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**The Rollercoaster Ride: An Interpretative Phenomenological
Analysis of Parental Decision- Making Concerning Academic
Redshirting of School Entry
MacKinnon, Kirsten**

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The Rollercoaster Ride: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Parental Decision- Making Concerning Academic Redshirting of School Entry

Kirsten MacKinnon

BEEd *USYD*, MEd (Lead) *ACU*, MRE *ACU*

Supervisors:

Emeritus Prof Tania Aspland, Dr Amy McPherson, Dr Ingrid Willenberg

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Key Words

Academic redshirting, delayed entry, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), foundation, gift of time, held back, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), parental decision-making, relative age, retention, school readiness, social promotion, starting school and transition.

Abstract

The decision concerning when a child should commence formal schooling has become increasingly complex in contemporary society. Worldwide, a growing number of children do not commence formal schooling until six or seven years of age (World Bank, 2021). In Australia, current school starting age policies afford *some* parents (dependent on the child's birth month) the flexibility to decide when their child will commence formal schooling. This results in some children starting school at 4.5 years of age (Early Childhood Intervention Australia [ECIA, NSW Chapter], 2017). However, there has been an increasing number of children in Australia commencing school a year after the child is first eligible, a practice commonly referred to as *academic redshirting* (Edwards et al., 2011).

Approximately 15 per cent of children are academically redshirted around Australia each year (Edwards et al., 2011). In New South Wales (NSW), Hanly et al. (2019) revealed 26 per cent of children were academically redshirted, which equated to half of all the children who were eligible to do so, experiencing a delayed school entry. Both statistics are notably higher than international estimates of 4 to 9 per cent of children across the globe being academically redshirted annually (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Dhuey, 2016). The higher incidence of academic redshirting in Australia, and in particular NSW, warranted the need for this study, to explore how parents make the decision regarding when their child should commence formal schooling.

This qualitative study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA involves exploring the lived experience of a phenomenon, with a particular emphasis on an individual's sense-making of the experience (Smith et al., 2022). The purpose of this study was to explore the *lived* experience of parents who were making the important decision

concerning academic redshirting and school entry. Data was collected individually through semi-structured interviews with 10 parents and collectively, through four focus groups with parents from various regions across NSW.

The findings of the study revealed parents experienced varying levels of stress regarding decision-making, with those making the decision for the first time experiencing higher levels of anxiety. Themes were generated from the data analysis and are based on the key concepts that were identified at the stage of data analysis: *cycles of indecision*, *ambiguity*, and *experiences of misalignment*.

This study makes an important contribution to the existing body of knowledge. This qualitative study has explored parents' perspectives on the decision-making in NSW, Australia, where academic redshirting rates are more than double the national average (Edwards et al., 2011). Methodologically, this study offers a different research lens to exploring academic redshirting practices in Australia, given most research conducted has been quantitative (see Edwards et al., 2011; Hanly et al., 2019).

As a result of this study, several recommendations are proposed. Two key recommendations for policy makers include the following: firstly, the findings indicate a need to change school starting age policies in Australia. Secondly, a stronger partnership between Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and schools needs to be established to enable a smoother school transition for all.

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Statement of Authorship and Sources

This thesis contains no material that has been extracted in whole or in part from a thesis that I have submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

No other person's work or data from generative Artificial Intelligence software has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

The participants in this study are consistently referred to as parents, not guardians or caregivers and, as mother or father, based on the information provided by the participants at the outset of the study.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics/Safety Committees (where required).

Signed:

2nd June 2023

Publications Arising from Doctoral Research

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Chapter 1. Introduction

“The rollercoaster ride of anxiety. Going up and down... Should I? Shouldn't I?”

(Kaitlyn, Mother as cited in MacKinnon, 2019, p. 58)

This doctoral study explores what has been described by Mergler and Walker (2017) as potentially *the* most difficult decision a parent must make for their child. Parental decision-making concerning when a child should commence formal schooling has become increasingly complex in contemporary society. For many families, starting school is supposed to be an important and exciting milestone in their child's life (Dockett & Perry, 2013; Edwards et al., 2009). However, for some parents, it can also be an anxious and stressful time. This may be attributed to a common belief that a successful transition to school is essential as it paves the cornerstones for a child's future educational outcomes and wellbeing (Dockett & Perry, 2013; Einarsdottir et al., 2019; Wickett, 2019). This transition is not a singular event, but rather a dynamic process of change for all family members. It begins prior to a child commencing formal schooling and does not conclude until all family members feel comfortable within the school environment (Dockett, 2017; Sayers et al., 2012; State of New South Wales [Department of Education], 2021). It is within this context that the focus of this thesis has been determined, namely: the complexities inherent in parental decision-making concerning when a child should commence formal schooling in the context of Australia.

1.1 Background

Difficulty in parental decision-making regarding when a child should commence formal schooling has been compounded by a wide variation the school starting age between countries. Data from the World Bank (2022) revealed globally that children typically do not commence formal schooling until six or seven years of age. Table 1.1 displays primary school

starting age by country. From this data, it can be deduced that Australian children typically commence formal schooling at a younger age, as early as age 4.5 years in some jurisdictions, in comparison to many other countries. Hence, it comes as no surprise that many parents in Australia grapple with this important decision. Interestingly, children in many countries who perform better than Australia (currently ranked 18th) on international tests such as *Program for International Student Achievement* (PISA), do not commence formal schooling until six or seven years of age (Armstrong, 2019). This finding may help to support an argument for increasing the age children commence formal schooling in Australia.

Table 1.1

Primary School Starting Age by Country

Age	Primary School Starting Age in 2021
5	Australia, Ireland, Malta, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, Samoa, Sri Lanka, United Kingdom
6	Belgium, Canada, China, Denmark, France, Germany, Hong Kong SAR, China, India, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Norway, Philippines, Singapore, United States (most states)
7	Afghanistan, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Indonesia, Poland, Russian Federation, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland

Note. Adapted from *Primary school starting age (years)* [Data set], by UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2022). ([Primary school starting age \(years\) | Data \(worldbank.org\)](#)). Copyright 2022 by The World Bank Group.

There are 13 years of formal education mandated in Australia, with a child unable to leave school before the age of 17 (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting

Authority [ACARA], 2022). The school year typically commences in late January and concludes by mid-December. Australia's education system is considered complex for several reasons.

First, the school entry cut-off dates vary between states and territories as shown in Table 1.2. The table shows that there is a six-month variance in the minimum age cut-off date between jurisdictions. In NSW, children are required to have turned five by July 31st, which results in some children being only 4.5 years of age when they commence formal schooling.

Table 1.2

School Age Cut-off Dates by State or Territory in Australia

State/Territory	Minimum Age Cut-off	Mandatory Age
Tasmania	4 turning 5 by 1 st January	5
Australian Capital Territory, Victoria	4 turning 5 by 30 th April	6
South Australia	4 turning 5 by 1 st May	6
Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia	4 turning 5 by 30 th June	6, 6.5 and 5.5 (respectively)
New South Wales	4 turning 5 by 31 st July	6

Note. Adapted from *National report on schooling in Australia 2020*, by Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2022 (<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-2020>). Copyright 2022 by ACARA.

Second, Australia's education system is considered complex because there are different types of schools from which to choose. The majority are government schools (70%), which are overseen by an education department in each state or territory (ACARA, 2022). The remaining 30 per cent are non-government schools, which typically have a religious

affiliation. Dockett and Perry (2006) proposed non-government schools in Australia influence school starting age because these schools commonly specify a different cut-off date for enrolment, which is often earlier than the mandated date for each state or territory. However, the cut-off date in non-government schools is not the same due to variability in enrolments, resources, and school registration requirements (Dockett & Perry, 2006).

Third, Australia's schooling system is considered complex because the terminology used to describe the first year of formal school varies by state or territory, as demonstrated in Table 1.3. This is despite The Australian Curriculum referring to the first year of formal schooling as the *Foundation* year (ACARA, 2022). Hereafter, Foundation will be the term used to describe the first year of formal schooling throughout this thesis to avoid confusion for the reader.

Table 1.3

Variance in Terminology Used

State or Territory	Name of Foundation Year
New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory	Kindergarten
Queensland, Victoria, Tasmania	Preparatory (Prep)
South Australia	Reception
Western Australia	Pre-Primary
Northern Territory	Transition

Note. Adapted from *National report on schooling in Australia 2020*, by Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2022 (<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-2020>). Copyright 2022 by ACARA.

It has been shown in this section that there is wide variation in the school starting age across the globe, with Australian children typically commencing formal schooling from a younger age in comparison to children in other countries. Current school starting age policies offer *some* Australian parents the choice to decide when to send their child to school. This means some parents can choose to send their child to school at the earliest opportunity, while others may choose to send their child to school as late as legally possible. The latter will be the focus of the next sub section.

1.1.1 Academic Redshirting

Academic redshirting, or delayed school entry, refers to a child commencing school the year after they are first eligible (Edwards et al., 2011). The name originates from the practice of redshirting in sport which is common in the United States of America (USA). This practice involves some college athletes spending an additional year on the sideline for growth and development purposes, before playing the following year (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). Redshirting in sport often results in an athletic advantage, with the redshirted athlete typically being older and potentially stronger from the additional year of practice. From an academic viewpoint, a delayed school entry may result in a child commencing formal schooling older, taller, and potentially more cognitively able than their peers (Dhuey, 2016; Graue & DiPerna, 2000).

Internationally, approximately 4 to 9 per cent of children are academically redshirted each year (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Dhuey, 2016; Huang, 2015) with a notable variance in rates between countries. Bedard and Dhuey (2006) considered countries which stipulate a single, mandatory cut-off date for school entry to have *clean* education systems. For example, England, Iceland, Japan, and Norway. There is little or no evidence of academic redshirting or *retention* (repeating a year) in these countries (Bernard & Dhuey, 2006).

On the other hand, academic redshirting rates are more prevalent in countries with *ambiguous* education systems (Bernard & Dhuey, 2006). Education systems are considered ambiguous if they offer greater flexibility through the provision of both a minimum entry age and a mandatory cut-off date. Countries with ambiguous education systems include Australia, Germany, Ireland, and the USA (Bedard & Dhuey, 2006). For example, a child in NSW, Australia, can commence formal schooling provided they turn five by July 31st, or they must be in compulsory school by the age of six (State of New South Wales [Department of Education], 2023). Therefore, parents with a child born between January and July have the choice to decide whether to send the child to school at the earliest opportunity or to delay school entry.

Academic redshirting rates in Australia are considerably higher than the international averages mentioned earlier. Data from *the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC) reported 14.5 per cent of Australian children were academically redshirted each year (Edwards et al., 2011). Recent data from the *Australian Early Development Census* (AEDC) showed 26 per cent of children in NSW were academically redshirted in the 2009 and 2012 Foundation year cohorts (Hanly et al., 2019). This equated to nearly half of all children who were eligible (children with January to July birth dates) delaying school entry in NSW.

Fortner and Jenkins (2017) suggested that academic redshirting practices were a result of either negative or positive selection. They described negative selection as a choice by parents to delay school entry due to concerns regarding their child's development or school readiness. Waiting for the additional year may provide their child with an opportunity to keep up with their peers. Positive selection, on the other hand, referred to the choice to delay school entry by parents to gain a competitive advantage. These parents often had no concerns

regarding their child's development or readiness (Fortner & Jenkins, 2017). The intended outcome is for the child to be more competitive in academia and sporting pursuits (Frey, 2005) once they enter the schooling system.

Regardless of parents' reasoning to delay school entry, academic redshirting results in an additional year before school for parents to consider for their child. The next section will briefly introduce the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system in Australia. This is an important discussion as this body, ECEC, potentially influences school starting age in Australia because it offers parents an alternative to sending their children to school at the earliest opportunity.

1.1.2 Early Childhood Education and Care

There are a variety of different ECEC services available in Australia including: long day care, family day care, occasional care, and preschool (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited ([AITSL], 2021). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics ([ABS, 2021]), in 2020 12 416 ECEC services offered a preschool program in Australia. 34 per cent of children aged between 3 and 6 years participated in a preschool program at a dedicated *preschool* (referred to as kindergarten in some states, see Table 1.4) whilst 66 per cent of children accessed a preschool program at a *long day care* service (ABS, 2021).

Table 1.4

Name of Preschool Program by State or Territory

Preschool Program	State or Territory
Preschool	Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Northern Territory, South Australia
Kindergarten	Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria, Western Australia

Note. Adapted from *Spotlight. Celebrating early childhood teachers*, by Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited (AITSL), 2021

(<https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/spotlights/celebrating-early-childhood-teachers>).

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Over the past two decades, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has undergone considerable change in Australia (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2008) as the commonwealth government has strived to lift the quality of ECEC. Australia's first national framework for ECEC teachers, the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) was developed in recognition that every child has the right to an education (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE], 2022). A country's investment in young children is valued as the result is more productive citizens and a potentially stronger workforce (COAG, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2013).

The quality of ECEC services in Australia, however, has been shown to vary. The most recent *National Quality Framework Snapshot* by the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority ([ACECQA], 2022c) indicated 12 per cent of ECEC services in Australia did not meet the *National Quality Standard* (NQS). To reduce this disparity, the *National Quality Framework* (NQF) was developed and currently shapes many facets of this

industry. This framework regulates the two most influential factors affecting quality of services: staff qualifications and educator-to-child ratios (ACECQA, 2022a; COAG, 2008). Siraj and Kingston (2015) suggest quality of a service can be determined based on the curriculum, interpersonal relationships, physical environment, and staff turnover. Research has shown children who attend quality ECEC services are more prepared to commence formal schooling and experience better educational outcomes, in comparison to children who do not attend ECEC services or who attend ECEC services which are of lower quality (ACARA, 2022; Gottfried et al., 2016; Melhuish et al., 2010).

A notable difference in quality between ECEC services in advantaged and disadvantaged areas was found to exist. The *National Quality Framework (NQF) Annual Performance Report* showed the percentage of services meeting the NQS or above was lower for disadvantaged areas (84%) in comparison to advantaged areas (88%) (ACECQA, 2022b). In addition, 33 per cent of services in advantaged areas were rated as Exceeding NQS, in comparison to 25 per cent of services in disadvantaged areas (ACECQA, 2022b). This raises concern because the evidence shows that access to quality ECEC helped to prepare children for school and beyond by providing them with the best possible start (Australian Government. Department of Education, Skills, and Employment. [AG-DESE], 2022).

