly different perspective. They agreed with M35 on the importance of learning over money, but they often questioned the effectiveness of taking the lessons at such a young age. For instance, one mother from the preschool-only group stated, "money is secondary, but I really wonder how much the children are getting from taking these lessons" (M42, 8).

Most mothers across school-types mentioned that they would take the cost-and-benefits into consideration when deciding their children's early schooling activities. They would assess the types, cost, and effectiveness of the program before signing up the children. For example, money is an issue for M41 in deciding her child's early learning activities, particularly with the activities that the mother believed could be learned by the

assistance of a family member, such as rollerblading. The mother's perception of money was also reflected in the interview with the child. When asked about the most favorite lesson, M41's son replied that he took art and swimming lessons last year but stopped because "Mom said that we have no money" (C41). The view was described differently by another mother,

> I will assess first, if the financial burden is too heavy I won't do it. If you give yourself the pressure unconsciously you will give it to your children as well. Then the starting point of taking these lessons is wrong. (M32, 29)

M45's comments on the expense during the individual interview gave another perspective on the issue of cost-and-benefits. She realized that she placed a very different value on money than a majority of parents by stating "I don't care about the money issue at all, because I am willing to pay a big price for my child's early educational experiences" (M45, 28). She shared the view with M32 on not putting the money pressure on the child, but she also expressed the view that she would "give whatever the child asks regardless of the effectiveness" (M45, 33) or beneficial outcome of taking the lessons. As the mother pointed out, it is very important for the child to have multiple learning experiences in the early years and preschool period is a period of searching for an area of interest.

Parents' devotion and sacrifice for their children's education had also brought out guilt for those who were unable to provide the same educational opportunity for their children. Two mothers in the public preschool expressed their guilt in not having the extra money to send their children to lessons like most of the children. One mother reflected on her experience with her only son, "When my son got into Grade-One, the teacher asked students what lessons they were taking outside of the school. Many of his

classmates had taken numerous lessons, but he had nothing. I felt so guilty for that" (M26, 23). She added, "He was getting many zeros for his tests and I started to worry. Regardless of our financial status, we have to educate him because he is the only son." This mother has five children and only one son. During the focus group she repeatedly talked about her lack of resources (particularly the family financial status and the mother's junior high school educational level) in providing her children the "mainstreaming education" and the fear of putting her children at a disadvantage.

Parental Dilemma. Parental dilemma was another pattern derived from many mothers' responses across the focus groups and interviews. The topics that emerged from this pattern are continuity vs. discontinuity, parenting styles, and child's developmental readiness.

Almost half of the mothers (particularly those who were taking both "talent" and "cram" lessons) who had their children in some form of lessons mentioned the problem of continuing or quitting the lessons. The problem was more evident when the child started to show resistance and frustration with the lessons. These mothers described the time committed, the money spent and the effort made as the reasons for having their children continue to take lessons. One mother described her struggle with the child's frustration with piano practice:

> Well, it is just like washing your hair halfway through, you cannot stop but keep continuing. You know that each lesson is about $1,000 (CN$40) and if you don't practice at home, the next time it is another $1,000 and the same song will be repeated. You know, your heart would be bleeding over the money. So you have to force the child. (M16, 6)

The private preschool teacher's story of one of her student's learning the piano provided another picture of this parental dilemma. She described how parental persistence in continuing taking lessons could create pressure for young children:

> Like this girl in my class, you can see bruises on her hands. The girl told me that her mother would hit her if she doesn't practice her piano lessons. Some mothers would think that they are already spending a fortune on buying the piano and sending the children to lessons . . . but their children are not showing progress. So, you know, eventually these mothers would pressure their children and force their children to continue the lessons. (T1, 32)

In fact, not "seeing the product" was another problem that a small number of mothers expressed about their children's performance in the lessons. During the individual interview with M13, the mother repeatedly spoke about her frustration with her child's performance. She mentioned that after taking music and English lessons for a period of time, the child's father complained of not seeing the child sing or speak English at home. The mother's reaction was that "we just have one more level to complete and I thought that it would be a waste if we don't finish to the end" (M13, 18). As a result, most mothers would have their children continue to take lessons due to the above concerns and also the "breaking through the difficulties" perspective as mentioned previously. However, the professionals expressed that the sole focus on "product" and insistence on "continuing" the lesson might create pressure for young children. The consequence could be damaging as the private preschool teacher explained,

> When you are giving too much pressure, the children don't want to learn anymore . . . they are miserable. Sometimes children would intentionally misbehave, such as stealing, to tell their parents their struggles and needs. They would feel that the parents only care about their grades and performance, never really understand and care about their needs. (T2, 1)

Moreover, the professionals stated that parents should "listen" to their children in order to understand their children's struggles and needs. The need to listen to children is

particularly important nowadays as "everyone is too busy these days including children . . . no time to listen and communicate with one another" (T3, 28).

As for the children, the reasons for continuing or quitting the lessons were evident in their answers to the reasons for liking and disliking the activities. Lessons that were reported as "fun" and "playful," such as the opportunity to play with musical instruments or to learn how to swim and rollerblade, were children's favorite lessons. In addition, lessons that have some sort of extrinsic rewards, such as tokens and food, were also popular among the children in this study. Children's reasons for disliking the lessons were based on the amount of time and work that they have to put into the lessons. For example, two children (C13 and C33) complained about the amount of homework that they have to do for abacus-mental math and Kumon Chinese lessons. Sometimes the reason for disliking the lesson was the time of the lesson. For example, a boy complained about eating dinner at the abacus-mental math center. Expectedly, children who "like" the activities would be more likely to continue the lessons and those who "dislike" the lessons would probably want to quit the lessons.

In addition, some mothers from the preschool-only group also made comments on their dilemmas over the continuity and discontinuity from a different point of view. One mother pointed out at the individual interview that parents who had expected their children to pursue music-related areas should be aware of the amount of resources they need to have. She explained, "this is a very long journey, and do the parents really have the resources and ability to continue providing education this way?" (M23, 7). The same view was shared by another mother who reviewed her sister's struggles, due to the sudden change in the family's financial status, with the child's continuity in piano

learning in order to be in the "music-talented" class. Furthermore, during the fourth focus group, the discussion explored the benefits of "continuous learning at the later stage" rather than "discontinuous learning at the earlier stage." M42's comment on the successful cases of those who learned English at the later stage and had continuous learning made other mothers nod their heads. As M44 reflected when commenting on the term "the earlier the better" by paraphrasing M42's statement, "nonstop learning at the later stage rather than how early you started" (M44, 13).

When discussing early schooling experiences, many parents had raised the issue of educational approaches. The basic premise underlying this topic is the mothers' parenting style, and how they view their roles, values, and concerns, which all have an impact upon the environments they create for their children. This in turn has an effect upon young children's early schooling experiences. For example, mothers in this study who believed in giving the child a push would be more likely to send their children to lessons. An individual explained her educational approach as "I think children are passive, and they don't voluntarily practice the piano. So, you need to force them sometimes, maybe half of the time" (M38, 29). On the contrary, mothers who frequently talked about "happy childhood" would be less likely to send their children to lessons. Of course, there were always some mothers who were constantly torn between the two approaches. One mother spoke about her struggles between the child's learning and childhood naivety:

> I talked to some professors in this area for I was very confused. Do I want to give my children a happy growing time or . . . but there is always some pressure in learning, and then what should I do? With the abacus-mental math, I think I will insist that my son continue until he reaches the upper level. Actually right now he doesn't want to go. But . . . so many people are telling you different things and I really don't know what to do. (M32, 16)

Another mother's comment at the individual interview provided a very different perspective on the issue of parenting style. She stated that today's parents are overprotecting their children by providing a pressure-free childhood environment. This in turn has a negative impact on children's ability to cope with stress and pressure that are constantly present and even increasing as the children enter the social world. The following quotation further illuminated this mother's perspective,

> There is much promotion of the so-called "love-education" and many early childhood education experts are telling us how tiresome our children are these days. And the result of that is the lack of resistance to pressure . . . The living pressure will be greater, and children wouldn't have the ability to deal with future pressure for they are overprotected by their parents. (M45, 26)

This mother concluded that having interest(s) would help the child to cope with future life stress; and hence, it was important to cultivate the child's interest(s) during the early childhood period.

The last topic on parental dilemmas was the concern over the child's developmental maturation and readiness in "digesting" the lessons. A small number of mothers from the talent-only and talent-and cram groups questioned their children's intellectual development in comprehending the lessons that the children were taking. They were aware that if the child's developmental foundation is not solid or "fully developed," the advanced learning would be "useless" and might even be "harmful" to later learning. However, the major problem with this issue is knowing when the child is developmentally ready for the learning. For instance, a mother described her struggle with her child's learning and development,

> I am really WORRYING, because I don't really have that much experience and knowledge in the education field. So I don't know under what conditions my child is ready to learn or to advance? You know, you cannot just rely on the experts and

> the preschools because each of them has their own agenda. So, I am really struggling with this. (M37, 22)

Another mother further indicated, "I want to give my son so much that I am afraid that he is not absorbing them well, because he is not performing as I anticipated" (M13, 7).

Intergeneration Gap. The different views on child-rearing and childhood education between the two generations were another pattern reported by many mothers (14 of the 32) when discussing the difficulties or concerns that they faced when deciding children's early schooling involvement. Most of these mothers described their parents or parents-in-law as "traditional" who believed in "natural development" and focused more on "cognitive development" or "academic-based" learning. When discussing the elders' views on sending young children to "talent" and "cram" lessons, some mothers mentioned the elders' questions about the purpose of sending children to lessons. The mothers reported that the elders believed that childhood should be the period to "be happy" and the "time to play" instead of taking lessons and doing homework. As the result, they would question the usefulness and practical value of taking lessons, particularly the "talent" lessons. One mother shared her father-in-law's questions on the child's drawing lesson, "What is the purpose of taking the drawing lessons? Can't the child just draw at home? Are these lessons practical? Does the child need to learn these later in school?" (M27, 19). Some other mothers also spoke about their elders' similar questions and comments regarding children's "talent" lessons. In addition, a few mothers reported their elders' complaints about the amount of work that a child has to do after the lessons. As one mother stated at the individual interview,

> My in-laws feel that by having children taking these many classes we are taking away their time to play, but at least I still leave Sunday free for them to play. My mother-in-law is upset with me for arranging so many lessons because the children

> are always writing their homework at home. She feels very sorry for the today's "poor kids." (M35, 8)

Comparatively as reported by the mothers, the older generation seems to view the "talent" lesson negatively rather than positively. One mother's description of her mother-in-law's definition of "talent" best illustrated the older generation's perspective: "my mother-in-law and most people in the countryside called all the lessons *cram*" (M13, 16). However, the grandmother in the first focus group held a different opinion about "talent" school lessons. Throughout the focus group discussion, the grandmother condemned the practice of enrolling young children to "cram" school lessons by telling the group the successful stories of children who went to prestige universities without ever being involved in "cram" lessons. Like many mothers, the grandmother held a more positive view for "talent" lessons. The grandmother asserted that the "talent" lessons were taken "based on the child's interest and the pressure-free learning environment" (M11, 24). She further expressed that, based on her personal experiences, children who were involved in "talent" lessons are "more likely to succeed in school learning than children who were forced in "cram" schools at early ages" (M11, 14).

The older generation was also described as more likely to view child development from a more "naturalistic" perspective. Some mothers reported that their parents or in-laws would share their experiences as a child who grew up without taking lessons or as a parent who did not send their children to lessons. For example, one mother described, "my parents and parents-in-law always said that they didn't take any lessons as a child and they didn't turn out to be dumb or stupid. They would say these lessons are just a waste of money" (M28, 3). A second mother further elaborated this view, "Our parents' generation raised us without lessons, so they don't see the problem with their way" (M23,

24). In addition, several mothers also spoke about the elders' view on the child's inborn ability as the major determination of the child's outcome. An individual summed up her father-in-law's view,

> [My father-in-law] always said that it is useless with these lessons and useless in sending children to such an expensive preschool. He would say if the child has the ability [he/she] will do well in school, and if the child doesn't have the ability, regardless of how much money you invested, [he/she] is not going to do well in school. If the granddaughter is meant to be a doctor then she will be regardless of what you do. But to me, it's more about brain development and potential stimulation in the early years. (M36, 14)

However, one mother provided a different story of her in-laws' view of children's learning ability. She explained, "my in-laws are teachers and they feel that my first son has the ability to be in the "gifted" class, so we should let him develop his talents. But my husband and I do not want to 'hurry' the child at such a young age" (M28, 20).

Five mothers further pointed out the older generation's focus on children's cognitive learning and academic performance. They explained that the elders held different expectations for preschoolers and school-aged children. Before entering formal education (elementary school education), children are not expected to learn and study. However, the situation changes once the child enters the elementary school. Throughout the focus groups, some mothers reported that the elders usually were not involved in young children's early schooling, but they would question and pay attention to the grandchildren's school grades and performance once the children entered Grade-One. M37 talked intensively about her struggles and fears of living with the in-laws primarily due to the father-in-law's focus on the children's school grades and his over-protectiveness of the grandchildren. She was visibly emotional when she said,

> My father-in-law cares a lot about the children's grades in school and he always asks me about their grades. If my school-aged daughter did not get good grades, my

> father-in-law's face would turn green and he would yell at the child to let me know his disappointment . . . he is a very rigid person and overprotective of the children, living with him is very stressful for me. (M37, 11)

Like M37, a few mothers also pointed out the over-protectiveness of the grandparents for the grandchildren. They reported that their parents or parents-in-law would scold them when they were "punishing" the children. For example, a mother shared her elders' comments on her child-rearing practice with the group, "When I scold my daughter, my father would say that children are supposed to be like that, and my father-in-law would say you have to talk to the child and he will understand. So, my daughter is very spoiled" (M27, 1). However, the grandmother in the first focus group repeatedly mentioned that "physical health is more important" (M11, 5) than cognitive and academic learning. The grandmother described that having a skill is more crucial than a university degree. As a result, her grand-daughter had been taking piano lessons since she was three-years-old as the grandmother wanted the child to be like her mother (a music teacher) in pursuing music as a career.

In short, almost all the mothers talked about the intergenerational gap regarding young children's early schooling involvement. Expectedly, mothers (about one-third of the participants) who lived with the parents-in-law were more likely to express intergenerational differences in child-rearing beliefs and practices than mothers who did not live with their parents or parents-in-law. However, mothers mentioned that they are able to decide and arrange their children's activities as they are the primary decision maker in children's early childhood education and care. Furthermore, some mothers also pointed out that they would try to communicate and involve the elders to witness the children's performances and achievements in taking the lessons. For example, a

participant talked about her strategy for involving the grandparents. She explained, "I would record the child's performance on the stage and show it to the grandparents. You know, to let them know that actually it is pretty good that the children are taking these lessons" (M38, 13).

In summary, all the study participants were aware of, with different degrees and perspectives, the positive (benefits) and negative (problems) aspects of involving young children in early learning. Whether involved in the "talent" or "cram" school activity or not, mothers across schools and groups repeatedly expressed their conflicts and struggles when facing their children's early schooling involvements. This implies that mothers need considerable resources to support and help them in deciding the "best educational practice" for their young children. Hence, how mothers get their information regarding children's early learning is crucial in understanding their perceptions of the phenomenon.

Information Sources

When mothers were asked where they got their information about early childhood education, most of them listed personal experiences, family members and friends, relevant books, media and lectures organized by a variety of organizations including government agencies. The major information channel described by more than two-thirds of mothers was through their family members, friends, and other parents in the class. During the focus groups, many mothers shared stories of people around them to make their points and statements on young children's early schooling experiences. Those mothers who had elder sisters were more likely to report their sisters, who had already gone through the process, as their major source of information. Some mothers also briefly named some of the related books (e.g., *Your Four-Year-Old*, *Two-Year-Old Can Read*,

and *Your Child's Brain*) that they had read. However, several mothers pointed out that they were overwhelmed by the wide spectrum of the books available on the market.

Two patterns are intricately developed from the discussions on the information source. The first pattern is that mothers often found it difficult to evaluate the overwhelming amount of information that they had received from other people, media, and books. A second pattern is how mothers were influenced by the media's portrayal of young children and early learning. The following sections provide detailed descriptions of these two patterns.

Information Overload Struggle

Almost half of the mothers (14 of the 32) mentioned information overload struggles when they discussed their sources of information in deciding on their children's early schooling involvements. They noted that many books that they had read about child development and other related topics were "too idealistic" or "theory-based" for them to implement or practice. M22's statement is an example that demonstrated the struggle:

> I used to feel very frustrated and stressful after reading some of those books. I thought that I wasn't a good mother because I wasn't able to do what the book said. Then I realized that I don't have to give myself this pressure. Now, I would read books that are written by those who had experienced what I am experiencing now. I mean, I feel more connected and less frustrated with these books. (13)

This view was shared by one-third of the mothers who also expressed their frustration in implementing the strategies or methods that some of the books advocated. A mother used the "tug-of-war" metaphor to further elaborate on mothers' struggles in trying to be the "good mother" as that the book described. She gave an example of how she would lose her emotional control in "punishing" the child and how she could not stop herself from teaching the child phonetics. As she summed up her statement, "You know,

it's like playing tug-of-war, fighting between the child's psychological well-being and intellectual development" (M12, 7). In fact, several mothers spoke about their loss of emotional control, and how they found strategies to manage their emotions. Interestingly, these mothers concurred on using the books to "comfort" and "calm" themselves. For instance, one mother stated, "I looked for books to comfort myself and to calm my emotions. Not looking for books on child-rearing but on educating myself" (M44, 21).

The review of the parenting books from the three major bookstores showed that the common theme among the books was their emphasis on the critical role of parents in their children's developmental outcomes and well-being. The broad range of books, from raising a higher EQ child to understanding child's brain development, provides parents with a variety of information and "method" in child-rearing practice. Parents were often described as the most important and first teachers of their children's life. How parents interact with their children would have a lasting impact on their children's development and life direction. As a result, it is parents' responsibility to create an enriched learning environment for the child's well-being. This message certainly creates pressure for all parents that search for the best educational opportunity and living environment for their children. However, what is the best practice is hard to define particularly in the era of information overload.

Another struggle that some mothers (10 of the 32) mentioned across the groups was evaluating the multiple voices and variety of sources, such as experts in the field and other parents. The different perspectives among the professionals, preschools, and other people regarding the "appropriateness" or "best practice" of young children's early

educational approaches had created confusion and fear for some mothers. One individual strongly expressed her struggle in the following comment:

> When I enrolled my son to Kumon-Chinese lesson, the teacher there told me that most children started at age of three and we were the latest one. She said that we were too late. At first, I thought that . . . well, I heard that everyone (like my sister and some experts in the field) was saying that there is no need to take lessons at such young age. But then I realized that most kids in the class were already recognizing the Chinese characters. I am AFRAID, really afraid that he is already behind. (M13, 10)

This confusion and fear were shared by several mothers across the groups. They described how they were caught in-between the different perspectives given by different agencies. One mother summed it up this way, "there are so many voices, and we don't really know how to grasp all of these messages" (M32, 22).

A frequently recurring topic of Chinese phonetics learning in the early years provides the best example in illuminating the issue. According to the Taiwanese Ministry of Education's curriculum guidelines, the first ten weeks of the Grade-One class are devoted to learning Chinese phonetics. However, as mentioned briefly earlier, almost all the preschools except the public preschool in this study are teaching phonetics to their preschoolers. This downward push of curriculum to earlier grades has worried many mothers in both the public and private preschools. Some mothers mentioned some experts' warnings on the negative impact of "hurrying" the young child in academic learning. Some described other experts' comments that "every child is able to advance," (M49, 21). Others would review the "rumors" they heard about the lack of phonetics teaching in the Grade-One class. As the result, some mothers reported that they were forced to follow the mainstreaming practice, and would rather "be safe than sorry" with their children's educational involvements.