A benefit of the EYLF and the associated NQF (ACECQA, 2022a) is that it may help to create a more even playing field for children *if* they attend early years programs prior to starting school. However, not all children attend ECEC because it is not compulsory. According to Brennan (2012), approximately one in seven children in NSW do not attend ECEC, which may influence their readiness for school. However, the increased enrolment of children from lower SES families in ECEC services appears to have contributed to a reduction in school readiness gaps during the Foundation year (Reardon & Portilla, 2016).

The concept of readiness is not consistently defined in education or across parental stakeholder groups. Therefore, it is important at the outset to briefly introduce some background information and policy matters regarding the concept of school readiness for children entering the schooling system in Australia.

1.1.3 Determining School Readiness

The conceptualisation of *school readiness* has changed significantly over time (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2007). Previously, school readiness was often determined by a child's chronological age or ability; with the latter being measured against established norms and standards (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2007). The focus was clearly on the readiness of the *child* (Brown et al., 2021; Dockett & Perry, 2013). More recently, the conceptualisation of school readiness has changed to a focus on *shared responsibility* (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2007; Brown et al., 2021) and readiness of schools, and communities (Dockett & Perry, 2013). Hopps (2019) recommended that schools develop strong relationships with both families and ECEC services in order to be ready for new children. Working in partnership across ECEC services and schools can assist communities to be ready for children starting formal schooling (Hopps, 2019).

Despite this recommendation for collaboration between families and ECEC services, schools appear to be increasingly expecting children to be ready to engage in formal learning when they come to school rather than acquiring readiness during the Foundation year (Donath et al., 2010; Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Petriwskyj & Grieshaber, 2011). What is becoming evident is that the expectations of children when they enter schooling reflects a *maturationalist* viewpoint, whereby a child's specific developmental milestones must occur prior to entering

formal learning (Dockett & Perry, 2002). As a result of this shift, academic redshirting is therefore seen as a way of enabling a child to have an extra year to grow and develop.

In contrast, contemporary views of early childhood acknowledge the influence of *sociocultural* factors on a child's development. Vygotsky (1978) believed that there was a fundamental relationship between learning and development. Learning in early childhood, based on this premise, needs to target areas beyond the current developmental level of a child (Vygotsky, 1978). His *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) theory was based on the argument that learning occurs through interaction with others who are more cognitively advanced (Massey & Brenneman, 2008) so that scaffolding can advance the learner to the next point of development. This theory provides a theoretical argument in support of sending children to school at the earliest opportunity.

Regardless of when a child commences formal schooling, what children do prior to starting school is important because this has been shown to affect *human capital accumulation*, or skill attainment prior to school entry (Elder & Lubotsky, 2009). This will be explored in the next sub section.

1.1.4 Human Capital Accumulation

The quality of the experiences provided through the home and ECEC environments also have been shown to influence not only developmental learning but also *human capital accumulation*, or skill attainment, prior to the commencement of formal schooling. This concept is very much under-researched in the field of early education. Elder and Lubotsky (2009) suggested human capital accumulation is more likely to influence a child's achievements in school, rather than any other factor such as being older in a cohort. It has

also been shown to affect a child beyond school, in terms of undertaking further study and future employment prospects.

Human capital accumulation may be influenced by the quality of experiences offered in the home environment. Niklas and Schneider (2017) believed that the quality of homebased experience was highly influential in the long-term development of a child's proficiency in mathematical and literacy skills. Sylva et al. (2011) measured the quality of home-based learning experiences by investigating the types of experiences offered and the frequency in which they occur. Experiences included: reading, drawing, painting, learning (alphabet, numbers, shapes, songs, nursery rhymes) and library visits. Sylva et al. (2011) reported a clear relationship between the quality of learning in the home environment and the quality of the ECEC service; with children who experienced high quality in both outperforming their peers in Mathematics and English at age 11.

Bassok et al. (2016a) compared the experiences of Foundation year children in 1998 to Foundation year children in 2010 in the US. They found the 2010 cohort of children had greater access to books and educational games using technology. Parents of these children were also more likely to spend quality time with their children both within the home (including reading to them) and through the provision of enriching outings. The findings of these two studies affirm the argument that access to quality learning experiences at home increased human capital accumulation and skill attainment for these children prior to entry to school.

Differences in the provision of home-based learning experiences were found to vary according to socioeconomic status (Early Start Research Institute, 2018; Fortner & Jenkins, 2017; Tayler et al., 2016). Fortner and Jenkins (2017) believed developmental gains achieved during the academically redshirted year were not a direct result from delaying school entry,

but rather were linked to socioeconomic status; with children from higher SES backgrounds being advantaged through the provision of rich educational experiences in the home environment. For example, children from affluent families often experienced higher quality educational experiences (such as trips to parks and museums) and greater access to resources (such as books, and educational toys) in comparison to children from lower SES families (Fortner & Jenkins, 2017); experiences that correspond to higher levels of readiness of school entry. This may help to explain why children from lower SES backgrounds typically commence ECEC with lower scores for socio-emotional and cognitive development (Siraj et al., 2017).

Human capital accumulation may be influenced by the quality of ECEC attended by children prior to the commencement of school. Children who attended high-quality ECEC services increased their human capital accumulation and skill development, which resulted in stronger academic performance improved behavioural outcomes (Gottfried et al., 2016). Melhuish et al. (2010) found children who attended higher quality ECEC services in the United Kingdom (UK) experienced increased outcomes at school entry, including greater independence and less anti-social behaviour. However, children who had attended low quality ECEC services achieved cognitive and behavioural scores which were similar to scores achieved by children who had not attended an ECEC service (Sylva et al., 2011). Promoting universal access to ECEC services in the year before school is therefore important for all children (Dockett & Perry, 2013) to help reduce later differences in academic success (Early et al., 2010).

This section has provided a background context into the important decision for parents regarding when a child should commence formal schooling. School starting age has been shown to vary between countries and among the different states and territories in

Australia. The practice of academic redshirting was introduced. A brief background of ECEC education in Australia was provided. The complexities involved in determining school readiness were introduced. The notion of human capital accumulation was explored in relation to the experiences provided to a child prior to the commencement of formal schooling. The problems associated with academic redshirting practices, a key concept underpinning this research will be introduced in the next section.

1.2 Problem Statement

It has been previously established that academic redshirting is more prevalent in Australia in comparison to other countries, with 14.5 per cent of Australian children delaying school entry each year (Edwards et al., 2011). The rate of academic redshirting in NSW was found to be significantly higher, with a study by Hanly et al. (2019) indicating 26 per cent of children in NSW were academically redshirted in the 2009 and 2012 Foundation year cohorts. Both statistics are considered high, when compared to international data which estimates between 4 to 9 per cent of children are academically redshirted worldwide each year (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Dhuey, 2016; Huang, 2015). The higher incidence of academic redshirting practices in Australia, and particularly NSW, warrant the need for further investigation.

Academic redshirting of school entry is problematic because it may result in a significant age gap, up to 18 months, between children in a year cohort. Hanly et al. (2019) reported that the median age difference between children in NSW classrooms is 13 months. A significant age gap between children in a cohort has implications for teachers, children, and parents. Teachers may need to modify the curriculum and experiences provided to meet the various needs of students (Bedard & Dhuey, 2012; Mergler & Walker, 2017) which may be challenging (Bassok et al., 2016b; Oshima & Domaleski, 2006). The curriculum may not be developmentally appropriate for the children who commence schooling at the earliest

opportunity (Jaekel et al., 2015; Norbury et al., 2016). Parents may struggle to determine whether their child is ready for school due to the increased expectations of children during the Foundation year (Mergler & Walker, 2017).

Children in NSW who enrol when they are first eligible are amongst the youngest to enter formal schooling worldwide (Hanly et al., 2019). Whilst some younger children may be ready and cope well with the academic and social demands of the school classroom, others may begin their schooling at a disadvantage. Evidence to support this proposition is found in the work of Hanly et al. (2019) who revealed 4709 children in NSW repeated the Foundation year in the 2009 and 2012 cohorts. Further, research conducted involving Australian high school students found the effects of retention, particularly for the Foundation year, were often negative for the retained child (Martin, 2009).

Academic redshirting has the potential to increase inequities in early life outcomes between children, particularly for younger children who come from lower SES families (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Black et al., 2011; Hanly et al., 2019; Stipek, 2002). This is because higher SES families may be able to afford the costs of providing rich educational resources during the additional year prior to the commencement of formal schooling. Hanly et al. (2019) raised concerns that children from disadvantaged areas may be more likely to commence formal schooling at the earliest opportunity, creating a cluster of younger school starters in particular geographic locations.

It was also mentioned earlier that non-government schools in Australia often stipulate their own cut-off date for school entry which is usually earlier than the mandated date (Dockett & Perry, 2006). As a result, some children may be required to delay school entry or potentially repeat a year prior to entry to these schools. Therefore, children who attend

nongovernment schools are often older than their government school counterparts when they commence formal schooling.

It is proposed that current starting school age policies in Australia (see Table 1.2) are problematic because only *some* parents, due to legislative requirements, are afforded the flexibility to decide on a school start date, dependent on the birth month of the child. Parents with children born between August and December have no choice but to send their child to school at the earliest opportunity, unless there are specific circumstances (e.g., disability). Social pressure and mixed messages about the benefits of academic redshirting may cause increased parental stress. Tension between parents may also result due to parents being concerned that the decision made by peers or community members will affect their own child's relative age of entry into the classroom (Hanly et al., 2019).

By way of introduction, academic redshirting of school entry has been shown to be problematic for several reasons which have been outlined in this section. The rationale for pursuing further investigation of the topic has been presented. It is timely in the next section to introduce the purpose of the current study.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

A child's transition to school is a major life experience for all family members. For children, it represents the time they become increasingly independent, in addition to adopting their new role as a 'school student'. Parents also experience various role changes during this transition. The responsibility for caring for the child becomes a role now shared between home and school. Parents also adopt a new role as the 'parent of a school child'. For some parents, their child's commencement of formal schooling may also signal a return to work or study. It therefore comes as no surprise that some parents find this period of change unsettling and they may struggle to decide when their child should commence formal schooling.

The purpose of this study was to explore the *lived* experience of parents who were making the important decision concerning academic redshirting and school entry. The research questions which guided the study were:

1. *What* is the lived experience for parents of decision-making concerning academic redshirting of their children?
2. *What* influences parental decision-making regarding whether a child is academically redshirted?
3. *Why* are particular experiences during the academically redshirted year valued?

1.4 Research Design

To address the specific research questions, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was deemed the most appropriate methodology for this study. IPA privileges the lived experience of participants, so this was an essential element to explore as part of the experience of the decision-making for parents in the study. An IPA approach was chosen because it enabled parents to reflect on their decision-making as they tried to make sense of their experience (Smith et al., 2022). The insights gained may be instructive for policy writers, educational decision makers, and like parents facing similar decisions regarding the point of school entry for their child.

The first group of participants included 10 parents invited to participate in one on one, semi-structured interviews. These parents were deciding whether to academically redshirt their child for the 2018 school year. The second group of participants included 18 parents purposefully selected based on geographical location to form four focus groups. These parents were reflecting on their decision, post school entry, during the first six months of the Foundation year. More detail on these two groups of participants will be provided in Chapter Four.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study was significant for several reasons. First, the study was conducted in NSW Australia, where academic redshirting rates are double the national average (Hanly et al., 2019). To date, there has been limited research into academic redshirting practices in Australia. Of these, the majority have been quantitative (see Edwards et al., 2011; Hanly et al., 2019). Whilst Mergler and Walker's (2017) study of academic redshirting practices in Queensland (QLD), a state of Australia, included both qualitative and quantitative data, their research focused solely on government schools. The inclusion of non-government schools would have provided a more accurate representation of academic redshirting practices.

First, this qualitative study contributes to the field of research because it provides an in-depth understanding into the phenomenon of parents' decision-making concerning academic redshirting. The inclusion of parents whose children attended both government and non-government schools provides a more holistic picture of academic redshirting practices in NSW, Australia.

Second, this study also contributes new findings to this field of research because it explored parents' perspectives on the decision-making to help understand why academic redshirting rates in NSW are more than double the national average (Hanly et al., 2019). The perspectives of both mothers and fathers are included, in contrast to most of the research which focused predominantly on the mothers' viewpoints. Data collected is valuable to various stakeholders including parents, teachers, principals, and policy makers.

Third, this study is also significant because it uses an IPA approach, which originated in the field of psychology. However, IPA is now used in a broader range of disciplines (Smith, 2004, 2016; Smith et al., 2022). Whilst popular in the UK, IPA is not as frequently used in Australia or in the field of education. This study provides an important contribution to the

growth of IPA, both here in Australia and in the field of education. Using IPA in this study enabled new insights into the complex experiences of Australian parents as they navigated this important decision and provided new understandings regarding an innovative research methodology.

Fourth, this study is also significant in raising the issue of education inequity caused by *opportunity hoarding* as middle-class parents attempt to guarantee the best educational outcomes for their children by securing educational opportunities to the detriment of others (Lyken-Segosebe & Hinz, 2015). Educational inequities have resulted in widening gaps between children from lower SES and higher SES backgrounds and schools (Hinz, 2021). The literature indicates academic redshirting is more prevalent in affluent families (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Hanly et al., 2019). This means that children from lower SES families and disadvantaged backgrounds may commence their formal schooling in unfavourable circumstances (Morrison & Hindman, 2008; Hinz, 2021), which do not disappear over time. These children are also less likely to complete their secondary school and undertake tertiary education (Hinz, 2021).

Fifth, drawing attention to the need to review school starting age policies in Australia is a final reason the study is significant. Edwards et al. (2011) found that school entry age policies were the most influential factor affecting a parent's decision on when to send their child to school. The Australian Childcare Alliance proposed there should be a national minimum age for starting school, such as turning five by January 1st (Mondo, 2019) which would help to narrow the significant age gap which currently exists between children in a cohort.

1.6 Reflexive Statement

My interest in the phenomenon of parental decision making regarding academic redshirting developed from my own personal experience in making this major decision for my eldest son who was born in January. A January birth date in Australia is the first entire month of the year where parents are offered the choice to decide when their child should commence formal schooling.

Having the choice to decide can be a stressful decision for parents, particularly for those who are making the decision for the first time. I can empathise with the parents who struggled with this decision, as I found it extremely difficult. I recall constantly comparing what my son was doing to what the other children in the mother's group (who were mostly girls) were doing. The positive outcome of making these comparisons was that my son received a formal diagnosis for a developmental condition at age three and was able to access important early intervention services before starting formal schooling.

Prior to commencing this study, I had assumed my January born son would start formal schooling the year he turned five. My younger brother, also born in January, commenced his formal schooling the year after he had turned five, in the 1980s. The original title for the study which was submitted with the research proposal: *"Delaying school starting age has a detrimental effect on student achievement in the early years of schooling"* provides evidence of my initial stance on this research area (see Appendix A).

Professionally, I came to this research with over 20 years' teaching experience in primary, high school, and tertiary settings across Sydney, NSW. During the earlier years of this study, I was employed in a primary school setting where I taught Physical Education to students across Early Stage One (ES1) to Stage Three (S3). I was able to see first-hand some

of the struggles experienced by the younger Foundation students (ES1) and the benefits experienced by older students in a cohort.

Upon review of the literature into school entry age, I became aware of a growing trend to delay school entry for children in NSW. I live in a geographical area of Sydney where academic redshirting is extremely common. As a result, and in addition to my initial concerns regarding my son's development, I followed the trend in my geographical area and sent my son to school at age six. As an 'insider' who has experienced first-hand the complexities of the decision-making, I was mindful of the wording of my questions so as not to convey my opinion to participants. The results of this study have been reported honestly, even if the findings do not reflect my opinion.

1.7 Definition of Terms

To provide clarity and transparency, Table 1.5 includes definitions of various terminology used throughout this thesis. The literature from secondary sources will be referred to as 'research' and my research will be referred to as 'study' hereafter.

Table 1.5

Definitions of Terminology Used

	Definition
Terminology	
<i>Academic redshirting</i>	Delaying the commencement of primary school for a year after the child is first eligible (Edwards et al., 2011).
<i>Early childhood</i>	The period from birth to eight years of age (AITSL, 2021).

<i>Early childhood education and care (ECEC)</i>	A broad range of services are available to parents prior to a child commencing school including long daycare, family daycare, occasional care, kindergarten, and preschool (AITSL, 2021).
<i>Foundation</i>	The first formal year of a child's primary school education. In different states and territories of Australia, this year may be referred to as: Kindergarten, Preparatory or Reception or Transition (ACARA, 2022).
<i>Gift of time</i>	Children are provided with an additional year before school, to develop cognitively and emotionally so that they are more school-ready (Edwards et al., 2011).
<i>Greenshirting</i>	The commencement of primary school before a child is legally eligible (Bassok & Reardon, 2013).
<i>Held back</i>	The commencement of primary school at the latest opportunity legally possible (Edwards et al., 2011).
<i>On-time</i>	The commencement of primary school when a child is first eligible (Stipek, 2002).
<i>Relative age</i>	A child's age when compared to their peers (Graue & DiPerna, 2000).
<i>Retained or retention</i>	When a child repeats a particular grade level (Martin, 2009).
<i>School readiness</i>	Historically, school readiness was determined by evaluation of a child's academic and social-emotional skills (Mergler & Walker, 2017). More recent definitions now consider both the child's readiness for school and the school's readiness for the child (State of New South Wales [Department of Education], 2021).
<i>Social promotion</i>	The practice of moving a child to the next grade level without achieving the expectations (Frey, 2005).

1.8 Overview of Thesis

This thesis is comprised of eight chapters. The first chapter introduced the phenomenon of parents' decision-making regarding academic redshirting. The contextual background of the study in relation to Australia's education system, academic redshirting, Early Childhood Education and Care, school readiness and human capital accumulation was established. The problems associated with the practice of academic redshirting were identified and the purpose of this study was presented. Three research questions were introduced, and a brief overview of the research design was provided. The significance of the study was conveyed to the reader. A reflexive statement was included to outline the researcher's background and positioning within the conceptualisation of the study. A table of definitions was provided to explain subject specific terminology used throughout the thesis.

Chapter Two includes a review of the existing body of scholarly literature and knowledge regarding academic redshirting. The strategy adopted for the review will be articulated and rationalised in this chapter. Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2010) proposed the use of a hermeneutic approach using the *hermeneutic circle* was appropriate when searching for literature in a phenomenological study. Fry et al. (2017) also provided a guide for writing the literature review in a phenomenological study for the novice researcher. This chapter has incorporated both Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic's (2010) hermeneutic approach and Fry et al.'s (2017) guide as the framework for phenomenological literature reviewing in this study.

Chapter Three discusses the methodological approach adopted for this qualitative phenomenological study. A rationale for the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the chosen methodology is provided. The philosophical assumptions underpinning the study and the alignment to the researcher's ontological and epistemological worldview are conveyed.

Chapter Four focuses on the research design adopted for this study. A detailed explanation of the participant selection process is presented. The data collection process for the interview and focus group data is described. A thorough account of the data analysis for each data set is conveyed. Legitimation of the study is considered. Ethical considerations are addressed. A reflexive statement is provided prior to and at the conclusion of the data analysis.

Five group experiential themes formed the basis of the reporting of the data analysis for this study and are presented across Chapter 5, 6 and 7. Chapter Five focuses on the key concept of *Cycles of Indecision*, explored across the following two group experiential themes:

1. *Parents were influenced by other parents as they navigated this important decision and its potential impact on their child's future; and*
2. *Parents' experiences showed that the burden of decision-making often fell upon the mother.*

Chapter Six explores the key concept of *Ambiguity* that permeated the data through a further group experiential theme:

3. *There was ambiguity for a number of parents as they considered what the best decision for their child was.*

Chapter Seven focuses on the key concept of *Experiences of Misalignment* through the analysis of the following two group experiential themes:

4. *Parents displayed varying levels of readiness for their child's transition to school; in addition to difficulty assessing their child's readiness for school.*
5. *There was an apparent misalignment in views between various stakeholders regarding when a child should commence formal schooling.*

The final chapter, Chapter 8, brings the thesis to a point of culmination where the contributions to the field of knowledge from this study are discussed. The findings of the study are reported and recommendations for policy, practice and future research outlined.

The next chapter will explore the body of empirical research that informs current knowledge and understanding in relation to academic redshirting.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

This chapter, as noted earlier, presents a phenomenological literature review of the existing body of empirical findings regarding academic redshirting. Because this qualitative study is phenomenological, the purpose of the literature review required careful consideration. This chapter will provide an overview of the purpose of a literature review, a detailed account of the approach taken, and an examination of the current literature through different lenses.

The structure reflects Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic's (2010) proposal that the use of a hermeneutic approach using the *hermeneutic circle* is appropriate when searching for literature in a phenomenological study. Fry et al. (2017) also provided a guide for writing the literature review in a phenomenological study for the novice researcher which is integrated into this chapter and thus what unfolds ahead reflects both Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic's (2010) hermeneutic approach and Fry et al.'s (2017) guide as the framework for phenomenological literature reviewing in this study.

2.1 Purpose of the Literature Review

The literature review is considered an essential component of the research process in both the quantitative and qualitative paradigms (Fry et al., 2017). Researchers typically conduct a literature review to investigate the existing empirical findings in a field of research and to detail how their study will contribute to that field (Creswell, 2014). The purpose of the literature review in a qualitative study, particularly those using grounded theory or phenomenology, has been the subject of much debate (Dunne, 2011; Finlay, 2011; Fry et al., 2017). Differences in opinion have arisen from disagreements concerning when a literature

review should be conducted, the type of approach used, and whether it is required in qualitative research (Fry et al., 2017).

Literature reviewing often occurs during the preliminary stages of the research process to explore the current state of knowledge within a field of study (Fry et al., 2017), with a view to also identifying existing gaps within the literature. This is mandatory for quantitative research and many forms of qualitative research. However, arguments have been put forward to conduct the literature review at a later stage during particular types of qualitative studies, such as Grounded Theory (Dunne, 2011). The reasoning underpinning such a recommendation argues that the delay enables participants' views to develop without influence from concepts presented in the literature review (Creswell, 2014). It is argued by such thinkers that the literature could then be used at the end of a qualitative study to determine whether the findings support (or challenge) the existing literature, or more importantly whether the findings make a significant contribution to the current knowledge base (Creswell, 2014). Such an argument can be upheld from a phenomenological perspective and yet it challenges the traditional regulatory principles that shape thesis writing in the higher education sector in Australia.

Husserl (1900, 1970) posited that the true qualities of a phenomenon may only be revealed by acquiring descriptions from the *lifeworld*, which he envisaged as the world and how it was directly experienced in the subjectivity of everyday life. The aim is to generate existential knowledge which relates to the lifeworld as opposed to the natural world due to our inability to separate one's *knowing* from the historical context (Cleave, 2022). Therefore, a phenomenological literature review should be "focused by an existential sense of relevance that is relational as well as thematic" (Cleave, 2022, p. 335). van Manen (1990) encouraged phenomenological researchers to adopt a more reflective stance because "there is no innocent,

pure or pristine experience of a real external world” (p. 185). This is a vastly different perspective when compared to that of quantitative researchers.

The debate into the purpose of a literature review in qualitative research also initially raised the possibility of not completing one. This was to avoid the researcher being influenced by prevailing worldviews and empirical research, and their research being limited by the existing literature (Dunne, 2011; Rees, 2011). This may be the case when the research questions are developed prior to conducting the literature review (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010).

After consideration of both sides of the debate, a literature review has been included at the early stages of this phenomenological study for several reasons. First, to enable the researcher to convey previous knowledge and predispositions to the reader (Giorgi, 2012). Second, to position this study within the field of research by exploring various bodies of knowledge concerning academic redshirting. Third, the literature will be used during the data analysis to support the analysis and findings (Rees, 2011). Further this is in keeping with the traditions of higher degree dissertation regulations as outlined in the higher education sector in Australia. The next section details the approach to the literature review that was adopted for this phenomenological study. The rest of the chapter will explore the various bodies of knowledge relevant to forging a comprehensive understanding of the key topic of this research namely, academic redshirting. A rationale for the current study will be provided in light of the existing scholarly literature.

2.2 Approach to Literature Review

The original approach to the literature review for this study naively adopted a positivist stance, which perhaps would have been suitable if this had been a quantitative study. It became apparent as the study progressed, that there was a need to revisit this review

from a phenomenological stance. Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2010) were critical of using a more traditional, structured approach such as a systematic literature review in phenomenological research. They believed the scope of the research may be limited by the research questions and instead proposed a hermeneutic approach involving the use of the *hermeneutic circle*, as a more suitable framework when searching for literature in phenomenological research (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010). The hermeneutic circle enabled continuous engagement with the body of literature, as new insights resulted in the examination of the literature from a different lens with each iteration undertaken (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). This is explained in more depth in Section 2.2.4. Fry et al. (2017) also provided a guide for writing the literature review in a phenomenological study for the novice researcher which will be used in this chapter. The next sub section describes the approach to literature reviewing for this study which has incorporated both Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic's (2014) hermeneutic framework and Fry et al.'s (2017) guide to phenomenological literature reviewing.

2.2.1 Orienting to the Phenomenon

In the early stages of the research process, it is important for the phenomenological researcher to approach a phenomenon with *wonder* (Fry et al., 2017). This orientation to the phenomenon was conceptualised by van Manen (2014) as a process of “questioning the meaning of life as we live it” and using wonder to “dislocate and displace” the phenomenon (p. 13). Phenomenologically, this wonder must be experiential or connected to human experience (van Manen, 1990).

To begin with, a phenomenon of interest was identified, and its meaning was considered in relation to the lived experience of parents (Fry et al., 2017). This occurred within the natural attitude or everyday perspective (Giorgi, 2009; van Manen, 2014). The

researcher's interest in the phenomenon of parents' decision-making concerning academic redshirting arose from her own experience with her eldest child. It was noticed that friends with children who were a few years older were sending their child to school at the latest opportunity, rather than when the child was first eligible. The researcher's initial stance on this topic (see Appendix A) took the stance academic redshirting would have a detrimental effect on a child's achievement in the early years of schooling. This caused the researcher to wonder why so many parents were making the decision to delay school entry for their child and how they came to this decision.

Phenomenological literature reviewing should reveal the researcher's-oriented interest or vantage point from which they are viewing the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). As noted in the introductory chapter, the researcher approached this study from a dual vantage point. First, from a personal level, as a parent who had experienced the phenomenon being researched and made the decision to academically redshirt her son. Second, from a professional level, as a teacher with over 20 years' experience working in various sectors of the education system in Australia.

2.2.2 The Articulation of the Phenomenon

The articulation of the phenomenon involves the researcher "locating and delineating" the phenomenon of interest (Wertz, 2005, p. 170). The way in which the phenomenon is conveyed will provide the reader with insight into the way the researcher has noticed (or perhaps not noticed) relevant bodies of literature (Cleave, 2022). The researcher needs to be aware of their interests and agenda for the study (Todres & Holloway, 2004) and convey these to the reader as the conceptualisation of the research unfolds.

Investigation into the history of academic redshirting revealed few children delayed school entry in the 1970s, however, there was a notable increase in the practice by the 1980s (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). The current increase was perplexing, given this particular generation of children are attending Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services in greater numbers compared to previous generations (Graue & DiPerna, 2000).

Academic redshirting rates in Australia are considerably high in comparison to other countries (Edwards et al., 2011). A recent Australian study conducted by Hanly et al., (2019) revealed 26 per cent of children who commenced formal schooling in New South Wales (NSW) in the 2009 and 2012 Foundation year cohorts were academically redshirted. This equated to half of the parents whose children were eligible to do so, choosing to delay school entry (Hanly et al., 2019). Therefore, the phenomenon of interest in this study was parents' decision-making concerning academic redshirting.

2.2.3 Delineating the Phenomenon

Delineating the phenomenon occurs within a specific context or lifeworld which encompasses the researcher's natural attitude, and personal or professional interests (Fry et al., 2017). Todres and Holloway (2004) described this as situating the phenomenon in a broad context. This involved reviewing the literature in a deliberate way to situate the phenomenon within the current body of knowledge, and to identify the potential gaps (Aveyard, 2010). The next sub section describes the hermeneutic approach adopted to explore the various bodies of knowledge concerning academic redshirting.