The results of the content review of the parenting resources indicated that there were multiple voices and views on the topic of early learning among the so-called experts in the field. Some experts would address the issue from Glenn Doman's early learning movement view that all children possess an innate genius that can be brought out if parents actively participate in their children's learning development. Other experts agreed with David Elkind's "maturationist' viewpoint on the possible psychological harm of early learning programs, and advised parents to "slow down" with their children's early learning. Thus, there is much contradictory information regarding young children and early learning. It can be difficult to evaluate which information is accurate and which practice is appropriate as the topic of early learning is a complex one.

Media Effect

Throughout the focus groups, terms such as "windows of opportunity," "critical period" and "brain power" were mentioned frequently by mothers across groups. Related to the previous pattern of "*Information Overload Struggle*," many mothers reported the overwhelming messages that they had received from the media. Commercials and advertisements, from promoting baby food to language schools, were often found to use these terms to "sell" their products. Some mothers expressed their suspicions and questions about these commercial slogans. For example, one mother stated, "the commercial slogans are very alluring and I do take them into consideration, but I also have my suspicions about them" (M15, 30). However, several mothers from the talent-and-cram group reported how they were attracted to these advertisements and in turn spent a great amount of money on purchasing the products such as Mozart CDs, Disney English teaching kits, children's encyclopedia and other educational materials.

Furthermore, a few mothers also noted that the flyers that were distributed to their house were the reason they enrolled their young children in the programs. As one mother explained to the researcher at the individual interview,

> I sent my child to this music-and-body movement class because of the content of their flyer. I was very attracted to terms such as "brain development" and "potential stimulation" that they said about the effects of music and body movement lessons. I really like that. (M13, 15)

Another mother's comment further echoed this view, "To me I don't reject the terms that the schools used to promote the effectiveness of their programs. Like what I said earlier, as long as the time allows I would like to send my daughter to these lessons" (M45, 29).

In fact, the messages that the advertisement flyers tried to deliver could be very powerful through their condensed explanations of children's needs and the promised results of the program in meeting these needs. The accessibility and availability of the advertisement flyers are other factors in making the flyer a powerful information dissemination channel. In addition to the television and radio broadcasting, the advertisement flyers for early learning programs were also often delivered to parents' front doors through the mail or put into their hands through on-the-street distribution particularly near the area of educational institutes. As a result, the advertisement flyers play a role in portraying young children and may affect how parents view early learning in Taiwan.

Four mothers "blamed" media for sending their young children to lessons. A mother excitedly described her view when the group was discussing the term "the earlier the better." She said, "I really don't know if earlier is better. But I feel that many of our views and beliefs were given by the media. This is all the media's fault" (M32, 18). Comparatively, mothers in the talent-and-cram group were more likely than those in the

other two groups to talk about how they were influenced by the media's portrayal of young children and their early learning experiences. Some professionals also mentioned the role that media play in shaping parents' perception of early learning. The business-oriented market of early childhood education programs and products has sent out the message of "don't let your child lose at the beginning of the race" (T1, 23). As a result, "more and more parents are enrolling their young children to the programs and lessons that claimed to put the children ahead of the race" (D2, 29). Thus, the content review of parenting information sources showed that the current focus on whole brain development which implied the "the earlier the better" message has dominated the early childhood education field.

Major Changes

When asked if there were any major changes with their experiences or perceptions regarding young children's early schooling involvements, over half of the participants responded with "no." About one quarter of the mothers reported the changes that they and/or their children had experienced. These findings are categorized and reported into three topics: (a) changes in the children; (b) changes in the parents; and (c) changes in parent-child interactions.

Changes in the Children

In the terms of the changes in the children, eight mothers reported positive changes that they had witnessed as a result of their children's "talent" and "cram" lessons. These mothers, in the different focus groups, said that their children had became "more active" as a consequence of taking lessons. The play-oriented type of program was reported to be the most influential one in changing children's behavior. For example, one mother

observed, "I think my daughter is more active since she started the English class. Her English class is the playful type, and the foreign teacher there is very active and often plays games with the kids" (M14, 18). In addition, a few mothers also reported their children's improved ability to "sit still" and "concentrate" after taking the abacus-mental math and chess lessons.

Several mothers expressed their concerns over their children's lack of interest and ability in learning Chinese due to their "early exposure" to English lessons. For instance, the following dialogue between the two mothers illustrates this view.

> M12: I think there are some side effects of taking English lessons. My daughter learned English prior to Chinese, so she is telling me that she wants to go to the American school instead of a Chinese school. (15)
>
> M13: My son too. Because he has been taking English lessons for the past two years, he doesn't know his Chinese phonetics. That's why I have to send him to the Kumon Chinese lessons to improve his Chinese skills. (7)

In addition, another mother in the fourth focus group also expressed her concern over the side effects of learning English at such a young age. She gave an example of her nephew's lack of Chinese skill after being in the English preschool for four years. As she explained,

> [My nephew's] Chinese is not that good at all. He would say things in the reverse order, more like saying Chinese with English sentence structure. But his English is very good. So, I am not sure if I want my son to learn English at such a young age. (M41, 21)

Another type of lesson that a few mothers mentioned was the effect of abacus-mental math on young children's handwriting skills. This topic was discussed particularly in the fourth focus group where one of the participants had been an assistant in the abacus-mental math center for a period of time. The mother had shared with the group her experiences with the lesson and her belief in not involving young children in the

lesson due to the child's lack of fine-motor skill development in writing and the "passive" teaching style of the program. As she reflected, "The lesson is OK if it's a short period where parents want the kids to count mentally. But not OK in the long term because it is based on memorizing some 'dead' equations" (M44, 2). This statement was agreed to by a mother in the group who had had a negative experience with her son's abacus-mental math where the child had developed incorrect pen holding position and messy writing. In contrast to this view, a few mothers reported their children's ability to concentrate, their fast speed in counting, and their advanced level of progress as the result of taking the abacus-mental math lesson.

Four mothers from the talent-and-cram group also expressed their concerns over their children's physical well-being resulting from taking the lessons. A change in their children's sleeping patterns and lack of energy had worried these mothers. Three mothers talked about their plans to change, cut down or stop the lessons. However, none of these mothers had finally stopped their children's lessons. One mother's statement on her child's experience gave the best illustration of these mothers' perspective. She said,

> There was a period of time that [my daughter] was wondering why she was learning so many things. But she was the one who wanted to learn, however, I think physically she wasn't able to take it. But, you know, we haven't been involved in the academic-related lessons yet. (M12, 27)

In fact, these mothers all mentioned at some points during the focus group discussions the "non-academic" involvements and the child's initiation of and insistence on continuing the lessons.

Changes in the Parents

Six mothers (N = 32) reported their changes of perceptions from disagreeing to agreeing or to being forced to send the young children to "talent" and "cram" schools.

The reasons for the changes varied from being lazy or disorganized in providing a more stimulating learning environment at home, being forced by competition and mainstreaming practice, to the child's ability in "absorbing" the learned materials. For example, M35 described during the individual interview her change of perception due to her child's ability in learning:

> I used to think that I would never enroll my children in any of those cram lessons. But my child, actually the preschool teacher also knows about this, is the type that would tell me that she wants to learn such and such lessons. When she was in the four-year-old class, the teacher told me that she was able to recognize and imitate the Chinese characters. Some teachers also told me that she has a high IQ and great potential. So I think learning really depends on the child's ability and personality. (26)

In complete contrast to the above change in perception, five mothers reported the reverse. They stated their personal experience with their children or with others' children was the major reason for their perception changes and also had made them question the effectiveness of early learning in formal settings. One mother reflected on her experience as follows,

> Actually I think I have changed my view a little. Maybe because I have three children now, so I am more careless. Like my youngest son, I don't intentionally teach him anything but I found that his development is as good as the older brother who I tried very hard to teach and enrolled him into lessons since he was very little. (M31, 19)

Two other mothers' experiences carried the same message as they found that the child without lessons was actually getting better grades in school than the child who had taken lessons.

Changes in Parent-Child Interaction

During the focus group discussions and interviews, six mothers (N = 32) reported changes in parent-child interactions and relationships as a result of their children's

involvements with lessons. For these mothers, more negative changes in the parent-child interactions were reported. All six mothers described how the supervision of their children's learning had created intense interactions between themselves and their children. One mother described her experience in supervising the child's piano practicing:

> I have to supervise and facilitate [my daughter's] practicing the piano at home. And our interactions have been affected by that. Well, change to "not so good." You need to put at least one hour into the practice in order to keep up with the progress. However, it usually ended up with crying and yelling. (M16, 32)

Piano, abacus-mental math, and English lessons were more likely to be reported as "the cause" of the negative parent-child interactions than were other types of lessons. Interestingly, only one mother reported positive parent-child interactions. M12 explained that her child's "diverse cultural stimulation" had changed their relation into a closer one not just in terms of the quantity of time they spent together but also the quality of their conversations. As she summed up, "learning does make a difference" (8).

Relatively speaking, most mothers did not change their perceptions regarding young children's early schooling involvements as a result of their children's early learning experiences. More often, however, comments concentrated on the conflicts and struggles that mothers experienced in deciding on their children's early childhood education approach. In fact, many mothers expressed through the focus group discussions and interviews that "it is not easy to be a parent these days."

New Emerged Topics

From the process of data analysis, three additional topics have emerged. The first topic is categorized as "characteristics of the child" where mothers talked about how their children's characteristics would decide and be enhanced by taking lessons. The second

topic is about how mothers perceived their roles in promoting their young children's early learning experiences. The last one is "play and learning" related to early learning experience. Detailed descriptions of the three emerged topics are reported below.

Characteristics of the Child

As indicated before, throughout the focus groups and interviews, mothers repeatedly emphasized the child's characteristics (such as will, interest, personality, ability, and needs) as their main reasons for deciding on their children's involvements in the early childhood education programs. First, more than half of the mothers (17 of the 27 mothers in talent-only and talent-and-cram groups) often described their children as the ones who asked for and made the choice of taking lessons. One of these participants explained her reason for enrolling the child in lessons as "all these lessons are based on [the child's] own request and will" (M12, 3). In fact, at the interview, M12's daughter did say that she was the one who asked the mother for the lessons. She replied further that she would feel "angry" if she didn't have to take the lessons. Of all the children interviewed, M12's daughter was the only child that reported only positive feelings and responses to all the lessons in which she was involved.

Another mother in the private preschool explained her way of dealing with "talent" lessons: "when I received the talent program notification from the preschool, I would read it to my son and ask him what he would like to take and learn. I always respect his choice" (M46, 19). M35's comment further elaborated, "my daughter is the type who would tell me that she wants to learn such and such lessons. All [the lessons] that she is taking now were demanded by her" (15).

Interestingly, four of the five mothers in the preschool-only group shared with the groups that their children rarely asked them to take lessons. For example, in the fourth focus group, many mothers expressed their envy toward the comment made by M42 who said, "my children don't ask me to take such and such lessons, very rarely. Really, they don't ask for them" (M42, 17). This group of mothers also admitted that they would consider enrolling their children in the lessons if the children asked. When interviewing M42's child, the boy did say that he does not "like to go" to lessons. However, the boy also mentioned that he would like to take swimming lessons when given the choice as he wanted "to learn how to swim" (C42). The mother noted that the only reason the child is not in swimming class is because of time conflict with the family schedule.

A few mothers and the professionals in both preschools also mentioned that sometimes children's decisions about taking lessons were based mainly on factors such as peer influence and extrinsic rewards. The professionals reported that children would want to take the lessons simply because their friends were taking that lesson, the "talent" class teacher was giving out candies to the students, or the adults were praising the child's "talent" in playing the musical instrument. For example, in the interview with M12's daughter, the girl mentioned that English lesson was one of her favorite lessons because of the "token" system in the class. This extrinsic reward motivation is also evident in M24's child's reaction. At the interview, the child repeatedly talked about the "delicious noodle" and "rice-wrapping" that he enjoyed eating at the Chinese Classic Recital class. The food seemed to be the main reason for keeping the child in the Chinese Classic Recital class.

In the private preschool, the rollerblading teacher's gender and "physical appearance" seemed to have certain power in attracting children in his class, particularly boys. For example, one mother talked about the reason her son wanted to be in the rollerblading class: "My son told me that he wanted to take rollerblading lessons because the 'handsome big-brother teacher' is teaching the class" (M46, 30). Interestingly, during the interview with M41's son, the boy also mentioned that if he had the choice he would like to take rollerblading lessons because the "handsome big-brother" is teaching the activity. The reason that the boy was not enrolled in the "handsome big-brother's" rollerblading lesson, as the mother stated in the focus group interview, is because "rollerblading could be learned through practice . . . therefore there is no need to pay for someone to do it" (M41, 20).

However, the extrinsic motivation for taking lessons may vanish when the children realize the painful effort that they would have to devote in order to be praised or rewarded. One mother illustrated her child's regret for asking to take piano lessons:

> My daughter saw her cousin playing piano one day, and then asked me if she could take lessons. I was very happy when she asked that. But after taking lessons for a period of time, she started to show resistance and regretted that she ever asked to take the piano lessons. You know, she even warned her younger brother to never ask for piano lessons. (M27, 28)

When facing a situation like this, mothers from the talent-only group were more likely to respond that they would stop the lessons if the child started to show resistance. To these mothers, forcing the child to continue learning something that they did not like would diminish the child's desire to learn. For example, a mother explained "the child needs to like and be interested in order to really learn" (M24, 21). In contrast, several mothers from the talent-and-cram school group responded differently. They stressed the

importance of encouraging children to face frustration and to break through the difficulties. This is evident in the following quotation:

> My daughter liked the abacus-mental math class at the beginning. Then she was frustrated midway after keeping getting bad scores. She asked me if she could quit the lessons. Well, I told her that she couldn't stop halfway. When children face frustration they would want to quit, but I don't want her to run away from her frustration and problems. So I would try to encourage her and sometimes even use tokens to help her go through the hard times. (M34, 31)

The findings from the children-pair interviews indicate that lessons which required homework, time and effort, such as abacus-mental math and Kumon Chinese, are the least favorite lessons among the children in this study. Even children who were not in the abacus-mental math realized the hard work that one has to put into it. For example, in the children-pair interview with C41 and C42, the boys replied that the abacus-mental math is "too hard" when asked why they are not taking any lessons. Furthermore, the two children (C32 and C33) who were taking the abacus-mental math all stated that the lesson is their least favorite activity and replied that they would not go to the lessons if given the choice.

The child's interest was one of the most frequently described criteria in deciding on young children's early schooling involvements. Some mothers (10 of the 27) reported that they would enroll their children in programs if the children showed interest. As one mother shared with the group, "I am thinking of enrolling my daughter in dance class because she is highly interested in all kinds of dance. She loves to see a dance performance and is able to sit through the whole program" (M31, 19). Another mother briefly explained her reason for sending her child to art lessons: "the reason that she is taking art class is because she has loved to draw since she was very little" (M44, 20). Even some mothers in the preschool-only groups said they would enroll their children in

lessons if the child asked and also showed interest. For instance, during the individual interview with M23, she talked about her son's request to take drawing lessons and her inquiry with the drawing teacher:

> My son wants to take drawing lessons and I did ask the drawing teacher that I knew. But the drawing teacher told me that he was too young (five-years-old) and would not learn much. She told me to wait for another year when he is more capable of understanding and following the instructions. So I thought, that is great, because I can save one year of tuition. (16)

When conducting the children-pair interview with M23's son, the boy did express his desire to take drawing lessons because he "wants to draw beautiful pictures" (C23). The child further talked about his disappointment in not being able to take drawing lessons. He said, "I asked my mother to take drawing lessons, but she told me to ask father, and he said NO."

Six of the 11 mothers in the talent-and-cram school group also talked about how their children's "high acceptance" and "strong adaptability" to different learning environments had made them enroll their children in lessons. When asked about the child's least favorite activity, two mothers in the third focus group responded, "my son doesn't really have anything he doesn't like" (M31, 27), and "my daughter likes all the lessons" (M35, 7). M31's response was confirmed by her son's "no" reply when asked about his least favorite activity and by "I would go because I can learn and it's fun" (C31) reply on the question of having the choice of lessons. One mother went beyond this level by saying:

> My son has a very strong adaptability skill. You know, he is a Sagittarius. I mean, he is interested in everything and plus I am willing to let him take the lessons. That's why he is learning in many "talent" classes now. (M32, 6)

Another mother in a different focus group expressed the view differently by saying "my daughter doesn't reject any lessons; she thinks all these lessons are for fun and for her to play with" (M45, 22). Five mothers from different focus groups also said that their children never say "no" or "not want to go" to them about taking and continuing the lessons. For example, one mother said, "my son accepted whatever I gave him and he never said he didn't want to go" (M13, 4). When interviewing M13's child, the boy responded that he would "follow Mom's orders" if his mother said he had to go. However, he also added that he would be "happy" if he didn't have to go and would prefer to "stay home to watch TV and play video games." In fact, M13 did mention that one of the reasons for sending her son to lessons was because he spent too much time on watching TV and playing games.

During the third focus group, almost every participant in the group described their children as "competitive" individuals who "don't give up easily," "have low tolerance to failure" and "have high self-expectation". There was a strong sense of parental pride and comparison among the mothers of this group. As one mother further revealed at the individual interview, "let's not say that my daughter is number one, but I know she is on the top percentile" (M35, 17). They often shared their children's achievements with the group such as their abacus-mental math level, piano level, and self-initiation in completing homework. Thus, compared with other three focus groups, the group interaction in the third focus group seemed to be more competitive and intense as the mothers shared their experiences with their children's early learning experiences. However, the children's "competitive" nature had worried some mothers. One mother expressed her worry in the following statement:

> I found that those students who committed suicide were those who got good grades at school. Both my mother-in-law (who used to be a school teacher) and I felt that good students are more likely to have lower rates of pressure resistance. I mean, when facing difficulties and frustration these children wouldn't know how to cope with their emotions. So I am afraid that my older daughter will turn out this way. And that's why I don't pressure her at such a young age. (M33, 5)

As a result, some mothers stated that they would send their children to lessons that would help the children to face failure and frustration in a more positive way. For example, one mother explained that "maybe through these abacus-mental math and chess lessons [my son] would be more tolerant of failure" (M37, 16).

The last topic mentioned as part of the "characteristics of the child" pattern was the need to "correct" the child's behavior. Several mothers outlined the child's careless and disorganized nature, shyness, lack of adaptability, learning disability or other deficits as their reasons for enrolling their children in lessons. For these mothers, they would select the lessons that they thought would be able to improve and change their children's "flaws." For example, they would enroll careless and disorganized children in abacus-mental math class to train the children to "pay closer attention" (M32, 20). Four mothers also said that their children's shyness and lack of skill in adjusting to new environments were the reasons for having their children in different lessons. One mother explained her child's personality as, "my daughter is very shy, especially in a new environment. That's why I thought I should provide her with a variety of learning environments and experiences" (M16, 5). This view was shared by another mother who talked about her principles for selecting lessons for her two preschoolers:

> I usually would find the "talent" lesson that is the opposite of my children's personalities. For example, if the child is the quiet type, I will find a "talent" that is more active. You know, not let the quiet one get more quiet and the active one get more active. Like my younger daughter, she is the quiet one and has been taking art lessons since she was four-years-old. So now I am having her take more active

> lessons such as swimming and drumming lessons. I am taking a more diverse approach and hoping that they will have a more balanced development. (M33, 37)

Three mothers in the preschool-only group also described their children as "shy" and "quiet." However, they spoke from a different perspective. One mother's comment on selecting the lessons that fit the needs of the child depicted this different view:

> Some people said that you should take the "quiet" type to lessons that are more "active." But, you know, that might just kill him. Right? Others said that you should take the "quiet" type to the "quiet" lessons. But he is a boy and I don't think it is that good for him to take drawing or other art-related lessons. So I don't really know how to grasp all of these. Well, my principle is that the child has to be willing to go and I also think that it is a good choice. (M42, 17)

Other mothers also talked about having a child in yoga class due to the child's physical needs (overweight) and having a child in drawing lessons due to the child's "violent drawing pattern" (M43, 33).