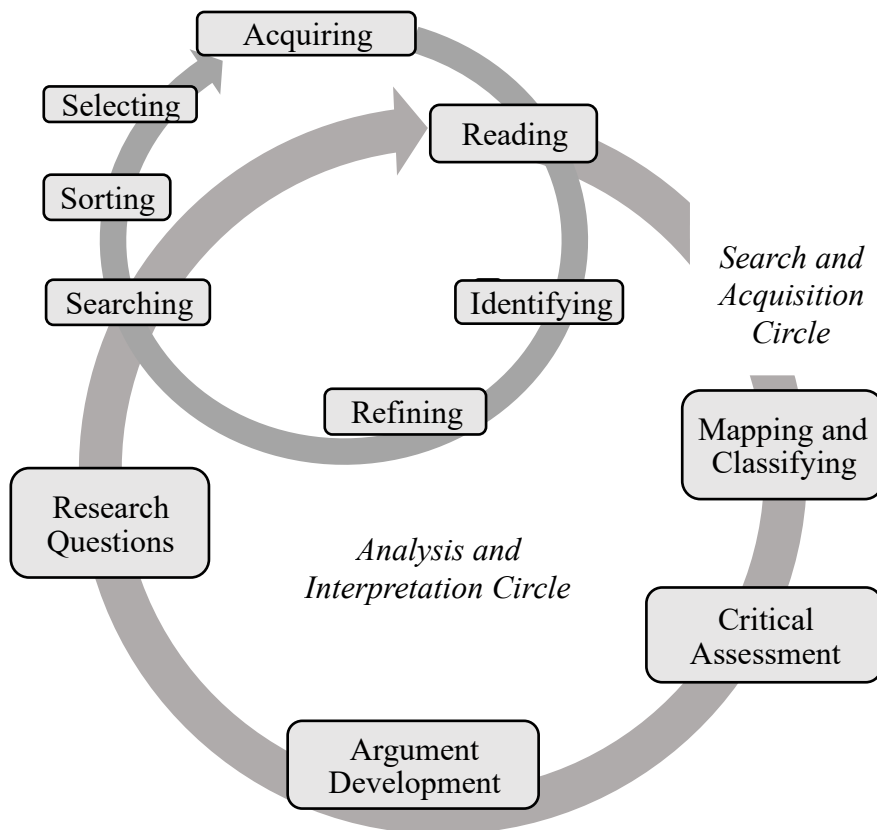
2.2.4 Hermeneutic Circle Framework

A hermeneutic circle framework for literature reviewing promotes continuous engagement with the body of literature, facilitating the development of new understandings

and insights (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). The use of the hermeneutic circle enables movement back and forth between individual articles; with each article representing a *part* of the *whole* body of literature (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010). Understanding of each individual article is therefore never isolated, but rather interpreted in the context of other articles and the whole body of literature (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010).

Figure 2.1 comprises Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic's (2014) hermeneutic framework, which incorporates two interconnected hermeneutic circles which were used for this literature review. After identifying the phenomenon of interest, the researcher entered the *Search and Acquisition* circle at the *searching* stage (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). The researcher then moved through various stages of the circle which involved *sorting*, *selecting*, and *acquiring* suitable articles. *Reading* was an important stage in this circle because it was one of the key activities that linked the two circles and enabled the development of understanding (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). This understanding facilitated the stages of *identifying* new articles and *refining* the search strategy as the researcher progressed through the circle (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014).

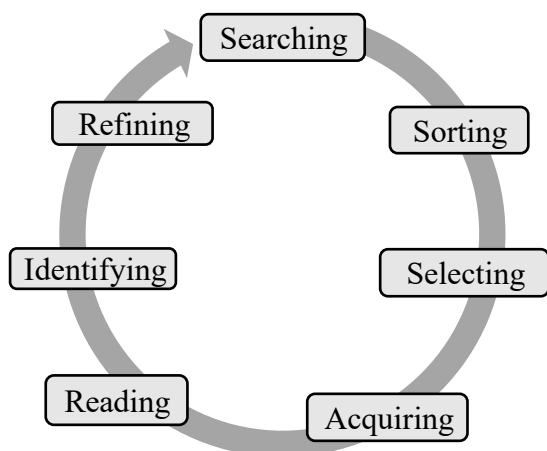
The *Analysis and Interpretation* circle progressed from the *reading* stage and involved the following stages: *mapping and classification*, *critical assessment*, *argument development* and *research questions*, before moving back to the *searching* stage which was the second key activity linking the two circles (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014) indicated that it is possible to skip some of the stages during the various iterations of the circles.

Figure 2.1*Hermeneutic Circle Framework*

Note. Adapted from “A hermeneutic approach for conducting literature reviews and literature searches”, by K.S. Boell & D. Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014, *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, 34, 264. Copyright 2014 by the Association for Information Systems.

2.2.4.1 Search and Acquisition. The *Search and Acquisition* circle (see Figure 2.2) involved a series of stages which were connected (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010). Repeated iterations of this hermeneutic circle assisted the researcher to develop a better understanding of the different bodies of literature relevant to the phenomenon of interest (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010).

Figure 2.2
Search and Acquisition Circle



Note. Adapted from “Literature reviews and the hermeneutic circle”, by K.S. Boell & D. Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010, *Australian Academic and Research Libraries*, 41(2), 134.
Copyright 2013 by Australian Academic & Research Libraries.

Searching for literature following a hermeneutic approach began with the aim to find a small number of highly relevant articles (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010). It was through subsequent iterations of the hermeneutic circle where additional literature was found as understanding of the phenomenon developed (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010).

An initial search of the literature was conducted to find suitable articles. Key words relevant to the research topic were identified. These included: *academic redshirting*, *kindergarten redshirting*, *delaying starting age*, *entrance age*, and *starting school*. These were used singularly and in combination as Boolean strings to increase the likelihood of finding articles. A systematic search of databases relevant to the field of research *1301 Education Systems* was then conducted. Both Australian and International databases were navigated including

- (i) A+ Education,
- (ii) Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC),
- (iii) ProQuest Education Database,
- (iv) Sage Journals Online,
- (v) Taylor and Francis Online and
- (vi) World Bank Data.

This strategy was effective, resulting in a selection of highly appropriate articles to review. The *sorting* stage involved using the ranking algorithm provided by each database to view the most relevant documents which were determined by the results of the Boolean strings created (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). The process of *selecting* reputable Australian and international articles was determined using the following criteria: peer-reviewed, empirical, sourced from a high-quality journal and written within the past ten years. A selection of articles which did not fit the criteria were also included because it was believed they may have offered a significant contribution to the study. *Acquiring* difficult to obtain articles required scans requests to be made through the Australian Catholic University Library Service. The researcher also contacted Professor Jonathan Smith, the creator of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, to personally request a copy of his article Smith (2011b), which he generously provided.

The *reading* stage was an important stage in the development of understanding regarding the phenomenon (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010). The researcher initially drew upon her preunderstandings to make sense of each article, which resulted in a change of viewpoint from the merging of horizons of understanding between the reader and the text (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Individual articles (parts) were compared as they came together to form the whole body of relevant literature (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014).

With each iteration of the circle performed, the body of literature was expanded.

The *identifying* stage involved the identification of the following new key words: *relative age effect, gift of time, early childhood, transition, school readiness, human capital accumulation; and retention*. *Refining* the search for articles involved expanding the search to include other fields of research. These included:

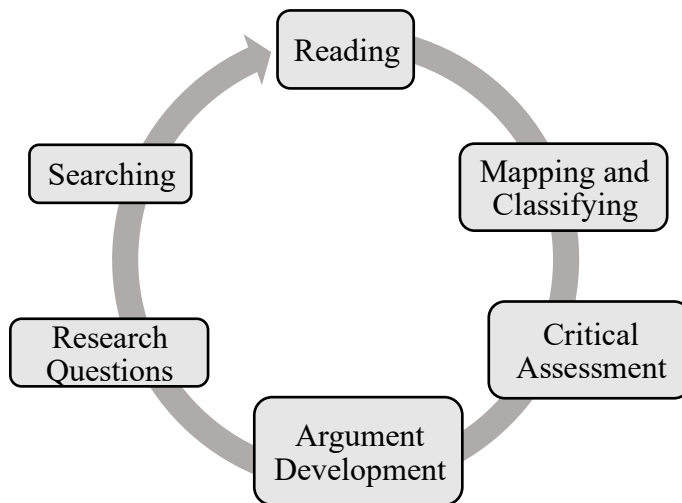
- (i) 1303 Specialist Studies in Education,
- (ii) 1402 Applied Economics,
- (iii) 1109 Neurosciences and
- (iv) 1701 Psychology.

Additional databases searched included:

- (i) Academic Search Complete,
- (ii) ProQuest Psychology Database, and
- (iii) PsychINFO.

The reference lists of previously selected articles were also examined to ensure no critical articles were omitted from the review. The literature review was constantly updated throughout the research process to include the most up to date literature.

2.2.4.2 Analysis and Interpretation. The *Analysis and Interpretation* circle (see Figure 2.3) evolved from the *reading* stage within the *Search and Acquisition* circle (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). From reading, the researcher progressed through the following stages: *mapping and classifying, critical assessment, and argument development*. The *research questions* were revisited and revised (see Appendix B) before re-commencing the *searching* stage to find new articles of relevance. The researcher progressed through several iterations of both circles to develop this literature review (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014).

Figure 2.3*Analysis and Interpretation Circle*

Note. Adapted from “A hermeneutic approach for conducting literature reviews and literature searches”, by K.S. Boell & D. Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014, *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, 34, 264. Copyright 2014 by the Association for Information Systems.

The *reading* stage was one of the key stages linking the two hermeneutic circles (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). As the researcher engaged in analytic reading of each article, new understandings of the phenomenon emerged. The *mapping and classifying* stage involved the use of mind maps (see Appendix B) to visually represent the researcher’s thoughts and understanding of the relationship between articles. During the *critical assessment* stage, potential gaps in the literature were identified (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). The *argument development* stage provided a rationale for the current study (see Section 2.12). The *research questions* underwent several processes of revision, resulting in new iterations of the hermeneutic circles (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). The *searching* stage, the second of the key stages linking the two hermeneutic circles (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014) continued after data analysis had occurred as new understandings from

the primary data emerged. This stage concluded when the researcher felt that a comprehensive review had been conducted of the various bodies of literature.

Multiple iterations were performed utilising both hermeneutic circles described previously. Sections 2.3 to 2.7 comprise of the different lenses which were used to explore the various bodies of knowledge concerning academic redshirting as a result of each iteration. The lenses included the key domains of (i) constructs of early childhood, (ii) purposes of schooling, (iii) influences of family and economic circumstances, (iv) characteristics of the individual child, including relative age effect, readiness for learning in a formal school setting, and (v) stake-holder decision-making. Each of these will now be addressed forthwith.

2.3 Constructs of Early Childhood

A review of the literature from an early childhood lens revealed several important concepts which may influence parents' decision-making regarding academic redshirting. First, the conceptualisation of childhood and what it means to be a child has changed over time. Second, contemporary views of childhood now recognise the importance of children's rights. Third, the Australian government introduced a national framework for early childhood education in 2009 called the *Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)* (Australian Government. Department of Education ([AGDE], 2022) which has recently been revised. Each of these concepts will be explored in the sub sections that follow.

2.3.1 Changing Constructs of Childhood

The concept of childhood in Western society has evolved significantly over time. The existence of childhood during the Middle Ages is a matter of debate (Bennett, 2019), with Ariès (1960) arguing childhood was non-existent in medieval society. Instead, children were considered *miniature adults* from the time they were weaned from the mother (Neaum, 2019) and were expected to contribute to the family resources by working (Ariès, 1960). Society

was predominantly influenced by the Church and her teachings; and Baptism was required to free a child from original sin (Irving, 2018). Children were believed to be *born sinful* and a harsh upbringing was necessary to rid the child of evil (Neaum, 2019). Infanticide was commonplace, with children who were considered *imperfect* often murdered by their parents (Sorin, 2005).

During the 17th century Enlightenment period, the work of philosopher John Locke significantly changed how childhood was conceptualised (Kerr, 2022; Neaum, 2019). In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Locke (1778) considered children to be born as *blank slates* (tabula rasa) who could be *moulded* in a particular way by adults. The way a child was nurtured, and the experiences often influenced who the child came to be as a person (Neaum, 2019). Locke (1778) believed it was important for children to be educated in the home by parents or tutors, rather than being exposed to societal influences in schools (Dever & Falconer, 2008). Rousseau (1762, 1979) also thought society corrupted the minds of *innocent* children and had a negative influence on their behaviour (Irving, 2018; Neaum, 2019).

From the 18th century, the social view of childhood shifted to one where children were viewed as *children* (Dever & Falconer, 2008). Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762, 1979) proposed a perspective suggesting humans were born *inherently good*. A child's upbringing should therefore encompass love, nurturing, and protection by their parents (Neaum, 2019). Institutions devoted to child welfare were formed by various charities and state bureaucracies (Heywood, 2009) to protect children when their family failed to do so (Kerr, 2022). While farms and workshops had previously been the primary site of work for children, school became the new workplace to develop basic literacy and numeracy skills (Heywood, 2009). Locke (1778) and Rousseau (1762, 1979) considered schools to be an

unnatural environment. Instead, Locke (1778) advocated a natural education which involved play, thus enabling children to learn by doing (Dever & Falconer, 2008; Irving, 2018).

By the 19th Century, children were often required to work in order to contribute to the family and sustain the economy (Bennett, 2019). The Industrial Revolution had resulted in the employment of mass numbers of children into the workforce, mainly in factories (Bennett, 2019). It was believed work kept children occupied, thus eliminating the potential for unruly behaviour from a wayward child (Bennett, 2019). However, work conditions were often deplorable, and many children experienced poor health and some even succumbed to death (Lowe, 2009; Radfar et al., 2018). Thankfully, by the late 19th century children were no longer needed to work, and society once again shifted its view to childhood being a time of *innocence* (Dever & Falconer, 2008). Bennett (2019) proposed the introduction of compulsory schooling signalled a change in the status of the child from an *active* participant in the workforce to a *passive* participant in the classroom. The investment in a child's education was deemed to produce long term gains for individuals and wider society (Bennett, 2019).

During the 20th century, advances in science and technology resulted in increased interest in the study of children (Lowe, 2009). The structure of schools resulted in childhood being perceived as a series of stages (Lowe, 2009). Adolescence emerged as a distinct period between childhood and adulthood (Heywood, 2009). In the latter part of this century, children were now viewed as inherently good and requiring nurturing (Kerr, 2022). Societal changes in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in changes to the way children were treated (Kerr, 2022). The invention of birth control enabled prospective parents to avoid pregnancy if desired. This resulted in the choice to decide whether to bring children into the world and therefore children who were born were often wanted and received favourable treatment (Kerr, 2022).

The increased study of children resulted in new knowledge about child development and parents became increasingly interested in providing enriching learning experiences for their children (Kerr, 2022). The women's liberation movement during the 1970s resulted in an increasing number of women entering the workforce (Schulz, 2017). They often entered occupations which involved working with children such as teaching, nursing, and social work, which led to an increased advocacy for children's rights (Kerr, 2022).

As a result, a new image of the child as *competent* emerged (Rinaldi, 2013). Children were no longer considered *passive* participants in society, but rather *active* participants capable of co-constructing their own lives (James & Prout, 1997). This new image included the centrality of mandated children rights, which gave children a voice in decisions related to their lives (Bennett, 2019). The rights of children, particularly regarding education, will now be explored in the next sub section.

2.3.2 Children's Rights

In the 21st century, the rights of children are considered paramount to modern civilisation and children are positioned as vulnerable and in need of protection (Dever & Falconer, 2008). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) compiled a document in the late 20th century outlining a substantial number of basic rights for all children. *Article 28* specifically stipulates that every child, no matter where they live, has the right to an education. *Article 29* outlines the specific goals of education, such as to enable a child to reach their full potential and become a productive citizen in society. *Article 3* indicates that all decisions relating to a child should be made with their best interest in mind. The importance of parents, guardians, or caregivers making decisions for their child is emphasised in *Article 5* whereby the convention gives parents the right to make decisions over government policy (UNCRC, 1989). Therefore, if parents believe it is in the best interest

of their child to delay starting school, then the convention supports this decision. *Article 12* mentions that a child (if capable) is entitled to express their views on matters which affect them (UNCRC, 1989). This is dependent on the child's age and level of maturity. The next sub section focuses on a framework for early childhood education and care in Australia which was developed in recognition that every child has the right to an education (AGDE, 2022).

2.3.3 The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)

Australia's first national framework for ECEC teachers, the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) was first introduced in 2009 (AGDE, 2022). The EYLF recognises that childhood is now seen as "a time to be, to seek and make meaning of the world" (AGDE, 2022, p. 6). Play-based learning is heavily promoted (AGDE, 2022; Thomas et al., 2011). This helps to explain the reluctance by ECEC teachers to adopt didactic teaching practices because it goes against their philosophy concerning how children learn best (Thomas et al., 2011). The concept of childhood in this context recognises children as *active* participants in their own development (AGDE, 2022). This enables ECEC teachers to move beyond preconceived expectations regarding children's abilities, to instead working with and respecting the abilities of each individual child (AGDE, 2022).

The EYLF is framed around the concept of a child's life being characterised by *belonging, being* and *becoming* (AGDE, 2022). A sense of *belonging* is considered fundamental to human existence. The EYLF accentuates the importance of children developing a sense of belonging through membership of various groups including the family, neighbourhood, and wider community (AGDE, 2022). *Being* acknowledges the significance of both the past and present in children's lives (AGDE, 2022). Childhood is viewed as a time for being in the present, rather than simply preparing children for the future (AGDE, 2022). Childhood is also a time for *becoming* as children experience significant change as they grow

and develop. The EYLF encourages collaboration between ECEC teachers, families, and their children during this important time in a child's development (AGDE, 2022).

This section has revealed important concepts in the existing literature from an early childhood lens which may influence parents' decision-making regarding academic redshirting. It has been shown that the conceptualisation of childhood has changed considerably over time. Studies of child development in the 20th century provided new knowledge about child development. This has resulted in parents spending more time investing in their child's human capital accumulation through exposure to enriching learning experiences for their children prior to entering school (Kerr, 2022). Contemporary views of childhood now recognise the importance of children's rights. In response to the right of every child to an education, Australia's first national framework known as the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) was introduced in 2009. Attendance in Early Childhood Education and Care prior to school entry is considered important to ensuring a child's readiness prior to entering school. Availability and access to quality ECEC prior to entering school may also influence parents' decision-making. The next section will explore the purposes of schooling and the interrelationship of the concept of childhood and schooling.

2.4 Purposes of Schooling

A review of the literature from the purpose of schooling lens revealed several important concepts which may influence parents' decision-making concerning academic redshirting. This lens will focus on the historical context, current context and future directions in relation to the purpose of schooling in Australia:

2.4.1 Historical Context

Prior to the 1870s, education in Australian colonies was provided solely by religious groups and private institutions, with minimal involvement by the government (Reid et al.,

2010). These schools provided children from middle-class families with the opportunity to learn basic skills in literacy and numeracy which would be required for future employment. Children from wealthier families were able to attend elite private colleges for secondary education, before continuing to university (Reid et al., 2010).

From the 1870s, concerns were raised by colonial governments that many children were not attending school, especially those from working-class families (Reid et al., 2010). The lack of attendance was impacting on the economy as jobs often required basic skills in literacy and numeracy. Public schools were established to enforce compulsory schooling, and these were funded with public monies. Schools run by religious groups received no funding (Reid et al., 2010).

At this time, schools in Australia were viewed as central to the task of nation building (Cranston et al., 2010b; Reid et al., 2010). Due to the significant investment into public schools by the government, a number of public purposes were expected to be achieved for the betterment of society (Cranston et al., 2010b). *Democratic equality* was built on notions of equity and social justice (Labaree, 1997). This purpose involved preparing children to become active and competent citizens in society (Labaree, 1997). *Social efficiency* involved preparing children to contribute to society by entering the workforce (Labaree, 1997). These public purposes were later refined as Australia's education system expanded (Reid et al., 2010).

During the 20th Century, the compulsory school leaving age was increased and the curriculum was expanded, resulting in more children completing secondary education (Reid et al., 2010). The public purposes of schools in Australia started to change as society progressed due to advancements in science and technology, globalisation, urbanisation, an ageing population, and increased concern for the environment (Reid et al., 2010). Federal

governments began funding of both public and private (including Catholic) schools in the 1960s and 1970s (Reid et al., 2010). This resulted in a significant change regarding the public purposes of schooling. By the 1980s, education had increasingly become a commodity which could be accessed by individuals for the private good of *social mobility* (Labaree, 1997). Access to education could improve one's position in society. This, however, was at the expense of the public purposes of schooling which had previously embraced democratic equality, citizenship, equity, and social justice (Cranston et al., 2010b; Reid et al., 2010). It could be argued that the shift away from public purposes of schooling towards private purposes has had a negative impact on the common good for Australian society (Cranston et al., 2011; Reid et al., 2010).

Federalism has also played an important role in the shaping of schools in Australia (Cranston et al., 2010a; Thomson, 2021). Schools are the Constitutional responsibility of state and territory governments (Lingard & Sellar, 2013) and collaborate with the federal government on educational policy (Cranston et al., 2010a). Since the 1990s, the federal government has taken a more prominent role in the funding of the education sector. This has resulted in the significant growth of non-government schools in Australia (Cranston et al., 2010a). While this growth has created choice in type of schooling for parents, it has undermined equity because not all families can afford a private education for their children (Hinz, 2021).

2.4.2 Current Context

There appears to have been a major shift from public purposes of education towards private purposes in Australia's education system (Cranston et al., 2010a). This may be attributed to a range of issues which are external to schools including: government policy,

funding and resourcing discrepancies across the different school sectors, and emerging societal issues (Cranston et al., 2010a).

In 2008, the Labor Government established the *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority* (ACARA) to manage a new national agenda (Parliament of Australia 2008). The three main functions of this Authority were to: oversee the implementation of a national school curriculum; national assessments; and the management of data. The development of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the My School website enabled the tracking of student achievement in literacy and numeracy across Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 and the ability to compare the overall performance of schools to national standards (Lingard et al., 2014). Comparisons of schools with similar student clientele is also possible due to the *Index of Community Socio Educational Advantage* (ICSEA) scale (ACARA, 2015).

This national agenda has resulted in increased competition between schools for students and funding (Reid et al., 2010). School quality is often measured by parents in terms of performance in national tests and final year results (Hinz, 2021). As a result, schools across all sectors have adopted strategies to try and attract more academically capable clientele. This has contributed to the process of residualisation, whereby students bypass the local school to travel to those which are performing stronger academically (Hinz, 2021). Social stratification has resulted in less socially mixed schools in Australia in comparison to other countries (Hattie, 2017). Children from higher SES backgrounds often attend non-government schools while children from lower SES backgrounds usually attend government schools (Hattie, 2017).

The implementation of the *Australian Education Act 2013* sought to provide a high quality and equitable system for all students. One of the key national targets was “for

Australia to be placed, by 2025, in the top 5 highest performing countries based on the performance of school students in reading, mathematics and science” (Australian Government, 2013, p. 3). However, despite significant funding by the government, Australia’s performance in the OECD’s *Program for International Student Achievement* (PISA) has continued to decline over the past 20 years (Thomson, 2021). The gap between high achieving and low achieving students had also widened during this time. These trends signal a need to provide more support to schools with increased numbers of disadvantaged students (Thomson, 2021).

The most recent national declaration, the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*, specifies two primary goals for all Australians which has been agreed upon by Education Ministers (Australian Government. Department of Education, Skills and Employment [AG-DESE], 2020b). The first goal is “the Australian education system promotes excellence and equity” (AG-DESE, 2020b, p. 5). This involves improving education outcomes for children who are disadvantaged and begins with providing every child with access to structured play-based learning prior to the commencement of formal schooling (AG-DESE, 2020b). The second goal is “for all young Australians to become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners and active and informed members of the community” (AG-DESE, 2020b, p. 6).

However, Australia’s education system advantages some children to the detriment of others. Lamb et al. (2020) described uneven levels of academic learning for different groups of young Australians. For example, children from lower SES backgrounds, Indigenous Australians and children who live in rural areas are less likely to complete school. This is evidence that Australia’s education system is not meeting the needs of all Australian children (Lamb et al., 2020). This is despite the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* is

prioritising equity of opportunity through targeted support for children who may be disadvantaged (AG-DESE, 2020b). There is also an ongoing commitment to ‘close the gap’ by empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to reach their potential (AGDESE, 2020b).

2.4.3 Future Directions

There is a need to return to an emphasis on the public purposes of education in Australia (Cranston et al., 2011; Reid et al., 2010). It has been shown in the previous two sub sections, there is concern the public purposes of schooling in Australia have been lost as a result of other dominant priorities, including national testing and My School (Cranston et al., 2011). Private purposes of schooling, dominated by the ideology of choice, have predominantly focused on economic or individual gain (Cranston et al., 2011). This has further disadvantaged children from lower SES families due to residualisation, as children from more affluent families bypass the local school to attend those which are performing stronger academically (Hinz, 2021).

The increased emphasis on academic performance as the main measure of a school’s quality in Australia has resulted in increased marketisation of schools, who must compete against one another to attract middle class and high achieving students (Hattie, 2017). The number of students attending non-government schools in Australia is relatively high in comparison to other countries (Larsen et al., 2021). Marketisation has resulted in reduced diversity within student populations and an uneven distribution of resources between schools (Reid et al., 2010). Instead of schools competing against one another, they should be working together to provide a high-quality education for all students (Reid et al., 2010). Hattie (2017) proposed a need change the way society defines ‘success’ in schools. Rather than focusing on

students' starting point in educational achievement, a school's success should be measured by the learning gains and progress achieved by its students over time (Hattie, 2017).

This section has explored the purposes of schooling in Australia over time. It was shown that schools initially served the public purposes of democratic equality and social efficiency (Labaree, 1997). However, changes to government funding to include the provision of financial support to schools in both the public and private sector in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in a rise in the number of non-government schools (Cranston et al., 2010a). It has been shown the purposes of schooling in Australia have changed over time and some would argue that the current format of education in Australia suits the private purpose of social mobility (Labaree, 1997).

The concepts presented in this section may influence parents' decision-making regarding academic redshirting because parents in Australia have the choice to decide the type of schooling for their child. It was mentioned previously, non-government schools in Australia may stipulate their own school entry cut-off date which may be earlier than the mandated date (Dockett & Perry, 2006). This is an important consideration for parents who may desire a private education for their child. The next section will explore the varying influences of family and economic circumstances on parents' decision-making regarding academic redshirting.

2.5 Influences of Family and Economic Circumstances

The transition to school is a dynamic process of change for all family members (Dockett & Perry, 2014). A review of the literature from the construct of the family revealed several important concepts which may influence parents' decision-making regarding academic redshirting. First, the concept of family structure is an important consideration, and decision-making is often influenced by the parents' marital status and number of children in

the family. Second, the ethnic background of the family is shown to influence parents' values and beliefs concerning education. Third, parents' employment situation is an important consideration in the decision-making due to varying work hours. Fourth, a family's geographical location is also shown to influence decision-making as academic redshirting practices are more prevalent in particular localities. Fifth, a family's economic circumstance influences parents' decision-making because government funding for ECEC services is now means-tested in Australia. Each of these concepts will be explored in the sub sections that follow.

2.5.1 Family Structure

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics ([ABS], 2021) a family is defined as “two or more people, one of whom is at least 15 years of age, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering, and who are usually resident in the same household” (para. 1). The majority (81%) of children in Australia aged 0-14 years live in couple families (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare ([AIHW], 2020). More recent definitions of family based on gender, sexuality, and same sex partnerships have revealed more diversified constructs than those defined by the ABS (2021), but this complexity will not be addressed in this thesis.

A review of the literature revealed there was no apparent research conducted in Australia which investigated the influence of family composition on parents' decision-making. This study aimed to contribute to this field of research through the inclusion of couple and single parent families. There were no same sex couples included in the study.

In Denmark, Landersø et al. (2020) investigated whether a child's school starting age had consequences for other family members. Using full population data for focal children born between 1986 and 2000, they were able to explore the influence of school starting age

on family stability. They found that parents' marital stability improved by delaying a child's school start by one year (Landersø et al., 2020). This was attributed to the possibility that the transition experience was not as stressful for parents due to the child being older at the time.

The number of children in a family also has been shown to influence parents' decision-making. The transition to school often results in changes to family routines, which may cause increased stress for family members (DeCaro & Worthman, 2011). This was shown to be particularly the case for families when the eldest child commences formal schooling (Wickett, 2019). Landersø et al. (2020) believed the transition to school from ECEC places additional pressure on parents' resources, particularly time. They found a delayed school entry for the youngest child enabled parents to spend more time assisting older siblings who were already at school with homework tasks (Landersø et al., 2020). The influence on the older sibling's school performance was therefore positive as parents were able to redirect resources towards the older child's needs.