Throughout the first focus group discussion, M13 repeatedly expressed her frustration in teaching the child to recognize Chinese characters and memorize the English alphabet. As a result of her struggle, she decided to send the child to Kumon Phonetics and English lessons instead of teaching the child herself. However, the decision in enrolling the child to cram school lesson was questioned by the grandmother in the group. In responding to M13's comment on her child's enrollment to Kumon Phonetics and English lessons, the grandmother said "You are too nervous about your child's early education. You need to stop worrying . . . and make sure that your child is physically healthy" (M11, 20). In the first focus group, the grandmother influenced the group discussion by expressing her perspectives on the negative impacts of young children's early cram school involvements. As the only elderly in the group, the grandmother's opinions were respected by the mothers in the way that the mothers often agreed with her

points or asked her for advices. In other words, although the first focus group was consisted of mothers whose children were involved in talent and cram schools, the grandmother's outspoken voice had affected interactions of the group discussion.

Mothers, in their separate groups, generated numerous comments about the importance of their children's "characteristics" in the decision making process. Children's strengths and deficits in their learning abilities or personalities were perceived as "changeable" and "improvable" through the process of taking the lessons that target these areas. Not surprisingly, mothers emphasized heavily their children's needs rather than their own needs which leads to the next topic of the role of mothers in young children's early learning experiences.

Mother's Role in Young Children's Early Learning

As the main purpose of this study was to explicate, interpret, and make sense of participants' lived experiences of their children's early schooling involvements, all the comments made by mothers were centered around the subjective understanding of this phenomenon. Mothers' perception of their role in their children's early learning and experiences is perhaps one of the essential components of their child-rearing practice and beliefs. More often, it was at the point in the discussion when the perceived benefits of early schooling were noted that mothers emphasized the role that they played in their children's early childhood education experiences, which in return had affected their parenting practices such as the time they committed to their children's education.

When making the decision about children's early schooling involvements, most mothers would consider their children's "characteristics" prior to their own "circumstances" such as time commitment and financial availability. As a full-time

working mother in the preschool-only group put it, "as long as the child is willing to learn and I also find that to be appropriate, I will find a way to let my child take the lessons" (M42, 9). In terms of time management, most (13 of the 17) mothers in the private preschool had enrolled their children in the preschool's "talent" and "cram" lessons. As mentioned previously, the full-day preschool program also offers extracurricular activities including both "talent" and "cram" lessons outside of the regular classroom hours. This service would give mothers more options with their children's early learning experiences and also save mothers time and trouble in transporting children to lessons, particularly for working mothers as they need their children's time to be occupied. For instance, a private preschool mother explained why she picked the preschool: "because I am a working mother I couldn't really afford to drive [my son] to different lessons, so I enrolled him in the preschool that has talent lessons" (M43, 7).

However, there were a small number of mothers (4 of the 17 mothers in the private preschool) from the talent-and-cram group who would spend their evenings driving their children to lessons. One mother explained why she enrolled her child in the out-of-preschool programs: "My boy doesn't really ask to take lessons, it's me who said that he should go take the lessons because he is not doing anything after school. You know, he is just playing and fooling around" (M32, 35). The boy did express his feelings about taking the lessons in the evening during the children-pair interview. He said, "I don't like the abacus-mental math because it is during dinner time and I don't like to eat dinner there" (C32). When asked how he would feel if he had the choice of not going to lessons, the boy simply replied "feel happy because I want to stay home and play." However, the

mother also mentioned that the major reason that she sent her son to lessons was because of his "strong adaptability" skill and his "careless" nature.

Compared with the private preschool, the public preschool focus groups spent more time discussing the need to manage children's downtime and free time with adult-structured educational activities. In the half-day program, five mothers (n = 15) mentioned that one of the reasons for sending their children to lessons was because of the children's free time at home. For example, one mother said, "my son spent a great amount of time on watching TV and I thought that watching too much TV is not good for him. So I decided to send him to learn things" (M13, 10). A second mother added, "because if [my daughter] didn't take lessons she would be wasting her time by fighting with her little brother" (M27). More often, however, these were the mothers who also made comments about purposefully selecting the half-day preschool in order to send children to lessons in the afternoons.

The term "education mother" or "study-along mother" was often cited when mothers were discussing their role in their children's early childhood education. The "education mother" refers to mothers who devote and commit all their time and energy into their children's education. For example, the education mother would accompany the child in the preschool classroom as a teacher's assistant or participate as an observer in the piano lessons with the child. Among all of the 32 mothers involved in this study, five mothers labeled themselves as "education mothers." Four of these five "education mothers" had children in the public preschool. Some mothers explained that by studying along with their children they would force themselves to spend some time with the

children and would be more able to supervise the children's learning progress. The following quotations reflect this view:

> Well, you know, if I don't plan these lessons I would be like my daughter just fooling around and wasting time. So, having her take the lessons is another way of pushing myself to spend time with her. (M16, 11)

> With piano lessons, the teacher requires the mothers to be present all the time. Because only through this way, the mother would know how to guide and supervise children in practicing the piano lessons. (M28, 3)

> Started from very early on, when [my son] was taking the music lesson at three-years-old, I would be in the class with him. English was the same, I would wait for him outside the class for one hour. Because if I don't do that, he would refuse to go. (M13, 2)

In counterpoint, some mothers from the one-talent and preschool-only groups portrayed a very different picture of the mother's role in the early childhood period. They said that the mother's role is "to stay home" with young children. As one mother explained, "just like those early childhood education books said, young children should stay with their mothers. Yes, I believe that's the best" (M44, 1). Another mother shared this view by saying "many friends and relatives told me that mothers themselves could do early childhood education as long as they put effort into it. They said there is no need to enroll children in any preschool" (M21, 5). The role of the mother was further elaborated by M23's description below,

> I think it is very important for full-time mothers, like myself, to give children space to explore. Let them explore what and where they can reach, then I don't think you need to worry about their future development. There is no need to think and worry that the children will fall behind for not taking those "talent" classes. Well, I think that is secondary. (21)

In fact, several mothers in both preschools mentioned not having their children in preschools for more than two years. For example, when sharing about their children's early schooling experiences, three mothers from the private preschool expressed their

reluctant decision to send their children to preschool at the age of three due to their lack of time and resources. The parenting books that were reviewed indicated that parents are the best teachers for their children's development; many of these books were based on providing parents with tools, toys, activities, and games that they could play with their children at home.

A small number of mothers also revealed that learning was more effective when it was taught by others rather than by the mothers themselves. Five mothers from different focus groups expressed their frustration and lack of system and persistence in teaching the children at home. One mother shared her experience, "at first I thought that I could teach [my son] how to play the piano, but after all these years, he couldn't even play a song" (M24, 20). Another mother commented, "The results are not that effective if the parents play the role of teacher. You know, the kids seemed not to pay any attention to their parents at all" (M27, 18). In addition, a few mothers also mentioned their lack of knowledge or skills in teaching and facilitating their children's learning. For example, one individual explained her lack of drawing skill, "I am not very good at drawing, so sometimes when my son asked me to draw something I didn't really know what to do. That's why I thought that I should let him take drawing lessons" (M46, 35).

However, a few mothers from the one-talent and preschool-only groups shared their successful experiences teaching their children. They talked about how they used different teaching materials such as home-made English vocabulary cards and storybooks in teaching their children to read, draw, and recognize alphabets and characters. For instance, one mother described how she taught her son to play the harmonica and

concluded that, "if the child is interested in learning a musical instrument, [he/she] will put effort into it. I mean, you don't need to go out there to learn it" (M25, 16).

Parental compensation was another topic discussed by several mothers. These mothers had reflected on their own childhood experiences and memories of not being able to take "talent" lessons as one of the reasons for having their children in lessons. They admitted that they had projected their own "loss" onto their children's early schooling involvements. Two mothers reviewed their early childhood experiences as quoted below:

> When I was little, I often heard the neighbor practicing piano. I remembered telling my mother that I wanted to learn piano, but she said that we couldn't afford it. You know, we didn't even have enough money for snacks. So I really envied those children who could play piano. . . . Later I spent the first month of my earnings on purchasing a piano, but I only took lessons for one month. Now, my children are using my piano. Yes, I think it's about compensation. (M15, 27)

> One of the reasons is that I didn't have lessons when I was young. I used to think if I could learn this and that it would be wonderful, but my family was not able to afford that. So you try to avoid this kind of regret for your own children, and give them the opportunity that you missed. (M33, 11)

In contrast, mothers who had taken lessons as a child emphasized that their childhood experiences were not the reason for having their children take lessons. These mothers, who had shared their childhood experiences with the focus groups, all described their experiences as "painful." One mother reflected on her early experiences with piano lessons as, "When I was young I was forced by my mother to take piano lessons. My mother would hold a stick in her hand to make sure that I practiced" (M24, 19). When questioned if their childhood experiences had influenced their decisions about their young children's early schooling experiences, all these mothers responded no. For instance, one mother explained her reason to the group by saying: "No, I am not doing

this because I went through that as a child. I let [my daughter] take these lessons because of her shy personality. The major reason is for her to adapt to different group-life learning environments" (M16, 30). However, the data from the *Information Sheet* revealed that mothers who had taken lessons as a child enrolled their children in some forms of "talent" and/or "cram" lessons.

The other mothers who had not taken lessons when they were young held different views on the relationship between their own childhood experiences and their young children's early schooling involvements. Two mothers reflected on their childhood as "natural and happy" and therefore did not see the need for their children to be in lessons at such a young age. However, two other mothers who had similar reflections of their childhood experiences expressed feeling pressure to send their children to lessons. One mother explained her pressure:

> When I was young my father really pushed us to those lessons. But I didn't go, and I was the top 1% of my class. But, you know, this generation is very different. I mean, the competition is much higher than in our days. As a result, the situation is getting worse and you feel that you have no choice, but to follow. (M12, 8)

The data showed that mothers emphasized strongly the benefits of early schooling involvements for the child rather than their own interests and needs. One preschool teacher commented, "parents these days are more 'child-centered' than the previous generation of parents" (T2, 17). Parental sacrifice and commitment to children's early learning was elaborated in the pervious section of perceived problems of early schooling involvements.

Regarding young children's early schooling experiences, the professionals also acknowledged the "match" and "mismatch" between the children's characteristics and the parents' circumstances. They described that the "best practice" of young children's early

schooling involvements was when the parent's expectation and attitude match the children's. The following comment from the director at the City Bureau of Education exemplifies that the "mismatch" between the parents and children can be harmful to early learning:

> I think the whole issue with young children's early learning experiences is rather complicated as it involves many different factors and personnel. However, I think the "core" is the match between the child's subjective perception and the parent's expectation of the child in taking the lessons. Some parents sent their children to the lessons by expecting their children to achieve or reach at a certain degree of skill, but their children might go to the lessons mainly for interest reasons or the "playful" nature of the lessons. . . . As a result, the children would be under a lot pressure in trying to meet the parents' expectations. . . . I mean, the consequence of this mismatch may result in the child's rebellion and anxiety toward learning. (4)

In addition, the preschool teachers talked further about the importance of parental attitude in young children's early learning experiences. They believed that the most effective and "happy" learning was when the parents focused on the "interest-based" nature of the lessons. As the public preschool teacher explained, "If the parents think that they are sending their children to the lessons for interest cultivation reasons, then the children wouldn't feel the pressure and the learning probably will be more effective" (T1, 9).

Play and Learning

In this section, four aspects related to "play and learning," as defined by the mothers are addressed. The first is "learning through play." Eight of the 32 mothers (all from the public preschool focus groups) emphasized the "playful" and "pressure-free" nature of their children's early schooling experiences. When asked to describe the activities their children engaged in, mothers often used "play-oriented" to refer to lessons that do not require children to do homework, memorize poems, write alphabets, and take

tests. For example, the grandmother in the first focus group spoke about her grand-daughter's "paper clay" lesson: "there is no pressure when the child comes home, all she needs to do is to play with clay" (M11, 3). Of all the engaged lessons, English was more likely to be defined as "play-oriented." As one mother reasoned, "my daughter's English lesson is the no-pressure type. There is no writing involved, it's just listening and speaking" (M16, 10). The findings of the content review of parenting resources have further indicated the strong relationship between play and learning. From the advertisement flyers on promoting a program to parenting books on raising a healthy and whole child, play was depicted as the "tool" for enhancing children's brain capacity and encouraging learning during the early critical years of life. Thus, "play with a purpose" was highly valued and advocated in the child's early learning environment.

Interestingly, the "learning through play" was never mentioned in the private preschool's focus groups. However, little information exists on why the private preschool mothers did not mention "learning through play", as it was frequently talked about among the mothers in the public preschools and also among the professionals across the two preschools. When discussing the teaching approaches, the preschool teachers and directors emphasized the importance of "learning through play" in children's early schooling experiences. The professionals often commented positively on the "talent" lessons that used "play" and "games" in their teaching and activities. One teacher emphasized the role of play when she described her two criteria for evaluating young children's early "talent" activity involvements as: "The child's interest and the program's play-oriented teaching approach are the two critical components. The learning will be more effective and less stressful if it is learned through play" (T3, 7).

The second point, "learning, not just playing," was only defined and discussed in the third focus group where most children were involved in both "talent" and "cram" school programs. In sharing her son's early experience with the music-based program, one mother reflected, "It was not just playing like in some other programs. You know, they actually did teach him something" (M32, 8). Different from the "learning through play" group, the mothers in this focus group addressed the importance of the "learning process" in children's early learning experiences. M32, in particular, talked about this view by sharing with the group advice that she took from a friend: "Well, like my friend said, the process is more important than the product itself. . . to learn something is a process. We always gain something through this process (33). In addition, these mothers also believed that pressure is necessary and inevitable as it is a part of the learning process. These were the mothers who would push and encourage their children to face and break through difficulties rather than allowing their children to quit the lessons. Almost all the mothers in this focus group talked about the sense of achievement and glory that the child would experience once he/she had put effort into working on the problems. One individual reflected on her daughter's experience with abacus-mental math by stating: "I think she is more interested in the lessons now because of the feelings of achievement that come with it" (M34, 19). Two mothers in the first focus group also shared this view as they spoke about their struggles with their children's practicing the piano. As one mother said, "after getting the applause by performing on the stage, she was more willing to play and practice the piano. All this hard work paid off" (M16, 12).

The last aspect, "to play," was often mentioned by mothers in the preschool-only and one-talent groups across all focus groups. These mothers were more likely to talk

about the importance of having a "happy childhood" and to view the preschool period as the period for children "to play." One individual used the phrase, "they are here to play" (M48, 19) when referring to the goal of having her child in preschool. In addition, three mothers from different focus groups also mentioned that "learning should be like play, very natural and happy" (M25, 8). This "happy learning" was also an important factor for the private preschool teacher and director. Throughout these interviews, the private preschool teacher and director repeatedly talked about the importance of creating an environment where young children could "learn happily." For instance, this view was evident in the private preschool teacher's comment on the major difference between preschool and "cram" school. She pointed out that "In cram-school, children are under a lot of pressure because there are levels, tests, and homework. . . . As for our preschool, we create a happy learning environment for our children where learning is a happy and fun thing" (T2, 25). However, many "talent" and "cram" schools claimed in their flyers that their school's goal is "to create a happy learning environment for young children" through play-oriented activities and teaching approaches.

The concept of play and learning was also evident in the children's pair interviews. In general, "play" and "fun" were the two major descriptors that children used when describing the activities in which they were involved (see Appendix B). Of the ten children interviewed, only one boy responded that he would still go to the lessons if he had the choice because he could learn. The reasons for liking and disliking the activities were mainly about the "fun" and "playful" nature of the activities. Six children reported that they would still "like to go" to the lessons when given the choice, and in contrast, three children said that they would be "happy" if they didn't have to take the lessons.

When asked how they would feel if their mothers said that they have to go, four children replied that they would just follow the mother's order and two children said that they would be happy to go because the activities were "fun" and "playful." In addition, five children said that "the mother" was the major reason that children were in or not in the lessons, and three children reported that "the child" was the one who decided to take the lessons because they "like to go" and "want to learn."

The last aspect that emerged related to "play and learning" was the notion of "effort" in children's educational endeavors. Effort was highly valued by almost half of the mothers across groups and preschools when discussing their children's learning behaviors in school environments. For those children who put effort into their learning, regardless of the type of learning and the outcomes of the learning, their behavior would be praised and rewarded by their mothers. As one individual put it, speaking about her experience with her daughter's abacus-mental math learning, "I was very happy and glad to see that she was putting effort into her learning which I didn't really anticipate and expect" (M33, 17). The three mothers who had discussed their financial difficulties in providing the "mainstreaming" education for their children stated they would tell their children "to put extra efforts" into their learning. M26's last statement in the focus group discussion illustrated this view:

> Because we don't have the extra money for those lessons, I tell my children that they have to put more efforts into their studies. If they still get bad grades, as long as they put effort into their learning, that's ok. (14)

Moreover, several mothers also emphasized the importance of effort by discussing the difference between their children's learning attitude and outcomes. For example, one

mother talked about her personal experience with her children's early schooling involvements:

> The experience with my two older children has taught me that the one who took the lessons ahead of time wouldn't necessarily get good grades in school. My daughter's math grades are actually better than her older brother's who took abacus-mental math lessons during the preschool period. By taking the lessons, the brother thought that he had already knew [math], so he paid less attention to the tests and the teacher. On the other hand, my daughter was able to put more effort into her studies and got better grades. I mean, I believe that children's effort is a very important component of school learning. (M24, 10)

Summary

In examining the perceptions of young children's early learning experiences, Taiwanese mothers, children, teachers and administrators were interviewed in this study. This section is a brief review of the major findings, including main results directly related to research questions and emerging new topics derived from the data analysis. The five general themes (children's development, mass media, social competition, differences between individuals and groups, and cultural change aspects) are discussed in the next chapter.

First, it became evident that young children's early schooling involvements were perceived by all Taiwanese participants in this study as a widespread social trend. Thirty-one of the 37 children in the study were involved in some type of skill-developing lessons such as language and art. In addition, all of the mothers who did not enroll their children into "talent" or "cram" schools had experienced particular pressure as a result of the mainstream practice or from being in the "minority."

Second, regarding the definition of "the earlier the better" research question, it was found that the responses of Taiwanese mothers in this study were mostly linked to their perceptions of different early childhood education programs ("talent" and "cram"

schools). In general, "talent" was perceived by both Taiwanese mothers as positive for its "interest-based" and "play-oriented" nature; in contrast, "cram" was more negatively perceived for its "academic-based" and "cognitive-oriented" learning. The study also found that the definitions of school types influenced mothers' attitudes and decisions about their young children's early schooling involvements. For example, mothers who perceived "talent" as a positive learning activity would be more likely to enroll their children in an interest-based program.

Third, the study revealed that mothers, as well as the professionals, were aware of both positive and negative aspects of young children's early learning. In general, pre-academic skills, interest cultivation, and competition advantage were perceived as the benefits of involving children in "talent" and "cram" school activities, while peer pressure, demands on the parents, parental dilemma, and intergeneration gap were perceived as problems.