2.5.2 Ethnic Background

The literature shows that the ethnic background of parents influences decision-making regarding starting school age. This is often due to variance in starting school entry cut-off dates and different perceptions of education across countries of origin. For example, Jha and Lewin (2014) examined delayed school entry practices in India and its impact on human capital accumulation, as defined by the number of completed school years. They found a delayed school entry is strongly linked to poverty. Parents in India may be forced to delay a child's school entry due to poor finances and undernourishment. Children in these families may also leave school early to engage in child labour to support the family (Jha & Lewin, 2014). This situation contrasts markedly with the Australian context.

In China, there is a preference for children to commence schooling as early as possible. The school entry cut-off date is September 1st. Huang et al. (2020) examined the birth certificates of more than 99 per cent of newborns (born from 2014 to 2016) in Guangdong Province of China to determine if the school entry cut-off date affected timing of births. Their findings revealed an increase in births via c-section in the last week of August, particularly amongst highly educated mothers. The increase in birth dates before the cut-off date was anecdotal evidence of the parents' preference to send their children to school at the earliest opportunity. Huang et al. (2020) explained parents in China often believed that "the early bird catches the worm" (p. 3) and therefore wanted their child to commence formal schooling as soon as possible. Altering the timing provides an economic benefit to parents by avoiding the need to pay an additional year of ECEC fees. Children who commence school at the earliest opportunity also enter the labor market one year earlier (Huang et al., 2020).

Whilst parents in China clearly valued commencing school at the earliest opportunity, the opposite was shown to be the case in Japan. Shigeoka (2015) studied birth records in Japan and believed there was a *strategic reaction* to the school cut-off date. He found in one year, more than 1800 parents postponed the delivery (via C-section) of their children. This was attributed to families in Japan valuing long-term academic gains through a delayed school entry and a preference to pay an additional year's childcare costs as an investment in early childhood human capital (Shigeoka, 2015).

There was also evidence of birth timing being influenced by school entry cut-off dates in other countries. For example, in South Korea, culture and identity are extremely important and children are referred to by their Korean age (Kim, 2021). When a child is born in South Korea, they are considered one year old. On January 1st, the child is considered another year older. In 2010, the school entry cut-off date was moved from March 1st to January 1st which

resulted in a reduction in academic redshirting practices in South Korea. This was attributed to parents in South Korea wanting their child to be the same Korean age as the other children in the class to avoid identity confusion. Kim (2021) also noted that birth records indicated more babies were born in January than December in South Korea. This may be due to parents in South Korea wanting their child to be older for the cohort. However, upon investigating birth records, there was a notable increase in home births during January and December (Kim, 2021). This indicated a potential for birth record manipulation as the witnesses to home births were not hospital staff.

2.5.3 Employment

Consideration of the parents' employment situation was important when conceptualising this study because it was shown to influence decision-making. ECEC services often have specified opening hours, with families having flexibility to choose their child's start and finish time to suit the family's needs. In contrast, schools often have specified start and finish times which families are expected to adhere to (Dockett & Perry, 2006). Landersø et al. (2020) reported maternal employment often changed because of the child's transition to school. The variance between the organisation of schools and ECEC services typically require an adjustment to routine for families. As a result, mothers often engaged in part-time employment until the child reached school age. Once the child commenced school, maternal employment in full-time work increased (Landersø et al., 2020). This has important implications for families in terms of affordability of ECEC in the years before school. Children were less likely to attend ECEC services if the mother did not work full-time (Suziedelytea & Zhu, 2015).

2.5.4 Geographical Location

Few studies have explored the prevalence of academic redshirting according to geographical location. Of these, most relied on nationally representative datasets which were based on children from the US. A large-scale state-wide study in the US in the 1990s found that academic redshirting was more prevalent in certain geographical areas (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). The study involved 8,595 children from 47 school districts in Wisconsin, USA. Overall, approximately 7 per cent of children in Wisconsin were academically redshirted. However, in one small suburb with only one Foundation class, 94 per cent of children were academically redshirted. The child who was not academically redshirted was retained the following year. Whilst this example was not common, it revealed the power of a community who changed the starting age for the Foundation year in a particular location. It also demonstrates that parents follow suit to ensure that their child is not the youngest in a cohort (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). Despite the research being dated, the findings have been included in this review because academic redshirting was examined as a social practice within a specific geographical community.

In NSW, a state of Australia, approximately 26 per cent of children were academically redshirted in the 2009 and 2012 school year cohorts (Hanly et al., 2019), revealing a quarter of all children in NSW commenced schooling a year after the child was first eligible. Academic redshirting rates were shown to vary significantly according to geographical location, with a range of 8 to 54 per cent across 198 areas of NSW (Hanly et al., 2019). Within Sydney, the capital city of NSW, children who lived in the Western Suburbs recorded the lowest rates of academic redshirting (0-15%). Children who lived in regional areas were more likely to be academically redshirted than children living in the Sydney metropolitan area (Hanly et al., 2019). Strong area level effects were reported, with children more likely to be academically redshirted in certain areas. This was attributed to either the clustering of

families with similar characteristics or the prevalence of a culture of academic redshirting in some communities (Hanly et al., 2019). Academic redshirting practices could therefore be described as a *community phenomenon* (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Greenburg & Winsler, 2020), with families who choose to delay school entry often living in specific geographical locations (Fortner & Jenkins, 2017; Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Hanly et al., 2019).

This may lead to other families to follow suit and delay school entry for their own child (Greenburg & Winsler, 2020).

2.5.5 Economic Circumstance

The decision regarding academic redshirting was often based on a family's socioeconomic status (SES). Children who are academically redshirted often come from a high SES background (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Deming & Dynarski, 2008; Dhuey, 2016; Hanly et al., 2019). Academic redshirting may not be an option for lower SES families due to financial constraints (Dhuey et al., 2019). The Australian Bureau of Statistics ([ABS], 2021) *Survey of Income and Housing* (SIH) indicated that in 2017-18, there were 2 million low-income households in Australia. Of these, 24 per cent included households with dependent children aged 0-14 (ABS, 2021).

Higher SES families are more likely to academically redshirt their children (Dhuey et al., 2019). These families are more likely to have disposable income to invest in their children, in addition to having the capacity to spend more time with them (Reardon & Portilla, 2016). As a result, children from higher SES families often started school older than children from lower SES families (Deming & Dynarski, 2008; Dhuey et al., 2019; Hanly et al., 2019; Stipek, 2002). Bassok and Reardon (2013) found schools with more high SES families had greater incidences of academic redshirting (15% or more) compared to schools with a higher proportion of lower SES families (4%). This has implications for broader

society from an equity viewpoint because children from more affluent families are likely to be older than their less affluent counterparts. Lyken-Segosebe and Hinz (2015) used the term *opportunity hoarding* to describe the strategy adopted by middle-class parents to use their economic capital to ensure desirable educational outcomes for their children to the detriment of others. In recognition of such inequities, the Australian government has introduced subsidies for lower SES families to ensure all children are able to access some form of ECEC prior to commencing formal schooling.

2.5.5.1 Government Funding. The socioeconomic status (SES) of a family often determines whether a child attends an ECEC service prior to starting school. The current average cost of childcare in Australia is approximately \$105 a day (Wood & Crowley, 2021) although the means-tested *Child Care Subsidy* provides a reduction in fees to eligible families. Despite this, the cost of ECEC may not be affordable to some lower SES families (Edwards et al., 2009). Australian research conducted by Lamb et al. (2020) found large variances across all developmental domains, including literacy and numeracy between children from higher SES families and children from lower SES families. For example, 67 per cent of children from lower SES families are developmentally on track across all developmental domains in comparison to 85.3 per cent of children from higher SES families (Lamb et al., 2020). Furthermore, only 74.3 per cent of children from lower SES families are developmentally on track in literacy and numeracy in comparison to 90.9 per cent of children from higher SES families (Lamb et al., 2020).

Prior to 2021, \$452.3 million was provided through the *Universal Access National Partnership* (UANP) which aimed to provide every child in Australia with access to 600 hours (equivalent to 15 hours a week) in a quality preschool program in the year before school (Australian Government Department of Education, Skills, and Employment

[AGDESE], 2022). This partnership resulted in a significant increase in the number of children enrolled in 15 hours of preschool each week, rising from 12 per cent in 2008 to 96 per cent in 2019 (ACARA, 2022). According to the AIHW (2022), 288 390 children in Australia are enrolled in a preschool program in the year before formal school in 2020. Most of these children (278 567) are enrolled for more than the recommended 15 hours per week (AIHW, 2022).

From 2022 to 2025, the Commonwealth and the States and Territories committed 2 billion dollars in funding to the *Preschool Reform Funding Agreement*. This agreement aims to continue to strengthen the delivery of preschool programs and ensure children are better prepared to commence formal schooling (ACARA, 2022) through the provision of a range of activities and experiences that help to prepare children socially and academically (Dockett & Perry, 2013).

It was mentioned previously that the quality of ECEC services in Australia varies. A rating system which assesses ECEC services across seven quality areas of the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) was introduced to help families make an informed decision when choosing a service (ACECQA, 2021). However, Stratigos and Fenech (2018) reported families often have limited or no understanding of the NQS. This was despite ECEC services being required to display their rating at the service and on their website (Hinton et al., 2017). Higher SES families are often able to afford quality ECEC services, offering their child a more stimulating academically redshirted year. Children from lower SES families often cannot afford to do this; they often utilise lower-quality ECEC services before sending their child to school as soon as possible (Edwards et al., 2009). This is despite lower SES families often showing the greatest concern for a child's readiness to commence school.

Participation in quality ECEC is shown to be important because children who attended higher quality ECEC services experienced better outcomes at school entry, including increased independence and less anti-social behaviour (Melhuish et al., 2010). Children who attend higher quality ECEC services are also able to increase their human capital accumulation, which may result in improved academic performance and socio-behavioural outcomes at school (Gottfried et al., 2016). This will be explored in the next sub section.

2.5.5.2 Human Capital Accumulation. Elder and Lubotsky (2009) defined human capital accumulation as the acquirement of additional skills through the provision of parental investment in learning prior to school entry and through schooling. The quality of the experiences provided in the home learning environment or ECEC service prior to starting school is very important. Elder and Lubotsky (2009) believed access to quality experiences was more likely to influence achievement, as opposed to being older for a cohort (Elder & Lubotsky, 2009). Higher SES families often can afford to provide their child access to a quality home learning environment or higher quality ECEC before school starts (Tayler et al., 2016). This is important because the additional year in early childhood only yields benefit from high-quality ECEC services (Sylva et al., 2011).

The quality of the home learning environment experienced by a child prior to commencing formal schooling varies. Sylva et al. (2011) measured the quality of home-based learning experiences by investigating the type and frequency of experiences offered. Types of experiences included: reading, drawing, painting, learning (alphabet, numbers, shapes, songs, nursery rhymes) and library visits. Differences in home-based learning opportunities often varied according to socioeconomic status (Early Start Research Institute, 2018; Fortner & Jenkins, 2017; Tayler et al., 2016). Fortner and Jenkins (2017) proposed that developmental gains achieved during the academically redshirted year were not a direct benefit from

delaying school entry, but rather were linked to socioeconomic status, with children from higher SES backgrounds being advantaged. This was attributed to families with a higher SES being able to provide higher quality home learning environments for their children (Tayler et al., 2016). For example, children from affluent families generally experienced higher quality educational experiences (such as trips to parks and museums) and greater access to resources (such as books, and educational toys) in comparison to children from lower SES families.

This may explain why children from lower SES backgrounds typically start ECEC with lower scores for socio-emotional and cognitive development (Early Start Research Institute, 2018). Commencing formal schooling at the earliest opportunity was shown to be beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly in closing the gap in cognitive skills (Stipek 2002; Suziedelytea & Zhu, 2015). However, regardless of the level of advantage, children who started school at the earliest opportunity performed worse in noncognitive skills. This was attributed to younger children finding the transition to school more challenging in comparison to their older peers (Suziedelytea & Zhu, 2015). This is an important finding in the context of this study of academic redshirting.

There is disparity in the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) offered in Australia, with 13 per cent of services in 2022 being assessed as below minimum standards of quality (ACECQA, 2022c). The previously mentioned *National Quality Framework* (NQF) was developed to reduce the disparity between different ECEC services. Attendance at higher quality ECEC services enables children to increase their human capital accumulation prior to commencing formal schooling (Gottfried et al., 2016). Melhuish et al. (2010) found children who attended higher quality ECEC services in the United Kingdom (UK) experienced increased outcomes at school entry, including increased independence and less anti-social behaviour. However, children who had attended low quality ECEC services achieved

cognitive and behavioural scores which were comparable to scores achieved by children who had not attended an ECEC service (Sylva et al., 2011).

Whilst it has been shown that attendance at ECEC services presents an opportunity to reduce inequalities, the quality of services offered varies. Early et al. (2010) were interested in investigating how children spent their time each day and whether there were differences based on ethnic backgrounds, gender, and family income. Their research observed 2061 children from 652 early childhood services across the United States. Data was obtained from two large studies: National Center for Early Development and Learning's (NCELD) *Multi State Study of Pre-Kindergarten, 2001-2003* and *State-Wide Early Education Programs (SWEEP), 2003-2004*. Whilst their findings suggested the time allocated to activities such as free choice, teacher assigned and meal routines was relatively equal across services, the quality of experiences provided differed significantly. For example, they found that classes with less Latino and African American children and more children from higher SES backgrounds were provided with richer, more stimulating experiences. They concluded that such discrepancies in quality of ECEC services widened achievement gaps.

It has been reported that there is a link between academic achievement and entrance age, with children from high SES backgrounds attaining the highest scores (Elder & Lubotsky, 2009). This was attributed to human capital accumulation gained through attending high quality ECEC services prior to entering school (Edwards et al., 2009). Younger children were more likely to be retained or referred to special education services (Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Dhuey & Lipscomb, 2010; Mendez et al., 2014). Early school failure may lead to lowered self-esteem in children, which may negatively impact on attitudes towards school in later years (Norbury et al., 2016). Promoting universal access to ECEC services in the year

before school is therefore important for all children (Dockett & Perry, 2013) to help reduce later differences in academic success (Early et al., 2010).