Fourth, most of the mothers reported that they gained information of early learning from their family members and friends, relevant books, and media. In addition, the mothers expressed their struggles with information overload and the mass media's portrait of young children and early learning.

Fifth, more than half of the mothers responded that they did not experience changes with their children's early schooling involvements. The reported changes were identified as the behavioral changes in the children, perceptional changes in the parents, and changes of interaction between parents and children.

Sixth, three new topics, namely child's characteristics, mother's role, and play and learning, emerged through the data analysis. Child's characteristics, such as will, interest,

personality, ability, and needs were found to be an important factor in deciding the child's involvements in "talent" and "cram" schools. The study revealed that in the Taiwanese context, mothers were the primary decision makers with respect to their young children's early schooling involvements. In addition, different perspectives of relationship between play and learning were expressed by mothers and children.

Seventh, the study clearly showed that mothers across groups and schools had encountered many struggles and conflicts when dealing with their children's early learning experiences. Mothers talked of the pressure of sending their children to lessons due to the mainstream practice, peer pressure, a competitive learning environment, and the media's portrayal of early learning. They also emphasized that a number of resources, such as time commitment, social support network and financial availability, were needed in order to provide the best learning environment for their young children. Professionals, however, identified parents as the ones who had partially created this trend of involving young children in numerous programs.

Last, the content review of the collected advertisement flyers, relevant magazines, and books revealed that there were two opposite positions ("competent child" vs. "hurried child") in the field, with a more dominant influence of the "competent child" view. The contents of the reviewed parenting magazines and books also suggested that Taiwanese mothers play a main role in their children's early childhood education.

Chapter Five ~ Discussion, Conclusions, Limitations and Implications

The main goal of this study was to examine Taiwanese mothers', children's, teachers', and administrators' perspectives of young children's early learning experiences. In this chapter, I will focus on exploring and illustrating the general themes that emerged through the data analysis process. In conclusion, the limitations of the study, the main implications, and the overall recommendations for future research will be discussed. As the first known research on this topic in Taiwan, it is hoped that the results of the present study will contribute new information and yield useful insights into issues concerning Taiwanese children's early learning experiences.

General Themes

The primary value of this qualitative study lies in the exploration of the perceptions and relevant meanings that participants ascribe to the actions of young children's early learning experiences. In this study an effort was made to work out structures and relations of meaning not immediately appeared in the text. As a result, based on systematic and critical data analysis, five general themes were synthesized which indicated extensive and deeper relationships among the categories and patterns that were reported in Chapter Four. In this section, the five themes: (a) children's development; (b) mass media; (c) social competition; (d) differences between individuals and groups; and (e) cultural change aspects are discussed. It is important to point out that these emerging themes are not regarded as independent and discrete categories. Instead there are connections and links within and between the different themes, which reveal the complexity of the topic and the multifaceted nature of the interpretation of the findings.

Children's Development

Concern about children's development was frequently expressed in the focus group discussions and in individual interviews across groups and schools. Taiwanese mothers and educators in this study might have different perceptions regarding young children's early schooling involvements, but they share the common goal of providing the best education possible for children. Similarly, the "experts" in the parenting magazines and books also addressed the issue of early learning from different perspectives, but the main purpose was to provide parents with the information needed to create the best learning environment for their young children. How mothers and professionals think about the best possible opportunities for learning, which has an impact on children's early learning experiences, appears to be related to their understanding of child development.

Importance of Child's Overall Development. Previous studies suggested that the Chinese parents put more emphasis on their children's academic achievement in the early years (e.g., Beckert et al., 2004; Ebbeck & Gokhale, 2004; Weikart, 1999). However, this study found that many Taiwanese mothers recognized the importance of "whole child" development as they frequently mentioned the importance of their children's emotional and social development during the early years. Throughout the focus groups and individual interviews, for instance, mothers repeatedly talked about the critical role that interpersonal skills play in a person's life and success. They also mentioned balancing the child's overall development by enrolling the child in different types of lessons that targeted different aspects of development. For example, enrolling a child who showed high interest in art, in swimming lessons is an effort to balance the physical and aesthetic aspects of development. It was found that no one child in this study was taking solely

"cognitive-oriented" or "academic-based" cram lessons. In other words, the mothers in this study valued "whole child" development, where every aspect of a child's development is emphasized, rather than solely the "cognitive" domain.

The agreement between mothers and professionals on a child's overall development is remarkable in this study. As for the professionals, successful early childhood education should enable children to maximize their development in intellectual, social, emotional, and physical domains. Although the professionals did not object to the interest-based lessons, particularly if they were in response to the child's interest and the family resources were available, they often questioned the "talent" and "cram" schools' learning environments in terms of meeting the needs of preschool children. Thus, teachers and directors warned about the negative impacts on the child's physical and psychological well being when the intellectual aspect of development was the sole focus and children were enrolled in numerous lessons. As a result, the professionals in this study often viewed the practice of involving young children in early schooling with disquiet.

The concept of "whole child" development was also reflected in the content review of parenting information sources in Taiwan. The term was often associated with Howard Gardner's "multiple intelligences" (1993) where the eight types of intelligence were valued. The advertisement flyers often used the words "holistic" and/or "pluralistic" to describe the program's teaching philosophy in creating a learning environment that aims to develop children's multiple intelligences. For the popular parenting magazines, the message was mainly on how to develop each child's unlimited potential and on how to provide richly varied learning experiences during the first critical years. In the *Preschool Education* magazine, three major skills (EQ, problem solving, and interpersonal skills)

were stressed as the crucial skills for future survival and success. The message is clear that every developmental domain or intelligence, including physical, cognitive and psychosocial, needs to be developed and balanced in order to effectively promote growth and change in children's brains.

As the study showed that Taiwanese mothers and professionals were concerned about the child's overall development rather than only focusing on intellectual development, the recent poll also indicated that Taiwanese parents put more emphasis on children's intrapersonal and interpersonal skills than the parents of pervious years (Tang, 2002). Tang speculated that this view shift was due to the media's promotion of EQ and pluralistic nature of the society in the past few years.

Brain Development and Early Learning Experiences. Regarding mothers' opinions of young children's early learning experiences, mothers across groups and schools often referred to "individual differences", "brain stimulation", and "developmental maturation" as their responses. Although the mothers were aware of both positive and negative aspects of early learning, the study showed that mothers who had enrolled children in "talent" and "cram" lessons were more likely to mention individual differences and brain stimulation. The terms such as "brain development", "windows of opportunity" and "critical period" were frequently mentioned. For example, mothers who had their children in English and/or piano lessons often mentioned the "critical period" for learning foreign language and music during the early years. They stated that the early exposure to English and music might enrich the child's ability in learning language and music skills.

As most mothers reported that their information about brain development was mainly derived from media sources, their perceptions of brain development and early

learning reflect the dominant influence brain research has on the existing parenting advice literature in Taiwan. From the promotion of an early learning program to a report on the importance of "intrauterine education," brain development was the reference and the evidence. The current hot topic of "right brain" or "whole brain" development has intensified the conception of a "critical period" or "learning window" during the early years. For example, early exposure to music was often advocated to train the brain for higher forms of thinking by stimulating neural connections related to abstract reasoning, language development, self-esteem, visual and aural skills. The potential of a child's brain was reported to be directly related to age and the amount of stimulation the child received. As a result, "timing is built in and is a critical factor in taking advantage of the child's total learning capacity" (Ko, 2004, p. 6). The current mainstream practice of involving young children in more schooling is an indication of the change that has occurred in Taiwanese parents' perception of early learning for their children.

This study also found that mothers who did not enroll their young children in lessons were more likely to view early schooling experiences from a developmental readiness perspective. These mothers usually referred to developmental readiness as a level of mental or physical preparedness that is necessary for having certain learning experiences. Mothers expressed the view that the learning environment needs to match the developmental state of the child in order to have effective learning and healthy development. Thus, these mothers, like the professionals in the study and featured in *Preschool Education* magazine, acknowledge that one must take the developmental abilities of children into consideration when making decisions about the child's early schooling involvements. A representative example of this perspective is from a

discussion on "abacus-mental math" lessons. The mothers who opposed the "abacus-mental math" learning would refer to young children's lack of fine-motor skills and cognitive development in fully comprehending abstract mathematical concepts. Moreover, they were afraid that the early learning might have some negative impacts on the child's development and attitude toward learning.

In conclusion, the findings of this study showed that Taiwanese mothers were aware of the importance of "whole child" development and the complex nature of a child's early education attainment. In addition, parental beliefs about child development may be viewed as changing as they are influenced by a variety of factors such as mass media and social competition.

Mass Media

Influences of Media on Maternal Views. Another important theme that occurred repeatedly in all focus groups and interviews was the impact of mass media on mothers' perceptions of early learning. In response to the discussion on information sources, many mothers pointed to the mass media as their main source of information and knowledge about parenting and child-rearing. Also, some mothers mentioned the money they had invested in brain-based educational products and programs as the result of catchy advertisements in the mass media. Additionally, mothers referred to parenting books (e.g., *Parenting Guide to Your Baby's First Five Years* and *Improving Your Parenting*) as their source of information in understanding their child's overall development and learning how to be a "good" mother. The telephone survey, conducted by Chao (1999), also indicated that approximately 46% of Taiwanese parents used books and magazines as their reference when confronting child-rearing problems. However, many mothers

reported feeling overwhelmed and confused with the massive amount of information and multiple voices that surround them. For example, one mother summed up her reasons and conflicts in enrolling the child in "talent" and "cram" lessons at age of three by claiming: "It's all the mass media's fault."

Thus, the mass media emerged as an essential contributor to maternal perceptions on early learning. The impact of mass media is evident in the terminology that mothers used in expressing their understanding and insights of the phenomenon. The terms such as "whole child development," "brain power," "potential simulation," "0-year-old education," "multiple intelligence," and "critical period" occurred frequently in this study and also paralleled the existing parenting advice literature and advertisements in Taiwan. In reviewing the existing parenting advice literature on early learning, the words "pluralistic/multiple" and "holistic" combined with other words such as development, experience, intelligence, education, and skill could be found almost everywhere from a early program flyer to a title of parenting book. Additionally, *Common Wealth Magazine* (established in 1981 and well-respected for its excellent business images, concerns for the welfare of society, and coverage of macroeconomic trends and modern management concepts) has published an educational issue every year since 1998 in Taiwan. These special issues covered topics on educational reform, the importance of the early years, informational technology, aesthetic/creativity, character promotion, reading, English learning and family education. These topics are both influencing and being influenced by social trends, and are also evident in mothers' and educators' discussions about young children's early learning experiences.

Two Opposing Views. Through the content review of parenting advice literature, the study found that there are two opposing views on the topic of early learning in Taiwan. Similar to North America, the Taiwanese mass media are evidently divided into "competent child" and "hurried child" positions. In examining the parenting advice literature, the business-oriented market of early childhood education was found to be more likely to use the "competent child" concept and related research, particularly brain research, as their philosophy. In general, the view of the "competent child" in Taiwan is that all children are endowed with unlimited learning potential and with appropriate amounts of stimulation they can learn a broader range of skills and interests than we had given them credit for in the past. Hence, early education would enable young children to realize and maximize their full potential. In contrast, the professional position, particularly that of the "experts" from the *Preschool Education* magazine, is notable for their open public warning of the "hurried child" phenomenon. In Taiwan, the term "hurried child" is often equated to the analogy of "to pull up the seedling while hoping to make it grow faster," which carries the message of potential detrimental outcomes from interfering in the natural process of development.

However observations, based on the content review of parenting resources in Taiwan, seemed to suggest that the market was dominated by the "competent child" philosophy with numerous programs and books on promoting early learning. For example, in the parenting section of the bookstore, books that claimed to maximize a child's learning abilities could be easily spotted, many with sensational titles such as *Brain Games For Babies*, *How To Multiply Your Baby's Intelligence*, *How To Have A Smarter Baby*, *Heading To Harvard*, and *Cultivating Your Child To Be A Versatile*

Genius. On the contrary, the books such as *Hurried Child*, *The Overscheduled Child*, and *Kid Stress* were among the minority, though those books had been reviewed and frequently referred to by the experts in the *Preschool Education* magazine.

Articles from popular magazines and other media often are enthusiastic about how the groundbreaking research on brain development and learning can rejuvenate early childhood programs and education. Thus, there is a growing market for brain-based programs and products in Taiwan that target their advertising to special needs groups. For example, "dermatographics," a current hot topic and practice, was reported positively by the three reviewed parenting magazines and also mentioned by the mothers in this study. In fact, the newly established parenting magazine, *My Baby* (the literal translation would be "Smart Baby" rather than "My Baby") stated that the magazine is fully devoted to "dermatographics" theory and would provide information periodically about the practice. The "dermatographics" is a representative example of utilizing so-called scientific brain-based research in promoting an "educational" program. Basically, the notion is that there is a strong connection and relation between the formation of fingerprints and brain development. It is believed that through a scientific-based analysis of a child's fingerprints, one can find out a child's brain activity and structure. By knowing a child's brain activity, a parent would know how to provide the best learning environment to maximize the child's innate potential and ability. Moreover, some Taiwanese experts have established programs, such as the so-called "DAP" (same name as the NAEYC's "developmentally appropriate practice"), that claim to promote a child's "whole brain" development based on each individual child's abilities, needs, and interests as the result of the fingerprint analysis.

The practice of "dermatographics" is often condemned by experts in the "hurried child" camp. For example, the *Preschool Education* magazine in Taiwan has published articles concerning the myth, misleading representation, and misinterpretation of brain research references on the brain-based products and programs including the "dermatographics" practice. Like NAEYC's "developmentally appropriate practice" (DAP), the magazine carried the same message that early childhood education should be holistic and the "best educational practice" is the one that matches curriculum and instruction to the child's developing abilities, needs, and interests. In this current study, the professionals also held the same view on the importance of constructing "developmentally appropriate" curriculum and environments in order to meet the needs of young children. On the other hand, through the review of the magazine's articles on the topic of early learning from 2000 to 2004, the strong influence of the North American "hurried child" philosophy, particularly as formulated by David Elkind, on Taiwanese professionals' perception of child development is evident. Ironically, the experts in "dermatographics" in Taiwan strategically borrowed the "DAP" term to promote their program that employed the "tailored" education approach based on the result of fingerprint analysis.

The two opposing views are present in Taiwan's early childhood education field, and the results of the present study indicated that mothers were aware of it. For example, when talking about learning English during the early years, many mothers would refer to the "critical period" of language learning and the "learning through play" teaching approach as their reasons for enrolling their children in English lessons. However, they were also aware of the negative effects of learning English at such a young age, such as

lack of knowledge and skill in learning Chinese. This conflict is reflected in the mass media, where "critical period" is often emphasized by the "competent child" camp and "sensitive period" is stressed by the "hurried child" camp. As previously described, some experts would use the brain research to imply a "window of opportunity" in learning a foreign language, while others would educate parents on the importance of exploration and informal play in the early years.

Faced with the vigorous growth of supplementary education institutes in Taiwan (Kwok, 2001; Zeng, 1999), not surprisingly, mothers are struggling to maintain their personal beliefs while preparing their children to succeed in the increasingly competitive and global economy. Thus, with the reality of the two opposing views of early childhood education and the huge enterprise of the supplementary education industry where early schooling involvement is a norm, Taiwanese parents are facing a challenge that has never been experienced by previous generations. As one mother summarized at the end of the focus group discussion, "it's not easy to be a parent these days." Hence, mothers need support within the family and from society as a whole in making the best decision for their children's early learning experiences.

Social Competition

All mothers in this study, whether involved in "talent" or "cram" lessons, agreed that Taiwanese society today is a highly competitive one that has a strong impact on their decisions about their children's early schooling involvements. Moreover, the growing number of young children involved in early learning programs may imply the strong influence of "competent child" view on parents' perception of the phenomenon. As the intent of this study is to understand the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives,

the participants' social context provides a key in interpreting the meanings of the phenomenon. The social context could be addressed from a variety of perspectives. In this study, the current education system and mainstream practice of involving young children in early learning activities that were repeatedly discussed among the participants will be addressed below.

Education System. Taiwan's education system is undergoing a dramatic reform since the establishment of Committee for Education Reform in 1994. The ultimate goals of this reform are to raise the country's competitiveness, create a high-quality pluralistic society, and help people obtain jobs that suit their skills (Government Office Information of Taiwan, 2003). As the result, the old joint entrance examinations to enter senior high school and college were abolished in 2001 and 2002, and the new multiple-entrance program was implemented. Taiwan, as a Confucian heritage culture, is an exam-driven society where examination has been the primary path of achieving higher education and of upward social mobility. Recognizing the thousand-year root of the examination system in the Chinese culture, it is no surprise that the new educational reform to abolish examinations triggered fear and resentment. In fact, the multiple entrance system has triggered much controversy where many people even want the old joint-entrance exam reinstated (Huang, 1999).

One of the criticisms is that the primary goal of reducing pressure on students for passing the entrance examination has not only failed, but has instead intensified the problem. There were reports that junior-high school students were taking leave from school to attend "cram" schools, and school administrations were giving more tests to help students to maximize their exam scores. The competition among students was

reported to be fiercer than under the old joint-entrance examination system. In addition, the vigorous growth of cram schools during the ten-years of educational reform, from 2,626 to 14,073 (He, 2005), further reflects the general public's dissatisfaction with the public education system.

The concerns over the educational reforms were often echoed by the mothers and some professionals in this study. The topic of educational reform occurred in all focus group discussions and interviews where many mothers often expressed their frustration with and lack of trust in the new education system. The lack of trust in the current education system could be seen in some mothers' reasons for enrolling their children in abacus-mental math lessons. In the new "The First through Ninth Grades Curriculum Alignment for Elementary and Junior High Education," a more comprehensive and thorough curriculum design for the nine-year compulsory education, the Ministry of Education has introduced an experimental interactive teaching method for mathematics. The new mathematics approach had worried some mothers as they stated that the basic computation skills are not taught in the primary school. As a result, the perceived need for enrolling children in math-related "cram" schools is even greater than before. Thus, as a mother commented, their children are the "guinea pigs" for the new education reforms where the present is foreign and the future is uncertain. With the new multiple entrance system, some mothers reported that their children need to have "multiple talents" in order to have an "outstanding" resume when applying to good schools. As a mother remarked, "education has became a luxury where only the rich can afford to have it." This comment reflects the public's concern of educational inequality under the new system.

The professionals have relatively more positive views about the current educational reforms in Taiwan than do the mothers in this study. Both public and private preschool educators all commented that they have implemented and practiced the "integrated curriculum" for many years and the new policy would make the transition to elementary school easier for their students. The director of the City Bureau of Education also stated that the new policy is a more comprehensive design in integrating curriculum from preschool to junior high school. However, some educators also criticized and questioned the effectiveness of educational reform. For example, the director at the private preschool pointed out that the current "integrated curriculum" policy is "in name only" where elementary school teachers are "doing everything but practicing the integrated curriculum" (D2, 9). She explained that the so-called "learning centers" are not integrated into the curriculum but only used as "play areas" during recess.

The dramatic changes in Taiwan's education system, inevitably, create fear and uncertainty for the mothers and some professionals in this study. Traditionally, the Chinese culture had strongly emphasized effort as more important than inborn abilities in academic studies (Salili, 1999). However, with the new promotion of "multiple intelligences" through mass media and education reform, the focus seems to have shifted to emphasize inborn ability and individual differences. For the mothers who had been educated under the old examination-oriented system where diligence indicated achievement, the new ideology of inborn ability presents contradiction and challenge. The current popular practice of "dermatographics" in finding the child's inborn talents through fingerprint analysis, perhaps to some degree, "solves" this contradiction. By knowing the child's inborn ability, a parent could start early to cultivate and maximize

that ability or intelligence. In other words, inborn ability or talent could be enhanced by putting effort and time into it. When mainstream education is not meeting parents' needs, parents use out-of-school strategies to enhance in-school success. As a result, the competitive pressures associated with these education structures have led to the rapid expansion of the private supplementary tutoring industry.

The vigorous growth of the supplementary tutoring industry (including "talent" and "cram" schools) in Taiwan implies there is parental demand for higher educational achievement and distrust of the current education system. Private supplementary tutoring has always played an important role in the Taiwan education system since its introduction back in the 1960s. In the comparative studies by Bray (1999), Zeng (1999) and Kwok (2001), the authors found that private supplementary tutoring is more likely to be widespread in countries that are strongly influenced by Confucian traditions where effort and examinations are highly valued. Other determinants, including the exam-driven education system, economic affluence, the nuclear nature of families, and the affordability and accessibility of supplementary tutoring, were also found to be positively correlated with the dramatic growth and popularly of supplementary tutoring schools in many East Asian countries (Bray & Kwok, 2003; Kwok, 2001; Zeng, 1999). These studies were mainly on the academically-oriented supplementary tutoring schools that targeted junior high and senior high school students. However, Zeng (1999) and Kwok (2001) noticed that the new-generation entrepreneurs in the cram business has started to expand classes for younger students in Taiwan. Thus, the number of programs targeting young children has increased dramatically even in the face of the economic downtrend in

Taiwan (Hsieh, 2003). As a result, the phenomenon of involving young children in early learning programs is becoming a normative activity for young children in Taiwan.

Mainstream Practice. In the education race, if somebody started to run, nobody would remain indifferent for very long. As some mothers in the study expressed, the pressure to send their children to lessons is great due to peer pressure and mainstream practice of involving young children in more structured activities. For example, English and piano learning in the early years were referred to by some mothers as a "necessary evil" not only because of a "critical period" but also for other factors such as mainstreaming practice and as a survival skill needed in the future. If they did not start to run like everyone else, they were afraid that their children might be at a disadvantage and face possible failure on high school and college entrance exams. Peer pressure was even greater for mothers who had refused to enroll their children in lessons in the face of the growth and promotion of early learning programs. For instance, one mother expressed her frustration toward other people's judgments and to being labeled as "irresponsible" about her children's education.

Whether involving the child in the "talent" or "cram" lessons or not, all mothers in this study agreed that social pressure is great and will be greater in this highly competitive educational system and global economy. Hence, they want their children well prepared for participation in the global competitive environment. However, the results of this study indicated the differences in how mothers prepare their children for the upcoming competition. Some mothers would prepare their children with early involvements in academic-based programs, such as mathematics and English, to gain an edge in the competitive job market. The mothers that enrolled their children in "talent"

lessons, such as piano and dance, were providing their children with a professional skill for surviving in the anticipated competitive environment. As for the mothers that did not involve their children in any type of lessons, they wanted to provide their children a happy childhood as this might be the only period free of social pressure during their lives.

Differences between Individuals and Groups

As previously described, within the same socio-cultural context, the individual differences among the mothers in this study are notable. The study found that, in addition to social influences, the other factors such as individual perceptions, the availability of resources, and personal experiences also affected a mother's decision making. In this section, the differences between mothers, children, and professionals in viewing the topic of early schooling involvements are discussed.

Mothers. In facing the omnipresent mass media and social competition, mothers have to make decisions based on their personal beliefs about what the best learning environment for their young children is. While many mothers in this study emphasized the importance of brain stimulation and the critical period of learning opportunity in preparing their children to succeed in the increasingly competitive society, several mothers mentioned the importance of providing their children with a "happy and pressure-free childhood." As a result, different emphases and preferences of mothers lead to different learning experiences for young children in Taiwan.

One important finding of this study is the influence of mothers' perception of each child's individual differences on their decisions. Throughout the focus groups and interviews, several mothers in their separate groups indicated the characteristics of the child as their main reason for enrolling in "talent" or "cram" programs. By observing and

understanding the child's learning behavior, the mothers reported the need to provide a stimulating environment that matches the child's learning process, needs, and interests. Additionally, they pointed out that not all of their children were involved in the same lessons due to their individual differences in personality and learning abilities. This finding indicates that the mothers noticed their children's individual differences and the importance of meeting each child's developing needs in ensuring optimal development.

The results of the study indicated three types of different perceptions of Taiwanese mothers on young children's early schooling involvements, which were probably best represented by three metaphors (sponge, balloon, and tug-of-war) that were given by the mothers in this study.

First, the "sponge" perception of child development was found to be associated with topics of individual difference and brain stimulation. Hence, in confronting the two forces of development and education, the mothers of "sponge" perception would refer to a child's individual differences and the importance of early brain development as their underlying philosophy in deciding the child's early schooling involvements. These mothers saw growth as being strongly influenced by environmental factors and would make more use of educational programs in order to provide the best possible opportunities for their children's early learning and future development. Furthermore, the content review also revealed that the "sponge" metaphor was used in the magazines to explain the phenomenal rate of a child's brain growth. As an expert reported, "the newborn's brain is like a sponge . . . it has millions of neurons that require constant stimulation . . . from the very instant she is born" (Ching, 2002, p. 13). As a result, parents were often advised to support their children's brain development from the very

beginning as they are the very best teachers for their own children, and family was depicted by Ching as "the cradle for intellectual, physical and social excellence in the child" (p. 16).

The "balloon" metaphor of the early schooling phenomenon implies negative effects of early learning on a child's overall development. The metaphor is often associated with "developmental readiness" and "happy childhood." Contrary to the "sponge" perception of child development, the "balloon" mothers perceived development as a series of stages and were concerned about the danger of providing early educational programs that were "too much too soon." Just as with a balloon, too much of early learning and programs could lead to an explosion. These mothers treat childhood as a period of "free play" where children's main goal is to play and where learning should be a "playful" and "happy" thing. In sum, the best learning environment for young children is the one that matches the child's readiness and the one that is free from pressure.

Many mothers in the study, regardless of their perceptions of child development and their actions of sending or not sending children to lessons, at some point in the focus group discussions and during the individual interviews, expressed their struggles with the relationship between overall development and early education. As one mother pictured it, it was like a "tug-of-war" being pulled by two forces, and balancing the two forces became a real challenge. For example, while realizing the importance of stimulating brain development during the early years, the mothers also expressed their concern over the possible harm to their children's cognitive development if the children are not developmentally ready for those experiences, knowledge, or actions.

Throughout the study, some mothers acknowledged that their personal experiences as a child also had some impact on their children's early schooling involvements. The topic of parental compensation occurred in all four focus groups where the mothers described the negative feelings resulting from not being able to take lessons due to family financial status. Not surprisingly, the mothers would not want their children to go through the same negative experiences that they had as children. In addition, other family members' views on early learning also had some influence on the mothers' decisions. Some mothers talked about the intergenerational differences, noting that the elderly often opposed the current practice. However, the influence is rather limited as the mothers are the primary decision makers of the child's early schooling involvements.

Availability of Resources. The mothers' personal preferences for the educational approach for their young children does not necessarily lead to the learning experience that they want their children to have as there are many other practical considerations that need to be met. The most frequently mentioned factor in this study was time. Some mothers explained that as full-time working mothers they did not have the time to transfer their children between lessons. As a result, the whole-day comprehensive preschool, where "talent" and "cram" lessons were part of the service, met the mothers' needs for child-minding and educational opportunity. However, the programs that the preschool offered would limit the choices of extra lessons. If the mothers preferred the out-of-school programs, they would have to find time in the evenings or on weekends to have the child in the lessons. Although many mothers in this study considered the early childhood education expense to be relatively high but affordable, money was indeed a primary issue for a few mothers in the study who did not have the money to send their

children to lessons. As the trend of involving young children in early learning becomes a norm, mothers would make the decision not solely on their personal beliefs about early learning but also would take into account their resource availability so as to balance their own and their child's needs. In summary, the factors that influence mothers' decision-making are multi-dimensional, ranging from the outer force of social competition and mass media to the inner layer of personal preference and family resource availability.

Children. Although mothers are the primary decision makers of the child's early learning experiences, children are the ones who actually live with the experience and an important aspect of this study is the exploration of children's perceptions on the topic. In general, the children who were involved in the lessons had some positive feelings about the experiences as they often described the lessons as "fun" and "playful". The answers were slightly different when the children were given hypothetical choices about going to lessons. Some children replied that they would still like to go to the lessons because they wanted to "learn" and "play," while others responded that they would "feel happy" if they could stay home and play. The children that were involved in the school-related lessons, such as Chinese and mathematics, were the ones who complained about the amount of work they had to put into the lessons and were the ones who preferred to stay home. The reasons for liking the activity also varied among the children, from extrinsic reasons such as "delicious noodle" to intrinsic reasons of "wanting to learn." In addition, children's (6 of the 10) response of "mother" as the major reason for going or not going to lessons further confirm that mothers are the primary decision makers in their children's early childhood education.

Interestingly, for the children (3 of the 10) that were not involved in any type of lessons, all named a lesson that they would like to take if given the choice. In other words, when asking why children go or do not go to lessons, children were well aware of the existence and role of talent and cram schools in their living environment. The findings from the children's pair-interviews indicate that there are individual differences in the responses of the children, and also reveal that the phenomenon of involvement in more early schooling is a kind of norm and part of the life of being a child in Taiwan today.

Professionals. Compared with the mother and children groups, there is more agreement and consistency among the early childhood professionals on the perception of young children's early schooling involvements. The professionals, in their separate interviews, often talked about the concern for the lack of developmentally appropriate practice in "talent" and "cram" school environments. The business-oriented and product-based out-of-school programs worried the educators because of possible negative impacts on the child's overall developmental outcomes. By realizing the existing social phenomenon, the professionals did not totally object to young children's involvements in early schooling activities. However, the underlying premise is that the lesson taken should be based on the child's individual preferences and interests and on the family resources available. In addition, parents should focus on the child's developmental needs and interest development rather than on the final products of the lessons.

While acknowledging the social competition and mainstream practice of involving young children in "talent" and "cram" school activities, the professionals in this study perceived the existing phenomenon as partly the creation of a group of anxious and busy

parents. Parents' high expectations, their performance-based attitude, lack of time, fear of lagging behind, and comparison making are often described by the professionals as the reason parents can be regarded as the "ringleaders" of the phenomenon. For example, the director at the private preschool explained that "many parents are afraid of losing at the so-called educational race . . . so they would rather send their children to the cram school that would improve their children's school grades even if it meant corporal punishment" (D2, 27). The professionals, in their separate interviews, repeatedly emphasized the importance of parent-child interaction and family time in the early education of the child. The advocacy of family time sums up the professionals' reaction to the phenomenon of involving young children in early schooling activities.

Cultural Change Aspect

In the course of data reduction and interpretation, one important finding about cultural change in the concept of childhood emerged. As our perspective on the nature of childhood is related to our place in history, today's parents and educators in general have a concept of childhood different from that of their parents' generation. The discussions on intergenerational differences in child-rearing and the emphasis on children's "effort" in the early learning among the mothers in this study indicate the continuities with and departures from the Chinese tradition.

Intergenerational Differences. The intergenerational gap between mothers and their parents in this study is apparent. In the discussions on the intergenerational difference, mothers often described the older generation as traditional, in their view of early childhood as a period of "free play" with the shift to the cognitive or school-related learning as the child entered primary school. The older generation's view on childhood

appears to confirm the literature reports on the Chinese cultural conceptions of child development and education. For example, the results of this study are consistent with the work of Ho (1994) in documenting the childhood socialization in Confucian heritage cultures. Traditionally, Chinese parents do not regard young children (below age six) as being capable of "understanding things" and treat childhood as a period of freedom and indulgence where young children should have freedom and opportunities for exploration (Bond, 1996; Ho, 1994). The early period of innocence is followed by a period of reason when children enter primary school and are expected to learn about academic matters. Not surprisingly, the older generation who was raised and had raised their children in a more traditional context would question today's mainstream practice of involving young children in different types of early learning programs, and be more likely to emphasize children's academic learning once they enter elementary school. However, the grandmother's positive view of "talent" lessons in this study may indicate changes in some elders' views of traditional child-rearing in Taiwan.

The shift from the traditional view of child development and education could be seen easily in the study. Throughout the discussions and interviews, the mothers' perspectives on early learning suggest that they are becoming more aware of the young child's potential for learning than were their parents' generation. The "indulgent" childhood period has been transformed into a "critical" period of learning opportunities or period of interest cultivation. Mothers, whether involving their children in lessons or not, have shown signs of becoming less age centered and more individually child-centered with the focus on each child's individual differences and developmental needs. The traditional emphasis on "cognitive" development is expanded to "whole child"

development where all domains ("multiple intelligences") of development, particularly emotional and social development, are focused on by the Taiwanese mothers in this study. This change is most evident in the current parental advice literature with the focus on whole brain and whole child development. Again, these findings agreed with the conclusions of other reports about the ascendancy of individualism and child centeredness in the Confucian heritage cultures (e.g., Chen & Luster, 1999; Ho, 1994; Ho & Kang, 1984).

The factors associated with the changing concept of child development and education are multiple and complex. The socio-cultural changes in family structure, economy, and technology all have a profound impact on our perspective of the nature of childhood. The growing number of early learning programs in Taiwan and the participants' perspectives on early learning in this study mirror the socio-cultural changes, and also reflect the influence of Western ideology of child psychology. The parenting advice literature and the media's portrayal of young children's learning behaviors indicate a strong effect of Western beliefs about children's competence and developing needs. Taiwan's vulnerability to Western influences is also seen in the directions of its education reforms. As previously discussed, the adoption of the American admission system in Taiwan's "multiple entrance" program to higher education, reflects the popular phrase in Taiwan, "The American moon is brighter."

Efforts. Westernization will undoubtedly continue to have a significant influence on Taiwanese conceptions of child development and education, but certain Chinese cultural heritages also appear to continue in the face of dramatic socio-cultural changes. One cultural heritage that remains valued by this group of mothers is "effort." In this study,

the Chinese cultural value on "effort" was repeatedly emphasized and praised by the mothers across groups and schools. The mothers often viewed effort as a main determinant or criterion of children's learning outcomes and behaviors. Children, who had shown academic achievement through "effort," were more likely to be praised than those who had received achievement as the results of the advanced learning. As some mothers mentioned, one negative aspect of involving children in "cram" lessons is the child's lack of effort in school-setting learning. Moreover, regardless of the outcomes of school or out-of-school learning, the mothers would be satisfied with the child's performance as long as the child has put effort into the learning. This maternal belief in effort is consistent with the literature on Chinese cultural stress and value on effort (e.g., Salili, 1999; Wang & Li, 2003; Zeng, 1999).

The practice of involving young children in more schooling activities is very widespread in Taiwan and in many other countries around the world. The results of this study have shown that mothers' decisions about their children's early learning experiences depend on many factors such as personal beliefs about child development and education, mass media, social competition, and cultural factors. Multiple factors that affect the participants' perceptions and decisions of young children's early schooling involvements highlight the complex nature of the phenomenon under investigation. On a final note, the findings of this study were based on the rich data collected through focus groups and individual interviews, which reflected the participants' views of the particular phenomenon in their own voices. On the other hand, the analysis of the results and the discussion of the five general themes represented an effort of the researcher in

interpreting the study by depicting the meanings of the participants' experiences in the broader contexts.

Limitations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to enhance understanding of the phenomenon of involving young children in additional formal schooling by examining the perspectives of Taiwanese mothers, children, and professionals. Indeed, the intent of the study was to give "voice" to their experiences and to provide a context for understanding rather than to infer or generalize the findings to a large population. In terms of research limitations, it should be noted that qualitative research methodology inherently warrants some cautions (Cresswell, 1997). The following are particular research limitations that might exist in this study.

First, this study was limited to the experiences of 32 Taiwanese mothers, 10 children, 3 teachers, and 3 administrators from 2 preschools in the same city. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be generalized to a large population across different economic and geographical barriers, nor do they purport to represent the experiences of all mothers, children, teachers, and administrators in Taiwan. Also as previously explained, the perspective of a male parent was not available. Additionally, although only mothers were selected to join the focus group discussions, a grandmother (who showed up at the meeting to represent the mother) was added as a participant. The grandmother's participation may have had an effect on the group dynamic and therefore the outcomes of the study.

A second possible limitation is related to the grouping of the participants. The original recruitment plan was to select two categories of mothers (mothers whose

children attend both "cram" lessons and preschool, and mothers whose children attend only preschool) for two different orientations and experiences in early childhood education. However, according to the returned responses of the volunteers and the agreement to participate in the focus groups in both preschools, only 5 (3 from the public preschool and 2 from the private preschool) of the 32 mothers were classified as belonging to the "preschool-only" category. As a result, the number of lessons taken by the child served as a criterion in grouping the participants. In order to have an appropriate number of mothers to participate in a focus group, mothers whose children attended only one non-school related lesson were grouped with the "preschool-only" mothers. Mothers whose children were enrolled in more than one lesson, regardless of the type, were grouped together as the second category. In fact, the lack of a "preschool-only" mother category further reflects the mainstream practice of involving young children in adult-supervised activities.

A third possible limitation is the definition of "cram" school. The assumption was that all lessons taken out of the regular preschool program were considered as "cram" as it is classified by the government. As discussed in the previous sections, the mothers in this study had a different definition of their children's early childhood programs. Within the category of "cram" school program, mothers had distinguished two types of "cram" school. They perceived positively the "talent" schools as "non-academic" and offering "interest-based" lessons, while "cram" schools with their academic focus were viewed negatively. In short, it may be the case that mothers with children in different types of early childhood programs ("preschool-only," "talent," and "cram" categories) would

articulate different perspectives if grouped in their own category. Thus, changing the makeup and dynamics of the groups may have affected the research outcomes.

Lastly, the time constraints and expertise of the researcher may also have been limitations. The length of data collection in the field was limited to six weeks. A longer time period of data collection over the entire year, which would have made possible conducting more focus groups, follow-up focus groups, and individual interviews with different groups (including mothers, children, and teachers) may have provided a richer and more comprehensive study of Taiwanese perspectives on young children's early schooling experiences. Moreover, the researcher's lack of previous experience in conducting focus groups may be another limitation. Therefore, interpretations of the results from this study should be made in light of the above limitations.

Implications

The trend of involving young children in preschool plus structured activities has become evident, and also created considerable controversy among professionals and parents in Taiwan. This current situation underlines the desirability of doing relevant research on early schooling. As our current understanding of Taiwanese perspectives on and experiences with the phenomenon is limited, this first-known exploratory study contributes to our knowledge in this area by delineating the ways in which Taiwanese mothers, children, and educators respond to the issue. In addition to the conceptual contribution to the field of early childhood education, the present study has illuminated several practical implications based on the major findings of the study.

First, the findings may serve as reference information and guidance for Taiwanese parents on the topic. For instance, the results of the study could provide mothers with a

comprehensive understanding of the issue and a unique opportunity to learn other's points of view. As in a "tug-of-war," many Taiwanese mothers in this study often experienced a dilemma between their child's overall development and educational attainment, which strongly suggests that appropriate professional advice for mothers is needed and in high demand. One particular implication derived from the data is that parents need to address characteristics of the child while making decisions about early schooling involvements. As many participants pointed out, a proper assessment of children's interest, personality, ability, needs, and readiness is a key to ensure the individually and developmentally appropriated early childhood practices.

Second, it is important to enhance parents' awareness of the damaging influence of misleading messages from the mass media on their perceptions of early learning. The results of the study indicated that brain research was often mentioned by the mothers as a major reason for enrolling their children into more structured activities at a young age. It was revealed that most mothers received their information regarding brain research from the mass media. As many brain research findings are often overstated and misinterpreted by the mass media, professionals may assist parents to understand the detrimental effects of deceptive messages and to critically evaluate the received information.