This section has investigated family and economic circumstances which influence parents' decision-making regarding academic redshirting. The transition to school often results in changes to family routines, which may cause increased stress for family members (DeCaro & Worthman, 2011). Family composition, including the number of children was shown to influence parents' decision-making. The ethnic background of the family was shown to influence parents' values and beliefs concerning education, with diverse views regarding when children should commence formal schooling. Parents' employment situation was another important consideration in the decision-making due to the need to manage school hours, school holidays and work commitments. The family's geographical location was also shown to influence parents' decision-making, with a higher incidence of academic redshirting practices in specific locations. Finally, the family's economic circumstance often determines whether parents can afford an additional year of ECEC fees or the resources to provide their child with a stimulating additional year at home. The next section will explore the existing literature to investigate characteristics of the individual child which may influence parents' decision-making concerning academic redshirting.

2.6 Characteristics of the Individual Child

A review of the literature revealed children who are typically academically redshirted often share common characteristics. The following sub sections will explore each of the following characteristics: birth month, developmental concern, gender, physical size, maturity, and ethnicity. The child's age in comparison to their peers will also be explored in terms of the relative age effect and its influence on parents' decision-making. The concept of

school readiness will be explored from the perspectives of various stakeholders including parents, ECEC teachers, and school teachers.

2.6.1 Birth Month

A child's birth month was shown to be an important consideration for many parents. Research conducted in the USA and Australia revealed children who were born in the three to four months prior to the school entry cut-off date were more likely to be academically redshirted (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Edwards et al., 2011; Hanly et al., 2019; Huang, 2015). According to the national parenting forum in Mergler and Walker's (2017) research involving Australian parents, a child's birth month being close to the cut-off date was the main reason influencing parental decision-making. Parents in the forum whose child's birth date was close to the cut-off date reported elevated levels of anxiety and frequently questioned whether their child was *ready* to commence formal schooling (Merger & Walker, 2017). These findings suggested that parents were more concerned their child would be the youngest in the cohort rather than being concerned about a specific issue.

Similarly, Dougan (2015) found parents did not consider the characteristics of their own child when making their decision. It was simply a choice made because they did not want their child to be young in a cohort. However, Graue et al. (2002) argued that simply being young is not an indicator that a child would struggle in the first year of school. Nevertheless, if the child is young and male or physically small for size, the risk of struggling increased (Graue et al., 2002). Parents' concerns were validated by research undertaken by Hanly et al. (2019) which revealed older children had better developmental outcomes than younger children during the Foundation year.

2.6.2 *Developmental Concern*

Another important consideration influencing parents' decision-making is if there was a developmental concern regarding the child. Academic redshirting is more prevalent for children of parents who may have suspected the child had developmental problems (Fortner & Jenkins, 2017; Gottfried et al., 2016; Hanly et al., 2019; Jaekel et al., 2015). Mergler and Walker (2017) found this was the second most common reason which influenced parents' decision-making according to a national parenting forum. Parents in the forum expressed concerns about perceived or actual developmental delays or learning difficulties experienced by their child (Mergler & Walker, 2017). These concerns were validated by the literature, which indicated children with a developmental delay or disability may be at an increased risk of struggling to cope with schooling demands (Datar, 2006; Stipek, 2002). Therefore, parents who suspected their child had a developmental issue were more likely to favour academic redshirting (Gottfried et al., 2016; Hanly et al., 2019; Jaekel et al., 2015).

Academic redshirting may be the preferred strategy because there was often less stigma associated with the practice because it occurred prior to school, as opposed to other methods such as *retention* or social promotion (promoting students into next grade despite poor achievement) once the child has commenced school (Dougan & Pijanowski, 2011; Fortner & Jenkins, 2018; Lincove & Painter 2006; Stipek, 2002). A delayed school entry may also be the preferred option for parents wanting their child to attend a mainstream school (Sands et al., 2021).

Whilst the literature showed parents who had a development concern for their child clearly favoured academic redshirting (Gottfried et al., 2016; Hanly et al., 2019; Jaekel et al., 2015), the advice to parents was for the child to commence formal schooling as soon as possible (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). It would be advantageous for the child, in terms of

identifying their needs and commencing support earlier (Fortner & Jenkins, 2017). It was proposed academic redshirting could be considered “a *theft of opportunity* [emphasis added] for early intervention and support for children with a developmental concern” (Graue & DiPerna, 2000, p. 529).

2.6.3 Gender

The gender of a child was another important consideration influencing parents’ decision-making. In particular, the literature revealed boys were more likely to be academically redshirted (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Edwards et al., 2011; Hanly et al., 2019; Kim, 2021; Mergler & Walker, 2017), with some studies suggesting at twice the rate in comparison to girls (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Dee & Sievertsen, 2018; Edwards et al., 2011). This may be attributed to the socialisation of children according to their gender in the early years.

Traditionally, children were often socialised from birth according to their gender. As they grew, children learnt about what it meant to be a ‘boy’ or a ‘girl’ according to society’s expectations at that time. Whitehead (2006) proposed that young children developed their gender identity prior to starting school. This was problematic because parents often placed different expectations on children according to gender. For example, boys were often encouraged to be more physical and to play sport, whereas girls tended to be encouraged to be involved in intellectual or social activities. This resulted in girls often being better prepared for the expectations required in the Foundation year. Whitehead’s (2006) study found that differences because of gender were observable during the Foundation year and beyond, with girls clearly outperforming boys. Boys who commenced school at the earliest opportunity were more likely to repeat the Foundation year in comparison to girls (Mergler & Walker, 2017).

Another reason to explain why boys were more likely to be academically redshirted than girls was in relation to gender bias in referrals for special needs services. Russell et al. (2011) used data from the *Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children* (ALSPAC), which focuses on the health of 14,000 children in England. They found evidence of gender bias regarding diagnosing boys with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Their findings were like other studies (see Vardill & Calvert, 2000) which have shown gender bias in areas such as referral for special needs and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), of which boys were overrepresented. A Danish study by Dee and Sievertsen (2018) found that delaying school entry by one year significantly reduced inattention and hyperactivity in a child at age seven. This was attributed to allowing extended play which increased opportunities for the development of self-regulation skills prior to the commencement of formal schooling.

2.6.4 Physical Size

The physical size of the child was another important consideration for parents. Bassok and Reardon (2013) found that the decision to academically redshirt was usually based on a child's physical size or relative age concerns, rather than the child's social or cognitive development. Being young for a cohort was not necessarily an indicator that a child would struggle in the Foundation year. However, if the child was young and male or physically small for size, the risk of struggling increased (Graue et al., 2002). The literature also revealed children who were born prematurely or with a low birth weight are more likely to be academically redshirted (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Dougan, 2015; Hanly et al., 2019; Jaekel et al., 2015).

2.6.5 Maturity

A child's maturity was an important consideration for parents. A longitudinal study by Stipek and Byler (2001) revealed parents were often more concerned about their child's

emotional development, rather than cognitive development. Children who had emotional problems or who were less able to persist at tasks were more likely to be academically redshirted (Edwards et al., 2011).

Parents in Mergler and Walker's (2017) study indicated a desire to delay entry for their child so that they would commence the Foundation year with more maturity, in addition to being one of the eldest in the cohort. The child would benefit in terms of *relative* maturity, simply because being older than their peers has developmental advantages (Dee & Sievertsen, 2018). Graue and DiPerna (2000) believed academic redshirting provided a child with the "gift of time" (p. 527). A delayed school entry would allow the child more time to develop and mature. This may be advantageous for the child during adolescence, when dealing with issues such peer pressure and risk-taking (Mergler & Walker, 2017). Dee and Sievertsen (2018) proposed children who were academically redshirted also benefited from *absolute* maturity, hypothesising that formal schooling today is more developmentally appropriate for older children.

2.6.6 Ethnicity

A child's ethnic background was shown to influence parental decision-making. Children who are academically redshirted are typically Caucasian (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Deming & Dynarski, 2008; Dhuey, 2016; Edwards et al., 2011; Hanly et al., 2019). A review of the literature revealed that in some countries, parents preferred for their children to commence formal schooling as early as possible. Bassok and Reardon (2013) found almost 6 per cent of 'White' children are academically redshirted, in comparison to 2 per cent of 'Hispanic' children, 2.7 per cent of 'Asian' children and less than 1per cent of 'Black' children. Their results also indicated that 'Asian' or 'Black' children are in fact more likely to be *academically greenshirted*, a term used to describe children who commence school earlier

than they were legally eligible, in comparison to ‘White’ or ‘Hispanic’ children (Bassok & Reardon, 2013). The practice of academic greenshirting was supported by literature which suggested children with English as a Second Language (ESL) benefitted from commencing school early to improve their English proficiency (Hanly et al., 2019).

2.6.7 Relative Age Effect

The age of a child in comparison to their peers is another important consideration in parents’ decision-making. Parents are often worried about their child’s relative age when compared to their peers (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Graue & DiPerna, 2000). This may be attributed to research revealing academic redshirting often provided a child with a competitive edge over younger peers (Martin, 2009). Relative age effects can have both advantages and disadvantages for all children (Black et al., 2011).

2.6.7.1 Advantages. Academic redshirting can provide a relative age advantage for some children. Hanly et al. (2019) indicated children who were older in the Foundation year in NSW were more likely to have better developmental outcomes. Older children often benefitted from having a higher *absolute* age, which may result in the child being bigger and more capable across a number of tasks than their peers (Page et al., 2019). This often resulted in increased self-confidence which was beneficial to the learning process. Children who are academically redshirted are also more likely to outperform their younger peers in both the academic and sporting arena (Deming & Dynarski, 2008). Therefore, parents may choose to delay school entry in the belief that their child will have the advantage of being older in a cohort (Fortner & Jenkins, 2017; Frey, 2005).

NAPLAN includes a series of tests which are administered each year to Australian students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 (ACARA, 2016). The results provide important feedback to

schools and parents regarding whether a child is meeting the educational outcomes expected for their age. Whitely et al. (2020) reported a clear trend for older children to outperform their younger peers across all year groups. Mavilidi et al. (2022) conveyed a similar finding from their longitudinal study evaluating relative age effects for Australian students during the first 10 years of formal schooling. They did, however, suggest that the relative age effect became progressively weaker over time. Using data from the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children*, they found children who are young for a cohort scored lower in NAPLAN tests in all years (3, 5, 7, and 9), however the relative age effect did progressively decline over time (Mavilidi et al., 2022).

Whilst it appears there were short-term benefits to academic redshirting, the literature revealed these benefits often disappeared over time (Datar, 2006; Gottfried et al., 2016; Huang & Invernizzi, 2012). Datar (2006) tested children both at the beginning of the Foundation year and at the end of the first two years at school. She found that older children performed significantly better than their younger peers in Math and reading tests. Children who were academically redshirted achieved a steep learning curve in the first two years of school, however, Datar (2006) reasoned that the initial benefits often diminished over time due to children being exposed to common instruction and experiences at school. Gottfried et al. (2016) also investigated the effects of school entry age on children's cognitive, social, and behavioural outcomes. Their main findings indicated that children who delayed commencing Foundation by a year exhibited better social-behavioural outcomes during the primary years. However, they also concluded that these benefits were only short term because younger children learned at a faster trajectory, and eventually caught up to their older peers (Gottfried et al., 2016). Younger children potentially benefited from learning from their older, possibly more capable peers.

Some literature suggested relative age differences may be long-lasting (Bedard & Dhuey, 2006; Page et al., 2019). It was argued relative age effects can be created during the primary years when ability-based groupings are utilised (Bedard & Dhuey, 2006). Furthermore, older children may have a maturity advantage and be better positioned to accumulate additional skills if they are selected for more advanced ability groups, such as Opportunity Classes (Bedard & Dhuey, 2006; Page et al., 2019).

Relative age effects were found to continue beyond school and into adulthood. Using data from Canada and the US, Bedard and Dhuey (2006) found individuals who were older for the cohort were more likely to attend university. Australian research conducted by Page et al. (2019) used an online survey of 1007 adults who were born within two months of the school cut-off entry date. Their findings revealed individuals who were older for a cohort displayed higher levels of self confidence in adulthood which may impact life decisions (Page et al., 2019).

2.6.7.2 Disadvantages. Academic redshirting can also provide a relative age disadvantage for children who start school at the earliest opportunity (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Deming & Dynarski, 2008). The social and academic achievement of younger children may be impacted when there are children who are more than 12 months older in the cohort (Oshima & Domaleski, 2006). Elder and Lubotsky (2009) reported a clear link between achievement on test scores and entrance age; children who were older and from higher SES backgrounds had the highest scores. This was attributed to these children accessing higher quality ECEC services prior to starting school (Edwards et al., 2009).

Younger children were also more likely to be retained or referred to special education services (Dhuey & Lipscomb, 2010; Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Mendez et al., 2014). In a study conducted in England, children who were the youngest in their class in the Foundation year,

were more likely to display behavioural problems and experience poor academic achievement (Norbury et al., 2016). Early school failure may lead to lowered self-esteem in children, which may negatively impact on attitudes towards school in the later years (Norbury et al., 2016). Marsh (2016) reported negative relative age effects in most countries who participated in the OECD's 2003 *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)*. They found children's academic self-concept, or belief in their own ability, was lower for younger children in comparison to their relatively older peers.

The composition of children in the classroom during the Foundation year has changed. Academic redshirting has resulted in greater numbers of 6-year-olds in the Foundation year, with increased skills and knowledge from being a year older (Bassok et al., 2016b). This has resulted in increased expectations for all children during the Foundation year (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Deming & Dynarski, 2008; Hanly et al., 2019). Given the difference in percentage of life lived, a year's difference in age may have a substantial impact on a child's learning (Oshima & Domaleski, 2006). It was mentioned previously, the social and academic achievement of younger children may be impacted when there are children who are more than 12 months older in the class (Oshima & Domaleski, 2006). Children who were relatively young for a cohort were also more likely to be diagnosed with and medicated for ADHD (Schnorrbusch et al., 2020; Whitely et al., 2019). This may be due to teachers mistaking immaturity, due to the child being young for a cohort, for ADHD symptoms (Whitely et al., 2019).

2.6.8 School Readiness

There are varying perspectives related to the conceptualisation of *school readiness* (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2007). School readiness is frequently

associated with a child's chronological age, which is often used by parents and schools to determine when a child should enrol to commence formal schooling (Saracho, 2023).

However, there are many definitions of school readiness and various methods for assessing it (Dockett & Perry, 2002). Most definitions use the term readiness "to describe characteristics of individual children or populations" who enter an education system for the first experience of formal learning (Dockett & Perry, 2013, p. 169). The focus was on the *child* and whether they were ready, rather than the readiness of schools, families, or communities for children. In Australia, school readiness is not officially tested prior to school entry (Niklas et al., 2018).