Third, the study underscores the need for improving communication and mutual understanding between parents and professionals. The results revealed that mothers and professionals in this study have different views on the important issues such as the nature and functions of different early childhood programs, current educational reforms, and factors attributed to the phenomenon of involving young children in "talent" and "cram" school activities. In order to provide a quality early childhood education, it is necessary

and critical that professionals and parents enhance their interaction and understanding. In that sense, the findings from this study could be used to provide professionals with relevant information on the social, historical, and cultural contexts that define the mothers' experiences. Moreover, it is important that the professional in consultation with parents should consider these contexts as well as each individual family's particular needs.

Last, the findings from this study also suggest some implications associated with educational policy making. One implication is related to the impact of educational reform policies on children's early learning experiences. During the focus group discussions, the mothers expressed their frustration and anxiety over the new educational reform programs. Their misunderstanding and misinterpretation of "multiple entrance" reflect the public's resentment and confusion over the new reform. The fear of putting the child at a disadvantage and facing possible failure in competing with others on the road to higher education and social mobility had forced some mothers to enroll their children in early learning programs. Therefore, it is critical that the Taiwanese policy makers formulate concrete and effective strategies for improvement of its often-criticized education reform policies and the communication of those policies. In addition, the policy makers should acknowledge the role that the early learning programs play in the face of education reform, and pay careful attention to how education reforms affect young children's learning experiences.

Another implication is concerning the discrepancy between children's educational opportunities that may be further exacerbated by their different early childhood educational attainments and experiences, and consequently, create social inequality in the

future. This study indicated that many resources are needed in order to broaden the experiences of children and maximize their overall development. As recognized by one mother's comment on "education as a luxury," the early learning programs are more easily available to the rich than to the poor. As such, the early learning programs could be a mechanism that may increase social inequality, and if the pattern becomes extreme, it could affect Taiwan's overall societal development. Hence, the results of this study may deliver a warning message to policy makers in this regard.

Directions for Future Research

While the present study produced important information on the phenomenon of involving Taiwanese young children in more formal schooling, additional relevant research needs to be done in this area. Based on the reflections on the methods and findings of the study, the following section provides several recommendations for future research on the topic.

First, field observation may need to be included in the future research. Although a triangulated methodological design in this study has provided rich and multifaceted data, the implementation of field observation would contribute well to the gathering of vital and valid data. Methodologically, multiple data collection strategies (focus group, individual interview, and content review) employed in the study have limitations in verifying research data. It is possible that some of responses could be unreliable because participant's self reports may have exaggerated or distorted the facts. For example, a participant claims that the child enjoyed being in the school, while, field observation may reveal that the statement is inconsistent with the child's actual behavior.

Second, further study is needed to explore mothers', children's, and professionals' experiences across a wide range of geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. It is possible that mothers, children, and professionals from different parts of Taiwan have different perspectives specific to the nature of their environment. Future research may investigate whether geographic differences between mothers in urban and rural areas play a role in the Taiwanese perspectives of the phenomenon. Furthermore, information from other participants, including fathers, grandparents, primary school teachers, and "talent" and "cram" school teachers may provide a more holistic picture of the phenomenon. In particular, the exploration of "talent" and "cram" school teachers' and operators' perspectives on the phenomenon will enrich our understanding of the nature and scale of the early learning programs.

Third, the present study may suggest directions for informing possible quantitative studies in the field. This qualitative study revealed substantial differences in the perspectives of mothers of children in different types of early childhood education programs. As the study provided some interesting answers on the research topic, it has raised considerably more questions, such as the effects and outcomes of the early learning. How are different experiences, including "talent" and "cram" learning, associated with specific outcomes for children living in defined contexts and cultures? What are the costs, if any, of the increased emphasis on early academic learning on a child's overall development? Does the early academic and interest training result in real advantages to children's intellectual development? Does the early interest cultivation translate into better critical thinking and emotional coping skills? Future studies could

explore these issues by implementing quantitative designs, which may help in determining the impacts and consequences of different early learning experiences.

Last, there is a need for future interdisciplinary research on children's developmental issues, which may provide a broader, more comprehensive and balanced understanding of this important time of a child's life. Many scientific perspectives, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, and medicine, are relevant and necessary in this regard. The brain research seems particularly important as it is often credited for the advocacy of early learning. At this point in time, and with the research available, the brain research does not make direct or specific connections between physiological brain function and everyday educational practice. For example, the current brain research does not show what kinds of activities or environments create strong connections between the neurons in a child's brain. With the ever-increasing advancing technology, we may some day know exactly how a normal brain functions and learns. By having that kind of knowledge, we may have a better understanding of brain development and its relation to early learning. In conclusion, additional relevant, interdisciplinary, and both qualitative and quantitative research is necessary in order to provide professionals and parents with better conceptual and practical information on the topic.

Conclusions

Employing a qualitative research approach, this research study explored the perceptions and experiences of Taiwanese mothers, children, teachers and administrators on the young children's early schooling involvements. It is the first known study of its kind in the field. The methodological strengths of this study included the use of several data sources and multiple methods. Research results revealed that young children's early

schooling involvement has become a widespread social trend in Taiwan, and the trend itself is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. The main findings, particularly five themes (children's development, mass media, social competition, differences between individuals and groups, and cultural change aspects) that emerged from the study, will enhance our understanding on the research topic and provide important implications and recommendations. Finally, the importance of young children's early schooling experience and the limitations of this study underscore a great need for further investigations.

References

Acredolo, L., Goodwyn, S., Abrams, D., & Hansen, R. (2002). *Baby signs: How to talk to your baby before your baby can talk.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Ballargeon, R. (1987). Object permanence in 3½- to 4½-months-old infants. *Developmental Psychology, 23*, 655-664.

Barbour, R. S., & Kitzinger, J. (1999). *Developing focus group research: Politics, theory, and practice.* Thousand Oak, CA: Sage Publications.

Barnett, W. S. (1995). Long-term effects of early childhood programs on cognitive and school outcomes. *The Future of Children, 5*(3), 25-50.

Becker, W. C., & Gersten, R. (1982). A follow-up of follow-through: The later effects of direct instruction model on children in fifth and sixth grades. *American Educational Research Journal, 19*, 75-92.

Beckert, T. E., Strom, P. S., Strom, R. D., Yang, C., Huang, N., & Lin, Y. (2004). Parent expectations of young children in Taiwan. *Early Childhood Research & Practice, 6*(2). Retrieved October 28, 2005, from http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v6n2/beckert.html.

Begley, S. (1996, February 19). Your child's brain. *Newsweek, 127*(8), 55-62.

Bereiter, C. (1986). Does direct instruction cause delinquency? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 1*, 289-292.

Black, J. E., Jones, T. A., Nelson, C. A., & Greenough, W. T. (1998). Neuronal plasticity and the developing brain. In N. E. Alessi, J. T. Coyle, S. I. Harrison, & S. Eth (Eds.), *Handbook of child and adolescent psychiatry* (pp. 31-53). New York: Wiley.

Blakeslee, S. (1997, April 18). Baby's brainpower is set by age one. *The Vancouver Sun,* p. A22.

Bloom, B. S. (1964). *Stability and change in human characteristics*. New York: Wiley.

Bond, M. H. (1996). *The handbook of Chinese psychology* (Eds.). Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Bower, T. G. R. (1966). The visual world of infants. *Scientific American, 215*(6), 80-92.

Bower, T. G. R. (1989). *The rational infant: Learning in infancy*. New York: Freeman.

Bray, M. (2001). Out-of-school supplementary tutoring. *Childhood Education, 77*(6), 360-366.

Bray, M., & Kwok, P. (2003). Demands for private supplementary tutoring: Conceptual considerations, and socio-economic patterns in Hong Kong. *Economics of Education Review, 22*, 661-620.

Bredekamp, S. (Ed.). (1986). *Developmentally appropriate practice.* Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Bredekamp, S, & Copple, C. (Eds.). (1997). *Developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood programs* (Rev. ed.). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Bremner, G., & Fogel, A. (Eds.). (2001). *Blackwell handbook of infant development.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Bruer, J. T. (1998). Brain science, brain fiction. *Educational Leadership, 56*(3), 14-18.

Bruner, J. (1960). *The process of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cassell, R. N., Chow, P., Demoulin, D. F., & Reiger, R. C. (2000). Extracurricular involvement in high school produces honesty and fair play needed to prevent delinquency and crime. *Education, 121*(2), 247-251.

Chang, B. (1993). *Biographies of Virtuous Women*. Taipei, Taiwan: Ivy League Press.

Chang, C. (2003). *Statistics talk: Early childhood cram-school programs in Taiwan.* Retrieved September 22, 2005, from http://www.kimy.com.tw/project/200522/study.html

Chang, W. (2001). *Future at three-year-old.* Retrieved September 22, 2005, from http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/03/lead.htm

Chao, H. C. (1999, November 18). Taiwan's child-rearing. *Common Wealth Magazine, 27,* 86-98.

Chao, R. K. (2001). Extending research on the consequences of parenting style for Chinese Americans and European Americans. *Child Development, 72*(6), 1832-1843.

Chen, F. M., & Luster, T. (1999). *Chinese parenting reconsideration: parenting practices in Taiwan.* (Report No. PS-028-066). Albuguerque, NM: Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED435480)

Chen, C., & Stevenson, H. W. (1995). Motivation and mathematics achievement: A comparative study of Asian-American, Caucasian-American, and East Asian high school students. *Child Development, 66,* 1215-1234.

Chen, X., Wu, H., Chen, H., Wang, L. (2001). Parenting practices and aggressive behavior in Chinese children. *Parenting: Science & Practice, 1*(3), 159-184.

Cheng, L. (2004, March 11). Need for early academic learning? *Preschool Education, 26*(12), 58-61.

Cheour-Luhtanen, M., Alho, K., Sainio, K., Rinne, T., Reinikainen, K., Pohjavuori, M., et al. (1996). The ontogenetically earliest discriminative response of the human brain. *Psychophysiology, 33,* 478-481.

Ching, B. Y. (2002, August 15). 0-3 years old brain development: Tips for brain stimulation. *Baby Life, 147*(8), 13-16.

Chiu, H. Y. (2003, July 24). Fix the KMT's education reforms. *Taipei Times, 107*(7), 12.

Chugani, H. (1998). A critical period of brain development: Studies of cerebral glucose utilization with PET. *Preventive Medicine, 27*, 184-188.

Coll, C. G., Akiba, D., Palacios, N., Bailey, B., Silver, R., et al. (2002). Parental involvement in children's education: Lesson from 3 immigrant groups. *Parenting: Science & Practice*, *2*(3), 303-324.

Crain, W. (2003). *Reclaiming childhood: Letting children be children in our achievement-oriented society.* New York: Times Books.

Cresswell, J. (1997). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Davis, S. M. (2001). Look before you leap: Concerns about "brain-based" products and approaches. *Childhood Education, 77*(2), 100-101.

Denscombe, M. (2003). The good research guide for small-scale social research projects (2nd ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

Denzin, N. K. (1994). The art and politics of interpretation. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 500-515). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Denzin N. K., & Lincoln Y. S. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications.

Dobosz, R. P., & Beaty, L. A. (1999). The relationship between athletic participation and high school students' leadership ability. *Adolescence*, *34*(133), 251-220.

Doherty, W. J., & Carlson, B. Z. (2002). *Putting family first*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC.

Doman, G. J. (1994). *How to multiply your baby's intelligence*. Garden City, NY: Avery Publishing Group.

Doman, G. J., Doman, J., & Aisen, S. (1985). *How to give your baby encyclopedic knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Ebbeck, M., & Gokhale, N. (2004). Child-rearing practices in a selected sample of parents with children in childcare in Singapore. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, *5*(2), 194-206.

Eccles, J. S., Barber, B. L., & Hunt, J. (2003). Extracurricular activities and adolescent development. *Journal of Social Issues, 59*(4), 856-889.

Elkind, D. (1981). *The hurried child: Growing up too fast too soon*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Elkind, D. (1987). *Miseducation: Preschoolers at risk*. New York: Knopf.

Elkind, D. (1993). *Images of the young child: Collected essays on development and education* (Report No. ISBN-0-935989-58-7). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED367468)

Elkind, D. (2001). Young Einsteins: Much too early. *Education Matters*, *1*(2), 9-15.

Engelmann, S., & Engelmann, T. (1981). *Give your child a superior mind*. New York: Cornerstone.

Fischer, K. W., & Rose, S. P. (1998). Growth cycles of brain and mind. *Educational Leadership*, *56*(3), 56-60.

Fitzsimmons, W., Lewis, M. M., & Ducey, C. (2000). *Time out or burn out for the next generation*. Retrieved October 29, 2005, from http://www.adm-is.fas.harvard.edu/timeoff.html

Fogel, A. (2004). The history and future of infancy. In G. Bremner & A. Fogel (Ed.), *Blackwell handbook of infant development* (pp. 726-757). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Gardner, H. (1993). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.

Gersten, R., Darch, C., & Gleason, M. (1988). Effectiveness of a direct instruction academic kindergarten for low-income students. *Elementary School Journal, 89*, 227-240.

Giorgi, A. (1970). *Psychology as a human science: A phenomenological based approach*. New York: Harper & Row.

Giorgi, A. (1997). The theory, practice, and evaluation of the phenomenological methods as a qualitative research procedure. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 28*, 235-281.

Goffin, S. G., & Wilson, C. S. (2001). *Curriculum models and early childhood education: Appraising the relationship*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Goodwin, W. L., & Goodwin, L. D. (1996). *Understanding quantitative and qualitative research in early childhood education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Gopnik, A., Meltzoff, A., & Kuhl, P. (1999). *The scientist in the crib: Minds, brains, and how children learn*. New York: William Morris and Company.

Government Information Office of Taiwan. (2003). *Taiwan yearbook 2003*. Taipei: Sinorama.

Greenough, W. T., Black, J. E. & Wallace, C. S. (1987). Experience and brain development. *Child Development, 58*, 539-559.

Hainline, L. (1998). The development of basic visual abilities. In A. Slater (Ed.), *Perceptual development: Visual, auditory and speech perception in infancy* (pp. 37-44). Hove: Psychology Press.

Haskins, R. (1989). Beyond metaphors: The efficacy of early childhood education. *American Psychologist, 44*, 274-282.

He, C. (2005, November 15). Family education. *Common Wealth Magazine*, *85*, 118-127.

Healy, J. (1990). *Endangered minds: Why children don't think and what we can do about it*. New York: Touchstone Books.

Hill, D. (1999). Everyone gets to play at Indiana middle school. *Education Week*, *18*(37), 6-7.

Ho, D. Y. (1994). Cognitive socialization in Confucian heritage cultures. In P. Greenfield & R. Cocking (Eds.), *Cross-cultural roots of minority child development* (pp. 285-313). Hillside, NJ: Erlbaum.

Ho, D. Y., & Kang, T. K. (1984). Intergenerational comparison of child-rearing attitudes and practices in Hong Kong. *Developmental Psychology, 20*(6), 1004-1016.

Hofferth, S. L., & Sandberg, J. F. (2001). Changes in American children's use of time, 1981-1997. In T. Owens & S. Hofferth (Eds.), *Children at the millennium: Where have we come from, where are we going?* (pp. 193-229). New York: Elsevier Science.

Holloway, J. H. (2000). Extracurricular activities: The path to academic success? *Educational Leadership*, *57*(4), 87-88.

Hong, L. T. (2004, March 11). Brain development misconception and myths. *Preschool Education, 26*(12), 9-13.

Hoon, S. S. (1995). Quality of kindergarten education in Singapore: Parent views and expectations. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Biennial Meetings of ISSBD. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED376968)

House, J. D. (2000). The effects of student involvement on the development of academic self-concept. The *Journal of Social Psychology*, *140*(2), 261-263.

Hsieh, M. H. (2001). The status quo and trends in Taiwan's early childhood education. *Taiwan Education*, *60*(6), 21-34.

Hsieh, M. H. (2004). Teaching practices in Taiwan's education for young children: Complexity and ambiguity of developmentally appropriate practice and/or developmentally inappropriate practices. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, *5*(3), 309-329.

Hsieh, W. (2003, August 4). Importance of cram schools' role overlooked. *Taipei Times, 108*(8), 6.

Hsue Y., & Aldridge, J (1995). Developmentally appropriate practice and traditional Taiwanese culture. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, *22*(4), 320-324.

Huang, H. M. (1999). Educational reform in Taiwan: A brighter American moon? *International Journal of Educational Reform, 8*(2), 145-153.

Hunt, J. (1961). *Intelligence and experience*. New York: Ronald.

Hunt, H. D. (2005). The effect of extracurricular activities in the educational process: Influence on academic outcomes? *Sociological Spectrum, 25*, 417-445.

Huntsinger, C. S., Jose, P. E., & Larson, S. L. (1998). Do parent practices to encourage academic competence influence the social adjustment of young European American and Chinese American children? *Developmental Psychology, 34*(4), 747-756.

Hymowitz, K. S. (1999). *Ready or not: Why treating children as small adults endangers their future – and ours.* New York: The Free Press.

Jacobson, L. (1996). Guidelines seek to define role of academics in children's play. *Education Week, 26*(13), 1, 28.

Kagan, J. (1998). *Three seductive ideas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kagan, S., & Zigler, E. (1987). *Early schooling: The national debate*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Kantrowitz, B., & Wingert, P. (2001, January 29). The parent trap. *Newsweek*, 49-53.

Karoly, L. A., Greenwood, P. W., Everingham, S. S., Hoube, J., Kilburn, M. R., Rydell, C. P., et al. (1998). *Investing in our children: what we know and don't know about the costs and benefits of early childhood interventions*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

Kelly, K. (2000, September 25). False promise. *U.S. News & World Report*, 48-55.

Kinney, A. B. (1995). *Chinese views of childhood*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Kisilevsky, B. S., Muir, D. W., & Low, J. A. (1992). Maturation of human fetal responses to vibro-acoustic stimulation. *Child Development, 63*, 1497-1508.

Kluger, J., & Park, A. (2001, April 30). The quest for a superkid. *Time*, 32-40.

Ko, T. (2004, February 15). Smart baby: Smart parenting. *Mom & Baby, 44*(2), 5-7.

Krueger, R. A. (1994). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Krueger, R. A. (1998). *Analyzing and reporting focus group results.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Kwok, P. (2001). Local knowledge and value transformation in East Asian mass tutorial schools. *International Education Journal, 2*(5), 86-97.

Larson, R. W. (1994). Youth organization, hobbies, and sports as developmental contexts. In R.K. Silbereisen, 7 E. Todt (Eds.), *Adolescence in context: the interplay of family, school, peers, and work in adjustment* (pp. 46-65). New York: Springer-Verlag.

Lecanuet, J. P., Graniere-Deferre, C., Jacquet, A. Y., & DeCasper, A. J. (2000). Fetal discrimination of low-pitched musical notes. *Developmental Psychology, 36*, 29-39.

Lee, S. (1999). Early childhood education in Changhua city. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Association in Changhua, 15*, 8.

Legge, J. (1966). *The Chinese classics*. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press.

Leung, K., Lau, S., & Lam, W. (1998). Parenting styles and academic achievement: a cross-cultural study. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 44*(2), 157-172.

Lin, C. C., & Fu, V. R. (1990). A comparison of child-rearing practices among Chinese, immigrant Chinese, and Caucasian-American parents. *Child Development, 61*, 426-433.

Lin, Y., & Tsai, M. (1996). Culture and the kindergarten curriculum in Taiwan. *Early Childhood Development and Care, 123*, 157-165.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inqui*ry. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Ludington, H. S., Hoe, G., & Golant, S. K. (1990). *How to have a smarter baby*. New York: Bantam Books.

Mahoney, J. L. (2000). School extracurricular activity participation as a moderator in the development of antisocial patterns. *Child Development, 71*(2), 502-516.

Mahoney, J. L., & Cairns, R. B. (1997). Do extracurricular activities protect against early school dropout? *Developmental Psychology, 33*(2), 241-253.

Mandel, D. R., Jusczyk, P. W., & Pisoni, D. B. (1995). Infants' recognition of the sound patterns of their own names. *Psychological Science, 6*, 315-318.

Marcon, C. A. (2002). Moving up the grades: Relationship between preschool model and later school success. *Early Childhood Research & Practice, 4*(1). Retrieved October 28, 2005, from http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v4n1/marcon.html.

McMillan, J. H., & Schumacher, S. (2001). *Research in education: A conceptual introduction*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.

Meaney, M. J. (1988). Effects of neonatal handling on age-related impairments associated with the hippocampus. *Science, 239*, 766-768.

Mehler, J., Bertoncini, J., & Barriere, M. (1978). Infant recognition of mother's voice. *Perception, 7*, 491-497.

Mills, M., & Meluish, E. (1974). Recognition of mother's voice in early infancy, *Nature, 252*, 123-124.

Morgan, D. L. (1988). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Morse, J. M., & Morse, L. R. (2002). *Read me first for a user's guide to qualitative methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Moustakas,C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

National Statistics of Taiwan (2004). Taipei: National Statistics of Taiwan. Retrieved September 22, 2005, from http://www.stat.gov.tw

Newsweek. (2000, Fall/Winter). How learning begins. Special 2000 edition.

Pan, H. W. (1992). Early childhood education in Taiwan. In G. Woodill, J. Bernhard, & L. Prochner (Ed.), *International handbook of early childhood education* (pp. 471-479). New York: Garland Publishing.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Postman, N. (1982). *Disappearance of childhood*. New York: Vintage Books.

Ran, A. (2001). Traveling on parallel tracks: Chinese parents and English teachers. *Educational Research*, *43*(3), 311-328.

Republic of China Ministry of Education (1981). *The Early Childhood Education Act*. Taipei: Ministry of Education.

Republic of China Ministry of Education (1987). *The standards of kindergarten curriculum*. Taipei, Taiwan: Ministry of Education.

Republic of China Ministry of Education (2004). Taipei: Ministry of Education. Retrieved October 29, 2005, from http://www.edu.tw/EDU-WEB/Web/special/index.html

Rescorla, M., Hyson, M, & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (1991). *Academic instruction in early childhood: Challenge or pressure?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rivera, S. M., Wakeley, A., & Langer, L. (1999). The drawbridge phenomenon: Representational reasoning or perceptual preference. *Developmental Psychology, 35*, 427-435.

Rohlen, T. P. (1980). The juku phenomenon: An exploratory essay. *Journal of Japanese Studies, 6*(2), 207-242.

Rosenfeld, A. A. & Wise, N. (2000). *Hyper-parenting: Are you hurting your child by trying too hard?* New York: St Martin's Press.

Rosenfeld, A. A. & Wise, N. (2001). *The over-scheduled child: Avoiding the hyper-parenting trap*. New York: St Martin's Press.

Saint-Exupery, A. (1945). *The little prince*. Paris, France: Gallimard.

Salili, F. (1999). Accepting personal responsibility for learning. In D.A. Watkins & J.B. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese learner: Cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (pp. 85-105). Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, the University of Hong Kong.

Schweinhart, L. J., Montie, J., Xiang, Z., Barnett, W. S., Belfield, C. R., & Nores, M. (2005). *Lifetime effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 40.* Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.

Shore, R. (1997). *Rethinking the brain: new insights into early development.* New York: Families and Work Institute.

Sigel, I. E. (1987). Does hothousing rob children of their childhood? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *2*, 211-225.

Sin, K. F. (2003). Practices and development of gifted and talented education. In J.P. Keeves & R. Watanabe (Eds.), *International handbook of education research in the Asia-Pacific region* (pp. 189-201). Dordrechi, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Smith, D. C. (1991). *The Confucian continuum: Educational modernization in Taiwan.* New York: Praeger Publishers.

Stipek, D. J., Feiler, R., Daniels, D., & Milburn, S. (1995). Effects of different instructional approaches on young children's achievement and motivation. *Child Development*, *66*(1), 209-223.

Stone, L. J., Smith, H. T., & Murphy, L. B. (1973). *The competent infant: research and commentary*. New York: Basic Books.

Strauss, V. (2003, January 17). U.S. to review Head Start program: Bush plan to assess 4-year-olds' progress stirs criticism. *Washington Post*, p. A1.

Sun, Y. (1978). *Mozi jiangu*. Taipei: Xinwengfeng Publications.

Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., Wang, S., Koutsouvanou, E., & Albright, M. (2002). Childrearing values in Greece, Taiwan, and the United States. *Parenting: Science & Practice*, *2*(3), 185-208.

Tang, H. L. (2002, April 20). Top 10 child-rearing problems. *Preschool Education*, *24*(4), 45-46.

Time. (1997, February 3). How a child's brain develops, 48-58.

Tobin, J. J., Wu, D. Y. H., & Davidson, D. H. (1989). *Preschool in three cultures: Japan, China, and the United States*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Walsh, D. J., Tobin, J. J., & Graue, M. E. (1993). The interpretive voice: Qualitative research in early childhood education. In B. Spodek (Ed.), *Handbook of research on the education of young children* (pp. 464-476). New York: Macmillan.

Wang, Q., & Li, J. (2003). Chinese children's self-concept in the domains of learning and social relations. *Psychology in the Schools*, *40*(1), 85-101.

Weikart, D.P. (1999). *What should young children learn?: Teacher and parent views in 15 countries*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.

Werner, L. A., Marean, G. C., Halpin, C. F., Spetner, N. B., & Gillenwater, J. M. (1992). Infant auditory temporary acuity: Gap detection. *Child Development*, *63*, 260-272.

White, S. H., & Buka, S. L. (1987). Early education: Programs, traditions, and policies. In E. Z. Rothkopf (Ed.), *Review of research in education* (Vol. 14, pp. 43-91). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

Whitehurst, G. J. (2001). Young Einsteins: Too much too late. *Education Matters*, *1*(2), 16-19.

Wrigley, J. (1989). Do young children need intellectual stimulation? Experts' advice to parents, 1900-1985. *History of Education Quarterly, 29*(1), 42-75.

Xuan, Y. (1999). *The dragon love and other Chinese proverbs*. Taipei, Taiwan: Shen's Books.

Zeng, K. M. (1999). *Dragon gate: Competitive examinations and their consequences*. London: Cassell.

Zigler, E. F. (1984). Foreword. In B. Biber, *Education and psychological development* (pp. ix-xi). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Zigler, E. F., & Trickett, P. (1978). IQ, social competence, and evaluation of early childhood intervention programs. *American Psychologist*, *33*, 789-798.

Zigler, E. F., & Bishop-Josef, S. J. (2004). Play under siege: A historical overview. In E. Zigler, D. Singer, & S. Bishop-Josef (Eds.), *Children's play: The roots of reading* (pp. 1-14). Washington, DC: Zero To Three Press.

Zigler, E. F., Singer, D. G., & Bishop-Josef, S. J. (2004). *Children's play: The roots of reading*. Washington, DC: Zero To Three Press.

Appendix A

Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

Focus Group # 1 (Public Preschool, March 4, 2004)

ID#	11	12	13*	14	15	16	17
# of Children	2	2	1	3	3	2	1
Gender	F	F**	M**	M	F	F	M
Age	6	6	6	5	5	5	6
Type-Length of Program (y-year, m-month)	Piano-2y; Drawing-1y; Paper Clay-1y	English-2y; Piano-1y; Ballet-3y; Drum-2m; Chess-2m	Music&Body-3y; English-2y; Chess-1.5y; MPM Math-6m; Kumon Chinese-6m	English-3m; Music-6m	Piano-1y, Art-1y	Paper Clay-1y; Drawing-2y; English-1y; Piano-6m; Music & Body-6m	English-2y; Chess-6m; piano-1y
Other children's programs	NO	Drum; English; Dance	N/A	School-subjects	Paino-5y	NO	N/A
Attended as a child	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	Piano	NO
Educational Level	Junior College	Junior College	Junior College	High School	Junior College	College	Junior College
Labor Force	NO	NO	NO	NO	Part-Time	Owing a business	YES

Note. * in "ID#" row indicates that the mother was involved in the one-to-one individual interview. ** in "Gender" row indicates that the child was involved in the children-pair interview. ID# 11 is a grandmother.

Focus Group # 2 (Public Preschool, March 12, 2004)

ID#	21	22	23*	24	25	26	27	28
# of Children	3	2	2	1	3	5	2	1
Gender	M	M	M**	M**	M	F	F	F
Age	6	5	5	5	5	6	6	6
Type-Length of Program (y-year, m-month)	Art-6m	Drawing-2y	NONE	Drawing-1y; Classic Recital-1y	NONE	NONE	Piano-6m; Art-1y	Piano-1y
Other children's programs	English; Drawing	NO	Music-1y; English-6m	N/A	Drawing; Drum; English	Reading; Abacus Math	NO	NO
Attended as a child	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	Piano	NO	NO
Educational Level	Junior College	College	Junior College	Junior College	Junior College	Junior High School	Junior College	College
Labor Force	NO	Part-Time	Owing a business	YES	YES	NO	Part-Time	NO

Note. * in "ID#" row indicates that the mother was involved in the one-to-one individual interview. ** in "Gender" row indicates that the child was involved in the children-pair interview.

Focus Group # 3 (Private Preschool, March 18, 2004)

ID#	31	32	33	34	35*	36	37	38
# of Children	3	3	2	2	3	1	2	1
Gender	M**	M**	F**	F	F	F	M	F
Age	6	6	6	6	5	5	6	5
Type-Length of Program (y-year, m-month)	Swim-3y; Chess-6m; Chinese Classic Recital-1y; Yoga-2m; Art-2y	Music-3m; Kumon Math-6m; Abacus Math-6m; Drawing-6m	Art-1y; Rollerblading-6m; Abacus Math-6m; Drumming-6m	Art-6m; Abacus Math-6m; Piano-1y	Dance-2.5y; Abacus-Mental Math-1y; Piano-6m; Art-2.5y	Art-1y; Drum-6m; Swim-6m	Rollerblading-6m; Abacus Math-6m; Chess-1y	Piano-6m; Art-6m; Swim-6m
Other children's programs	F*** (5) Dance-6m; Yoga-2m	F***(4) Drawing-6m; Abacus Math-6m	F***(5) Art-1y; Swim-6m; Drum-6m	Art-2y; English-1.5y	Dance-4y; Art-4y; Swim-2y; Abacus Math-3y; Piano-3y; Science-6m; Writing-1y; English-1y	N/A	Art-1y	N/A
Attended as a child	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Educational Level	Junior College	Junior College	Junior College	Junior College	Junior College	College	College	Junior College
Labor Force	YES	YES	YES	NO	Part-Time	NO	YES	Owing a business

Note. * in "ID#" row indicates that the mother was involved in the one-to-one individual interview. ** in "Gender" row indicates that the child was involved in the children-pair interview. *** in "Other Children's Programs" row indicates the gender and age of the child who was also attending the preschool.

Focus Group # 4 (Private Preschool, March, 25, 2004)

ID#	41	42	43	44	45*	46	47	48	49
# of Children	1	2	2	2	2	2	3	1	2
Gender	M**	M**	M	F	F**	M	F	F	M
Age	6	5	5	5	5	6	6	6	
Type-Length of Program (y-year, m-month)	Art-6m; Swim-6m	NONE	Art-6m	Art-6m	Art-6m; Dance-1y	Art-1y; Rollerblading-1y	Piano-1y	NONE	Art-1y; Swim-6m
Other children's programs	N/A	F***(4) NONE	Art-6m	NONE	NONE	NONE	Piano-1y	N/A	F***(5) Art-6m
Attended as a child	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO
Education Level	Junior college	College	Junior College	Junior College	College	Junior College	High School	Junior College	Junior College
Labor Force	YES	YES	YES	NO	Owing a business	Owing a business	NO	YES	Part-Time

Note. * in "ID#" row indicates that the mother was involved in the one-to-one individual interview. ** in "Gender" row indicates that the child was involved in the children-pair interview. *** in "Other Children's Programs" row indicates the gender and age of the child who was also attending the preschool.

Appendix B

Children's Pair-Interview Responses

Public Preschool

Questions:	ID# 12 (F, 6)	ID# 13 (M, 6)	ID# 23 (M, 5)	ID# 24 (M, 5)
Favorite School Activity	Drawing – love to draw	Theme: "postman game" – fun	Racing; building blocks – fun	Play games; building blocks; racing – fun
Least Favorite Activity	NONE	Drawing	NONE	NONE
Taken Lessons	YES	YES	NO	YES
Favorite Lesson	English – token; Phonetics – fun; Drum – play with instruments; Dance – like to put the legs on barred railing	Chess – love to play with others; MPM Math – play with materials; English – fun activities	NONE	Chinese Classic Recital – love to eat the delicious noodles
Least Favorite Lesson	NONE	Chinese Kumon – homework to do	N/A	NONE
Favorite Activity (if given choice)	Drum – play different instruments	Chess – play with others	Drawing	NONE
Why are you taking the lessons?	Mom told me; Asked mom to take me because I like the lessons	Mom told me	Mom didn't register me in any lessons	Mom told me
Would you go if you have the choice?	Yes, I like to go	Sometimes – yes and no; don't skip many lessons	Yes – like to take drawing lessons – want to draw pretty pictures – but father said "no"	Yes, love to eat those "rice-wrapping" and noodles there
How would you feel if you didn't have to go?	Mom has changed – feels angry – Mom wouldn't let me play	Happy – stay home to watch TV and play video games	N/A	Not mad – but I like to go
How would you feel if you have to go?	Happy	No feeling – follow Mom's order	N/A	I would just go
Why children go or do not go to lessons?	Go – they don't know English so need to go; Not go – they don't know about the lessons	Go – mom said they need to go; Not go – mom won't let them go	Go- mom registered them in lessons; Not go- mom didn't register them in lessons	Go – they like to go; Not go – they don't like to go

Note. The child's ID number is equivalent to his or her mother's ID number in Appendix A. The parenthesis after ID# indicates the child's gender and age.

Private Preschool

Questions:	ID# 31 (M,6)	ID#32 (M, 6)	ID# 33 (F, 6)	ID# 41 (M, 6)	ID# 42 (M, 6)	ID# 45 (F, 5)
Favorite School Activity	Swimming – like to be in the adult's section	Swimming – like to be in the adult's section	Swimming – like to play in the water	Rollerblade and storytelling – fun	Swimming – fun	Dance – fun
Least Favorite Activity	P.E. – too tired	Music – not fun	Abacus Math – homework to do	Going to school	NONE	N/A
Taken Lessons	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	N/A
Favorite Lesson	Swimming – play in the water	Swimming – fund and be in the adult's section of the pool	Rollerblade – fun	Took art and swimming last year – quit – mom said we have no money	N/A	Dance – like to dance
Least Favorite Lesson	NONE	Kumon Math – pen was too big to hold; Abacus Math – during the dinner time, have to eat dinner there	Abacus Math – too much time to count and too much homework; but mom said I have to continue	N/A	N/A	N/A
Favorite Activity (if given choice)	Chess – like to play; can watch cartoons after the lessons	Swimming	Rollerblade – like to learn how; want to rollerblade faster	Rollerblade – "handsome-big-brother" teacher is teaching the class	Swimming – want to learn how	N/A
Why are you taking the lessons?	So I can learn things	NONE	I want to go to those lessons	Those lessons are too hard (abacus math)	Don't like to take math – too hard and just sit there and count	N/A
Would you go if you have the choice?	Yes, because I can learn	Yes, because it's fun, but not abacus math	Not wanting to go to abacus math, but mom said I have to	NO	NO	Not drawing lessons; but mom said I have to
How would you feel if you didn't have to go?	Feel bad because I want to go	Happy – want to stay home and play	I won't go then	N/A	N/A	Happy, not wanting to go to drawing
How would you feel if you have to go?	I would go because it's fun	No feelings	Would just go and obey mom	I don't want to go	I don't like to go	Mom would want me to go

Private Preschool (continued)

Questions:	ID# 31 (M, 6)	ID#32 (M, 6)	ID# 33 (F, 6)	ID# 41 (M, 6)	ID# 42 (M, 6)	ID# 45 (F, 5)
Why children go or do not go to lessons?	Go – mom told them to go; Not go – don't have to go	Go – mom said so; Not go – don't know about it	Go – want to go and to learn; Not go – don't want to go	Go – like and ask their mom to go; Not go – lessons are too hard	Go – mom told them to go; Not go – mom didn't tell them	N/A

Note. The child's ID number is equivalent to his or her mother's ID number in Appendix A. The parenthesis after ID# indicates the child's gender and age.

Appendix C

Cover Letter to the Preschool Principal or Owner

Dear Owner/Principal of _____ Preschool

I am currently working toward a Ph.D. degree in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Victoria in Canada. As part of the program, I am conducting a research study about young children's early schooling involvements in Taiwan. The study I propose here will serve as my major project required for my degree.

The purpose of this research is to explore the perspectives of Taiwanese early childhood mothers, children, and educators on young children's early schooling experiences. Your preschool is being invited to participate in this study because of your involvement in the early childhood community.

If your preschool agrees to voluntarily participate in this research a representative of your preschool will need to read and sign an Informed Consent Form (see attached) prior to your preschool's participation in the study. The Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Victoria requires this Informed Consent Form to be submitted prior to the study.

Your preschool's participation will include participating in one to two hours focus group interviews and 30 minutes personal interviews. There are no known or anticipated risks to your preschool by participating in this research.

You preschool's participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If your preschool does decide to participate, your preschool may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If your preschool does withdraw from the study, your preschool's data will not be used in the analysis.

In term of protecting your preschool's anonymity, your preschool's name will not appear on any part of the data, the research results, or in any written or oral discussions of the study. All the data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my private residence until the research project has been completed at which time the tapes will be shredded and then burned.

Your preschool may contact me if you have further questions at xxxxx (in Canada) and xxxxx (in Taiwan) or at chchen@uvic.ca. Your preschool may also contact my supervisor Dr. Margie Mayfield at 0021-250-721-7849 or at mayfield@uvic.ca. Your preschool may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria in Canada.

Thank you for considering my request and I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Yours truly,

Chin-Hsiu Chen

(This letter was translated into Chinese)

Appendix D

Cover Letter to the City Bureau of Education

Dear Director of City Bureau of Education in Early Childhood Education Division,

I am currently working toward a Ph.D. degree in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Victoria in Canada. My dissertation is called "Taiwanese Perspectives on Young Children's Early Schooling Experiences". The purpose of this research is to understand what mothers, children, and educators think about young children's early schooling involvements.

I am writing to ask for your voluntarily participation in an interview on your perspectives of children's early schooling involvements. You are being invited to participate in this study because of your involvement in the early childhood community. If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research you will need to read and sign an Informed Consent Form (see attached) prior to your participation in the study.

Your participation will be voluntary and individual response will be kept confidential. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used. The interview audiotapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my home until the research project has been completed at which time the tapes will be shredded and then burned.

Your name will not appear on any part of the data, the research results, or any written or oral discussions of the study. Whether you participate or choose not to participate will have no bearing on your professional status and your employer will not have access to any of the information collected in this study.

If you agree to participate in the individual interview, I will contact you by phone and the individual interview will be scheduled depending on your convenience and available free time. The individual interview will be approximately 30 minutes and will take place upon your preference (i.e., workplace, home).

You may contact me if you have further questions at xxxxx (in Canada) and xxxxx (in Taiwan) or at chchen@uvic.ca. Your preschool may also contact my supervisor Dr. Margie Mayfield at xxxxx or at mayfield@uvic.ca. Your preschool may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria in Canada.

Thank you for considering my request and I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Yours truly,
Chin-Hsiu Chen

(This letter was translated into Chinese)

Appendix E

Recruitment Letter to Mothers

Dear Mothers,

I am currently working toward a Ph.D. degree in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Victoria in Canada. My dissertation is called "Taiwanese Perspectives on Young Children's Early Schooling Experiences". The purpose of this research is to understand what mothers, children, and educators think about young children's early schooling involvements.

I am writing to ask for your voluntary participation in an audio-taped group discussion on your perspectives of children's early schooling involvements. You are being invited to participate in this study because of your involvement in the early childhood community. If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research you will need to read and sign an Informed Consent Form prior to your participation in the study.

All participation will be voluntary and individual response will be kept confidential. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used. The group discussion audiotapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my home until the research project has been completed at which time the tapes will be shredded and then burned.

Your name will not appear on any part of the data, the research results, or any written or oral discussions of the study. The confidentiality of data will be protected by using pseudonyms to identify the results obtained from all participants.

If you agree to participate in the group discussion, your name will be included in a pool from which 24 to 32 names will be drawn. If your name is selected, the group discussion will be scheduled depending on the group's convenience and available free time. The group discussion will be approximately 1 to 2 hours and will take place in the community conference room.

A few refreshments will be served and childcare will be available if you want to bring your children. Your child will also be receiving a storybook as a thank you for giving me your time and ideas.

You may contact me if you have further questions at xxxxx (in Taiwan) and xxxxx (in Canada) or at chchen@uvic.ca. Your preschool may also contact my supervisor Dr. Margie Mayfield at xxxxx or at mayfield@uvic.ca. Your preschool may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria in Canada.

Thank you for considering my request and I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Yours truly,

Chin-Hsiu Chen

Please place the below slip in the attached envelope and return it to the box in school office. Please do not write names on the return envelope.

My signature below indicates that I am willing to participate in the group interview as described in the above letter.

Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Child's Class: _____

Contact phone number: _____

Available time for group interview:

_____

Will you need childcare? Yes: ☐ No: ☐

Has your child ever enrolled in any talent/cram school programs?

Yes: ☐ No: ☐

If yes, what types of program: _____

and how many: _____

My signature below indicates that I'm giving the permission for the group interview to be audio-taped by the researcher.

Name of Participant	Signature	Date

(This letter was translated into Chinese)

Appendix F

Recruitment Letter to Preschool Children

Dear Preschool Children,

My name is Chin-Hsiu Chen and I am a student at the University of Victoria in Canada. With this letter, I am inviting you to be part of my study, called "Taiwanese Perspectives on Young Children's Early Schooling Experiences".

The purpose for doing this study is to learn about young children's thoughts on school activities. You are being asked to be part of this study because you go to a preschool.

You will decide if you want to be in this study or not. It is completely up to you to decide. It should be safe for you to be in this study because there are no known or expected dangers to you. If you decide to be in the study, you will be asked some questions about your school activities in an interview. During this study, you can stop being part the study at any time without anyone getting upset with you and you don't even have to tell anyone why you don't want to do it anymore. If you do decide not to be in the study, any information about you will not be used. At no time will your name be on anything written down or talked about.

You may call me if you have any questions at xxxxx or email me at chchen@uvic.ca. You may call my teacher Dr. Margie Mayfield at xxxxx or at email her at mayfield@uvic.ca. You can make sure that the study won't hurt you, or ask any questions about the study, by talking with the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria in Canada.

Before you can be part of this study, your mom or dad will need to sign an Informed Assent Form for you. This form is to make sure that you know about the study and will say the same things that I have written to you today.

Thank you very much.

Yours truly,
Chin-Hsiu Chen

(This letter was translated into Chinese)

Appendix G

Recruitment Letter to Preschool Teachers

Dear Teachers,

I am currently working toward a Ph.D. degree in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Victoria in Canada. My dissertation is called "Taiwanese Perspectives on Young Children's Early Schooling Experiences". The purpose of this research is to understand what mothers, children, and educators think about young children's early schooling involvements.

I am writing to ask for your voluntary participation in an interview on your perspectives of children's early schooling involvements. You are being invited to participate in this study because of your involvement in the early childhood community. If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research you will need to read and sign an Informed Consent Form prior to your participation in the study.

All participation will be voluntary and individual response will be kept confidential. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used. The interview audiotapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my home until the research project has been completed at which time the tapes will be shredded and then burned.

Your name will not appear on any part of the data, the research results, or any written or oral discussions of the study. Whether you participate or choose not to participate will have no bearing on your professional status and your employer will not have access to any of the information collected in this study.

If you agree to participate in the individual interview, I will contact you by phone and the individual interview will be scheduled depending on your convenience and available free time. The individual interview will be approximately 30 minutes and will take place upon your preference (i.e., workplace, home).

You may contact me if you have further questions at xxxxx (in Taiwan) and xxxxx (in Canada) or at chchen@uvic.ca. Your preschool may also contact my supervisor Dr. Margie Mayfield at xxxxx or at mayfield@uvic.ca. Your preschool may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria in Canada.

Thank you for considering my request and I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Yours truly,
Chin-Hsiu Chen

Please place the below slip in the attached envelope and return it to the box in school office.

My signature below indicates that I am willing to participate in the interview as described in the above letter.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Class: _____

Number of years in teaching young children: _____

Contact phone number: _____

Available times and days for individual interview: _____

My signature below indicates that I'm giving the permission for the interview to be audio-taped by the researcher.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

(This letter was translated into Chinese)

Appendix H

Recruitment Letter to Preschool Director

Dear Director,

I am currently working toward a Ph.D. degree in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Victoria in Canada. My dissertation is called "Taiwanese Perspectives on Young Children's Early Schooling Experiences". The purpose of this research is to understand what mothers, children, and educators think about young children's early schooling involvements.

I am writing to ask for your voluntary participation in an interview on your perspectives of children's early schooling involvements. You are being invited to participate in this study because of your involvement in the early childhood community. If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research you will need to read and sign an Informed Consent Form prior to your participation in the study.

All participation will be voluntary and individual response will be kept confidential. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used. The interview audiotapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my home until the research project has been completed at which time the tapes will be shredded and then burned.

Your name will not appear on any part of the data, the research results, or any written or oral discussions of the study. Whether you participate or choose not to participate will have no bearing on your professional status and your employer will not have access to any of the information collected in this study.

If you agree to participate in the individual interview, I will contact you by phone and the individual interview will be scheduled depending on your convenience and available free time. The individual interview will be approximately 30 minutes and will take place upon your preference (i.e., workplace, home).

You may contact me if you have further questions at xxxxx (in Taiwan) and xxxxx (in Canada) or at chchen@uvic.ca. Your preschool may also contact my supervisor Dr. Margie Mayfield at xxxxx or at mayfield@uvic.ca. Your preschool may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria in Canada.

Thank you for considering my request and I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Yours truly,
Chin-Hsiu Chen

My signature below indicates that I am willing to participate in the interview as described in the above letter.

Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Contact phone number: _____

Available times and days for individual interview: _____

My signature below indicates that I'm giving the permission for the interview to be audio-taped by the researcher.

Name of Participant	Signature	Date

(This letter was translated into Chinese)

Appendix I

Focus Group Protocol

Preschool: _____ Date: _____

Category: _____

Introduction:

Good evening and welcome. Thanks for taking the time to join our discussion on young children's early schooling experiences. My name is Chin-Hsiu Chen, and I will be the moderator for our discussion today, and my assistant is _____ and she will be taking the notes throughout the discussions.

Before we start the discussion on young children's early schooling experiences, I would like to remind everyone of the "Informed Consent Form" that you have signed earlier. This form is required by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Victoria to protect your rights in the study including the rights to withdraw without consequences, to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer, and to refuse to participate in this discussion to be audiotaped. I will be audio recording what we discuss today because I don't want to miss any of your comments, and this will also help me in transcribing the discussion later on. If you have any further questions regarding the Informed Consent Form, we can discuss about them now before starting the discussion.

Please keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers. I expect that you will have different points of view and experiences regarding your children's early schooling experiences. I want to know your perspectives, so please feel free to share your story and point of view even if it differs from what others have said. However, in order to make sure that everyone has a chance to share, some ground rules will be set. Only one person can speak at a time, so if you're talking a lot I may ask you to give others a chance. This is to make sure that we hear from all of you. Please do not carry on side conversations among neighbors. Please keep in mind that everything we say here today should be kept confidential within the group. If you decide not to participate in the discussion, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used.

I have name labels here in front of us today. I would like you to choose a pseudonym and write it on the name label, this is to keep your identity confidential on the transcription and afterward. No name will be included in any reports or descriptions of this focus group interview.

Questioning Route:

Possible Questions:	**Probes** (to be used if needed)**:**
1. Could you describe for me what does the term "the earlier the better" mean for you?	Can you say more about that definition?
2. Could you describe some of the experiences that you and your children have had regarding this topic?	Please tell us more about that.
3. What does the experience of more or less early schooling involvement mean to you and your children?	Would you give us an example of what you mean?
4. Could you describe the reasons or the motivation that made you to decide on enrolling or not enrolling your children in talent/cram school programs?	I'm curious about your perspectives on … would you please explain further?
5. Could you describe some of the activities that your child does in the talent/cram school? What does the child like the most and least about the preschool or talent/cram school programs/activities?	Please give us an example of what you mean by ___?
6. What are some of the difficulties or concerns that you face when deciding your children's early schooling involvement?	Say more about that. Any other comments before we move on?
7. Could you describe the major changes (if any) that you and your children have experienced? What are the reasons that you think caused these changes?	Please describe what you mean? Is there anything else?
8. What percentage of your family's monthly income spent on the children's talent/cram school programs/activities?	Tell me more about that.

(This protocol was translated into Chinese)

Appendix J

Information Sheet

This Information Sheet seeks general information regarding yourself and your children. Please indicate your responses on the lines provided.

1. Number of children: _____

2. Gender of your kindergarten child: _____

3. Age of your kindergarten child: _____

4. Has your kindergarten child ever enrolled in any talent/cram school programs:

   No: ☐

   Yes: ☐

   If yes, what type of program and how long have your child been in the program: Please put "*" right next to the lesson/s that the child is currently taking.

   Type: _____ Length: _____

   Type: _____ Length: _____

   Type: _____ Length: _____

   Type: _____ Length: _____

   Type: _____ Length: _____

5. Have other children in your family ever enrolled in any talent/cram school programs:

   No: ☐

   Yes: ☐

   If yes, what type of program and how long have your children been in the program:

   (1) First Child

   Type: _____ Length: _____

Type: _____ Length: _____

(2) Second Child

Type: _____ Length: _____

Type: _____ Length: _____

(3) Third Child

Type: _____ Length: _____

Type: _____ Length: _____

6. Did you attend a talent/cram school as a child?

   Yes: ☐ No: ☐

7. Your educational level: _____

8. Are you a working mother work in the paid labor force? Yes: ☐ No: ☐

I also would like to invite you to do a one-to-one interview with me to talk more about your perspectives and experiences with your child's early schooling involvement (please see the attached "Informed Consent Form for Mothers" for details). This personal interview is like the focus group discussion where the participation must be voluntary and you still hold the right to withdraw without consequences, to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer, and to refuse the discussion to be audiotaped. The interview will take about approximately 30 minutes and will be scheduled based on your preference of time and meeting place.

In addition, I would also like to have your permission to do a pair interview with your child to talk about his or her experience with the early schooling experiences (please see the attached "Recruitment Letter to Children" for details). This interview will be conducted with another child to make the children feel more comfortable with the company of another child, and the conversation will not be audio taped due to children's distraction with the audio recorder. The interview will take approximately 15 minutes and will not be audiotaped. The interview will be arranged based on your child's schedule (your child will be withdraw from the class during the break time) and will take place in the preschool's conference room.

Would you and your child be able to join me for interviews?

1. Are you willing to participate in the individual interview as described in the above letter?

Yes: ☐ No: ☐

2. Are you willing to let your child to participate in a paired interview as described in the above letter?

Yes: ☐ No: ☐

Your Name: _____

Your Child's Name: _____

Your Child's Class: _____

Contact phone number: _____

Mailing address: _____

Your signature below indicates that you give permission for your interview to be audio-taped by the researcher.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please return this Information Sheet to the researcher.

(This information sheet was translated into Chinese)

Appendix K

Individual Interview Protocol for Mothers

Name: _____ Date: _____

Preschool: _____ Category: _____

Introduction:

I want to thank you, again, for taking the time to talk with me. As described in the Informed Consent Form, I will be audio recording and transcribing what we say today. This individual interview must be completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate in the interview, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used.

In this one-to-one interview, I am interested in learning more about your perspectives and experiences of your child's early schooling involvements. Please feel free to discuss your views. I will probably ask you for more detail and clarification on some of the things you say, to be sure I understand your perspective.

Question Description: the following is a list of possible questions that may be asked to the participants during the individual interview.

A. **Mothers who have read the focus group discussion transcript.**

Possible Questions:	**Probes** (to be used if needed)**:**
1. From reading the focus group transcript, would you like to add or clarify anything on the transcript? Does the transcript clearly depict and state your understanding of the focus group discussion?	Any other comments before we continue the interview?
2. Are there any areas or conversations that you have questions or comments about? Has the focus group discussion changed your perspectives of the phenomenon, and in what ways?	Is there anything else? Please, talk more about the change.
3. From the transcript, you have mentioned _____ (e.g., the "social pressure") that motivated you to enroll your child to talent/cram school, could you tell me more about this _____?	Would you give me an example?
4. You have briefly mentioned the "maturity readiness" as your reason for not enrolling your child in any	Tell me more about that reason.

talent/cram school programs, could you elaborate on this?	
5. During the focus group discussion, you talked about the changes that you have experienced with your children's early schooling involvement, could you say more about your experiences with these changes?	Please say more.

B. Mothers who have not read the focus group discussion transcript.

Possible Questions:	**Probes** (to be used if needed)**:**
1. Reflecting back on the focus group discussion, would you like to add, comment, or clarify anything that we have talked about?	Is there anything else you like to say?
2. What is your impression of the focus group discussion? Has it changed your perspectives of the phenomenon, and in what ways?	Talk more about the change.
3. Could you please tell me more about your _____ (e.g., definition of "the earlier the better")?	Please say more about that.
4. During the focus group discussion, the group talked a great deal on the difficulties of making decisions about a child's early schooling involvement, could you say more about any difficulties or concerns you have experienced?	I'm curious of your perspectives, would you please explain further?
5. You have mentioned that your child's early schooling involvement has affected your understanding of your child's learning, could you tell me more about that experience?	Would you give me an example of it?

(This protocol was translated into Chinese)

Appendix L

Children Interview Protocol

Preschool: _____ Date: _____

Name of Child A: _____ Category: _____

Name of Child B: _____ Category: _____

Introduction:

Hello, my name is Chin-Hsiu Chen and I am a student at the university in Canada. I want to thank both of you for being here with me today. As you might already known that my study is on learning about what young children, like both of you, think about school activities. Today we are going to talk about the activities that you are doing in preschool and cram school(s). I will ask you some questions and please just say what you think, because there is no right and wrong answer. During our conversation, I will take notes and this is to help me remember what we said. If you want to stop during the talk, you can just let me know without giving me any reason. If you do stop, everything you said will not be used in my study. Do you have any questions about this?

Question Description:

Possible Questions:	**Probes** (to be used if needed)**:**
1. What are the activities or lessons you are doing in the preschool now?	Can you talk about the activity more? What do you do in the class?
2. What is your favorite activity/lesson? And why? What is your least favorite? Why?	Tell me why this activity is your favorite. What are the funs you have?
3. Have you ever taken activities or lessons in talent/cram schools (outside of the preschool)?	Think about the activities/lessons that you have outside of the preschool.
4. What are these activities? Which one is your favorite? Why? Which is your least favorite? Why?	Say more about what are/were the things that you do/did in these lessons.
5. If you can choose any activity to spend your time, what would you pick? And why?	Tell me why you picked this activity.
6. Why did/didn't you go to talent/cram school? If you could choose, would you go or not? If your mother said you didn't have to go, how would you	Tell me more about how you feel.

feel? And if your mother said you have to go, how would you feel?	
7. Can you tell me why some children go/don't go to talent/cram school?	Tell me more about that thought?

Conclusion:

Thank you so much for talking with me today. I really enjoy talking to both of you and you have done a wonderful job in sharing your experiences with me. I would like to give each of you a sticker to thank you for helping me with my study. Thank you!

(This protocol was translated into Chinese)

Appendix M

Individual Interview Protocol for Preschool Teachers and Director

Name: _____ Date: _____

Preschool: _____

Introduction:

I want to thank you, for taking the time to talk with me today. As described in the Informed Consent Form, I will be audio recording and transcribing what we say today. This individual interview must be completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate in the interview, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used in my study.

In this one-to-one interview, I am interested in learning about your perspectives and experiences of young children's early schooling involvement. Please feel free to discuss your views. I will probably ask you for more detail and clarification on some of the things you say, to be sure I understand your perspective.

Before beginning the interview, I would like you to choose a pseudonym, to keep your identity confidential.

Question Description:

Possible Questions:	**Probes** (to be used if needed)**:**
1. What would you say to parents who ask you about how to prepare their children for primary school?	Can you say more about that? Why is that so important?
2. What do you think of talent/cram schools for young children? Do you see a role for the talent/cram schools in young children's early childhood education? Why or why not?	I'm curious about your perspectives, would you please explain further?
3. Do you see any conflicts between preschools and talent/cram schools? If yes, What are some of these conflicts?	Please describe what you mean?
4. Do you see any influences of the Ministry of Education's preschool guidelines and regulations on your preschool curriculum? If yes, what are some of these influences?	Tell me more about that influence. Can you give me an example of it?

(This protocol was translated into Chinese)

Appendix N

Individual Interview Protocol for City Bureaus of Education Director

Name: _____ Date: _____

Position: _____

Introduction:

I want to thank you, for taking the time to talk with me today. I will be audio recording and transcribing what we say today. This individual interview must be completely voluntary. If you do decide not to participate in the interview, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used in my study.

In this one-to-one interview, I am interested in learning about your perspectives and experiences of young children's early schooling involvement. Please feel free to discuss your views. I will probably ask you for more detail and clarification on some of the things you say, to be sure I understand your perspective.

Before beginning the interview, I would like you to choose a pseudonym, to keep your identity confidential.

Question Description:

Possible Questions:	**Probes** (to be used if needed)**:**
1. What are the skills that the Ministry of Education believes that a child should have before entering primary school?	Can you say more about that? Why is that so important?
2. How does the Ministry of Education implement that belief?	Please tell me more about that.
3. Do you see a role that the talent/cram schools can play in young children's early childhood education? Why and why not?	Would you please explain further?
4. Do you see any conflicts between the Ministry of Education and the practices among preschools and/or talent/cram schools? If yes, what are the main conflicts or challenges that the Ministry faces?	Please describe what you mean?

5. Do you see any influences or impacts of the Ministry's guidelines and regulations on the current practices among preschools and/or talent/cram schools (or vise versa)? If yes, what are some of these influences or impacts?	Tell me more about that influence. Can you give me an example of it?

(This protocol was translated into Chinese)