More recent conceptualisations of school readiness consider readiness as a two-way street (Morrison & Hindman, 2008). Whilst it is important for children to be ready to commence formal schooling, *schools* should also be ready for each individual child (Dockett & Perry, 2002). Lamb et al. (2020) indicated that in 2018, approximately one in five children in Australia are developmentally vulnerable in at least one developmental area prior to commencing formal schooling. These children are more likely to be boys, with 27.9 per cent of boys being vulnerable in at least one area compared to 15.3 per cent of girls (Lamb et al., 2020). The notion of 'schools being ready' will be explored later in this chapter.

The transition to school is important and should be a positive experience because school readiness can influence future outcomes (Edwards et al., 2009). A negative experience is associated with an increased likelihood of children dropping out or being retained (Edwards et al., 2009). The differing perspectives of school readiness for various stakeholders including parents, ECEC and schools will now be explored.

2.6.8.1 Parents' Perspectives. Parents' perspectives on school readiness can be defined by the skills and behaviours that parents consider as important prior to their child

commencing formal schooling (Jung, 2016). Niklas et al. (2018) believed Australian parents do not have a clear understanding of what being ‘school ready’ entails or how to assess it. However, parents who have more than one child may feel they are in a better position to assess a child’s readiness for school (Edwards et al., 2011).

The literature showed parents are often more concerned about their child’s emotional development, as opposed to cognitive (Stipek & Byler, 2001). Donath et al. (2010) surveyed 63 parents who had academically redshirted their children. They found parents often considered a child’s emotional needs such as improving self-confidence as the major influence on their decision-making. Similarly, Edwards et al. (2011) also reported children who had emotional problems or who were less able to persist at tasks are more likely to be academically redshirted in Australia. This may be due to the parents worrying their child will experience difficulty adjusting to an unfamiliar environment (Edwards et al., 2011; Gottfried et al., 2016).

However, more recent research suggests a rise in parental concern regarding academic readiness for school. For example, Australian researchers Kaplun et al. (2017) reported 35 of the 55 mothers interviewed about their child’s transition to school considered their child’s academic skills, including letter and number recognition, and a desire by the child to want to learn to read, write or count, as the main indicator of school readiness. Bassok et al. (2016b) compared the experiences of Foundation children in 1998 and 2010 in the US. They believed parents of the 2010 cohort of children were more aware of the importance of academic skills, including letter and number recognition prior to starting school than parents of children in the 1998 cohort (Bassok et al., 2016b). It is apparent that parents have become increasingly aware of the academic demands being placed upon children during the early years of schooling and want to prepare them sufficiently (Brown & Lan, 2018).

The literature showed parents often associated attendance at ECEC with a smooth transition to school (Hatcher et al., 2012; Niklas et al., 2018) and this was referred to as the ‘preschool advantage’ (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2007). Attendance in ECEC programs contributed to increased school readiness, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Niklas et al., 2018). Access to appropriate social and cognitive experiences through quality ECEC programs enabled the development of increased independence and a positive attitude towards learning, in addition to facilitating a positive school transition and supporting future academic success for those who attended (Elliott, 2006).

2.6.8.2 ECEC Perspectives. The literature revealed ECEC teachers often considered the development of a child’s social and emotional skills as the priority for school readiness (Dockett & Perry 2002). Niklas et al. (2018) raised a concern that ECEC teachers do not have a clear understanding of what school readiness means, resulting in preparation for and assessment of it difficult. Their research, which was conducted in six countries including Australia, showed ECEC teachers considered self-confidence, resilience, independence, and social competence as the most important school readiness characteristics for a positive transition to school (Niklas et al., 2018). Therefore, ECEC teachers are inclined to focus on providing experiences which develop these skills. However, important skills required for learning such as attention and thinking, in addition to literacy and numeracy skills may be neglected. It is therefore important for ECEC programs to incorporate experiences which enable the development of independence, creativity, and problem-solving skills (Niklas et al., 2018).

The *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) endorses the creation of effective partnerships between ECEC teachers and families in Australia (Dockett & Perry, 2014). To

achieve effective partnerships, families and ECEC teachers need to work together with shared responsibility towards achieving the common goal of preparing a child for formal schooling. The literature showed communication between parents and ECEC teachers occurred frequently but informally at drop off and pick up time (Duncan et al., 2012). Parents who engaged in educational activities at home reported higher levels of engagement and communication with ECEC teachers (Murray et al., 2015).

2.6.8.3 Schools' Perspectives. It was mentioned previously that schools are increasingly expecting children to arrive at school ready to engage in formal learning as opposed to acquiring readiness during the Foundation year (Donath et al., 2010; Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Petriwskyj & Grieshaber, 2011). Further there is scant literature that demonstrates schools are prepared and willing to accept a diverse range of children. This may be attributed to an increased emphasis on the development of academic skills and knowledge (Brown & Lan, 2015) during the Foundation year that will be required for national testing in future years (Minicozzi, 2016).

The implementation of national testing and comparisons between schools have placed growing pressure on principals to improve results (Bassok et al., 2016b; Deming & Dynarski, 2008). There may be a preference for children to commence school older in the hope they will perform more strongly due to increased age and maturity. Donath et al. (2010) surveyed 24 Foundation teachers to determine acceptable reasons for academic redshirting children. Their results showed teachers often supported the use of academic redshirting for academic or maturational reasons. Interestingly, teachers did not consider self-confidence to be a sufficient reason to academically redshirt a child (Donath et al., 2010) whereas parents and ECEC teachers both prioritised this as an important indicator of school readiness.

2.6.8.4 Child Development Theories. There are theoretical arguments which support academic redshirting and those which support sending children to school at the earliest opportunity (Gottfried et al., 2016). The *maturational* viewpoint, based on the ideas of Gesell (1940) reasoned some children needed the *gift of time* to allow more time to mature, which could contribute to greater success at school. Piaget's (1970) *Stage Theory* also recognised the importance of biological maturation. He believed that certain development foundations were necessary before learning could occur. Therefore, academic redshirting enables a child to have more time to grow and develop prior to commencing formal learning. The maturational view, however, contradicts current frameworks of development because *sociocultural* theory proposes that learning precedes development (Graue & DiPerna, 2000) and that teaching is responsive to diversity.

Contemporary views of early childhood acknowledge the impact of sociocultural factors on a child's development. Constructivist Vygotsky (1978) believed that there was a fundamental relationship between learning and development. He hypothesised that children learnt best through social processes such as everyday experiences, as opposed to explicit instruction, pointing out that learning begins at an early age. This means that there is a previous history to any learning which is undertaken at school. Learning in early childhood, therefore, needs to target areas beyond the current developmental level of a child (Vygotsky, 1978). This was referred to as his *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)* theory (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory was based on the premise that learning occurs through interaction with others who are more cognitively advanced (Massey & Brenneman, 2008).

This section has shown children who are academically redshirted often share common characteristics. The literature indicated the two most influential characteristics for Australian parents are the child's birth month and any developmental concern. Children who are born in

the three to four months prior to the school entry cut-off date are more likely to be academically redshirted (Edwards et al., 2011; Hanly et al., 2019; Mergler & Walker, 2017). Parents may also choose to academically redshirt their child if they are concerned about a perceived or actual developmental delay (Mergler & Walker, 2017). Other characteristics which were also found to influence parents' decision-making included gender, physical size, maturity, and ethnicity.

A child's relative age in comparison to their peers was shown to be an important consideration for parents in their decision-making. The literature revealed academic redshirting often advantaged older children, whilst younger children may be more vulnerable to retention or referral to special education services (Dhuey & Lipscomb, 2010; Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Mendez et al., 2014). The perspectives of school readiness for various stakeholders including parents, ECEC teachers, and school teachers was shown to differ, which can cause increased confusion for parents during the decision-making process. The next section will investigate influences on the decision-making for these stakeholders.

2.7 Stake-Holder Decision-Making

A review of the literature revealed varying perspectives regarding when children should commence formal schooling. This may be due to the different conceptualisations of school readiness which were discussed previously. The sections that follow will explore the influences on decision-making for various stakeholders including parents, ECEC teachers, schools, and governments.

2.7.1 Parents

A review of the literature revealed there were a variety of influences on parents' decision-making regarding academic redshirting. The following sub sections will explore

each of the following influences: parent characteristics, mass media, social media, and the parents' own schooling experience.

2.7.1.1 Parent Characteristics. Parents who typically academically redshirt their child often share common characteristics. These parents are more likely to be highly educated (Deming & Dynarski, 2008; Graue & DiPerna, 2000), from a high SES background (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Deming & Dynarski, 2008; Frey, 2005) and typically the mother speaks English as her first language (Edwards et al., 2011). In contrast, parents from lower SES backgrounds often favour sending their child to school at the earliest opportunity (Hanly et al., 2019). Children who typically commence school at the earliest opportunity tend to have a mother born in Asia, the Middle East, or North Africa, and speaks English as her second language (Edwards et al., 2011). Migrant parents often teach their child their 'mother tongue' in the anticipation the child's English will develop once they have commenced school (Binasis et al., 2022).

2.7.1.2 Mass Media. Mass media has the potential to influence parental decision making regarding academic redshirting. Huang (2015) blamed the media in the United States for overestimating the incidence of academic redshirting, resulting in unnecessary alarm for parents. He also believed the media representation of academic redshirting was biased due to focusing on specific schools where academic redshirting was more common. This inaccurate portrayal that academic redshirting is the norm may cause some parents to believe the phenomenon of academic redshirting was more common than it was, compelling parents to follow suit, thus exacerbating the issue (Bassok & Reardon, 2013). Black et al. (2011) suggested the media was highly influential in increasing academic redshirting rates by promoting the benefits of delaying school entry.

2.7.1.3 Social Media. The rise of social media platforms has enabled parents to connect with other parents via online parenting groups. Australian parents often utilised social media sources for information and advice; with *Facebook*, blogs and parenting websites being the most popular sources (Haslam et al., 2017). McDaniel et al. (2012) explored how social media and blogging influenced the maternal wellbeing of new mothers. Their research revealed new mothers spent approximately three hours per day on the internet. Chalken and Anderson (2017) reported similar findings, with one in five mothers in their Australian study indicating they spent more than two hours a day on *Facebook*. Time spent online enabled social connections as new mothers navigated important decisions as new parents.

Utilising social media sources also enabled increased social connections, with mothers able to share successful parenting experiences with others (McDaniel et al., 2012). In Mergler and Walker's (2017) study which involved an online parent forum in Australia, many parents revealed feelings of being overwhelmed, anxious and stressed over the decision regarding when their child should commence formal schooling. Parents who had made the decision previously were able to share their experiences, which were often emotionally difficult. Parents who were making the decision for the first time reported feeling confused and anxious as they struggled to make the *right* choice for their child (Mergler & Walker, 2017).

Facebook was an appealing online social media platform for connecting with other parents due to its ability to reach a wider parenting population. Chalken and Anderson (2017) examined Australian mothers' behaviours in relation to the use of *Facebook*. They found mothers valued the instant access provided in the online environment in terms of access to information. However, many experienced judgmental behaviours from other mothers. In

response, mothers often changed their online behaviour to become less open about sharing their views in public forums. Other protective strategies were also adopted, such as changing their profile name or picture, or accessing private groups (Chalken & Anderson, 2017).

2.7.1.4 Parents' Own Schooling Experience. Parents often took their own personal or family experience of starting school into consideration when making choices for their own children (Graue et al., 2002). However, this may be problematic due to changes in ECEC in Australia and changes to the type of learning undertaken in the Foundation year. Mergler and Walker (2017) revealed many parents relied heavily on their own schooling experience when deliberating school entry options for their children. For example, parents chose to academically redshirt their child if the parent's own experience of being one of the younger children in a cohort had been a negative experience. In contrast, parents who had themselves experienced a positive by starting school older, favoured a delayed school entry for their child (Mergler & Walker, 2017). Whilst some parents may be eager for their child to have a similar school experience to their own, other parents may want for their child to have a different experience (James & Beedell, 2009).

2.7.2 ECEC Teachers

A review of the literature revealed limited research into the perspectives of ECEC teachers regarding when children should commence formal schooling. Research undertaken by Wickett (2017) reported an increased emphasis on ECEC services to prepare children to commence formal schooling. There is an expectation that ECEC services will provide a foundation for reading, writing and computation (Hatcher et al., 2012). There is also an expectation from parents that attendance at an ECEC service will ensure their child is 'school ready' (Hatcher et al., 2012; Wickett, 2017). These expectations have placed increasing

pressure on ECEC teachers to ensure children are ready for subsequent education (Watkins, 2013).

The primary focus of ECEC education has changed from play-based models to an academic focus (Hatcher et al., 2012). The preschool teachers who participated in Watkin's (2013) research indicated a belief that their role as an ECEC teacher had been redefined by parents over the last 10 years. Rather than viewing preschool as an opportunity for a child's socialisation, parents now demand more intense academic preparation for the first year of school (Watkins, 2013). It is considered the responsibility of the ECEC teacher to ensure children have the knowledge, skills, and behaviours necessary for school learning (Wickett, 2017).

ECEC teachers are required to consider the different factors influencing school readiness and to meet with parents to provide a recommendation regarding school entry for each child (Watkins, 2013). ECEC teachers consider varying philosophies of child development when advising parents on academic redshirting of school entry (Watkins, 2013). For ECEC teachers who recommend a delayed entry, the rationale is often based on the child's social and emotional skills. The ECEC teacher may encourage the parents to give their child an additional year to mature. The benefits of a positive start to schooling are emphasised due to the impact it can have on a child's entire schooling (Watkins, 2013).

The ECEC teachers reported difficulty convincing parents of the need to delay their child's school entry (Watkins, 2013). Many ECEC teachers reported that parents were offended that their child may not be ready (Watkins, 2013). To convince parents of the need to delay school entry, a strategy adopted by one preschool was to invite parents to observe their child at the centre (Watkins, 2013). This opportunity allowed parents to see firsthand their child's interactions and behaviours in the preschool setting. The ECEC teachers reported

that once parents observed their child's immaturity in comparison to their peers, many agreed that there was a need to delay school entry (Watkins, 2013).

2.7.3 Schools

The literature revealed several potential influences on the stance of schools regarding academic redshirting. Increased testing and greater accountability have placed growing pressure on schools to improve learning outcomes (Bassok et al., 2016b; Deming & Dynarski, 2008). As a result, schools may encourage parents of younger children, especially if they are male, to delay school entry due to fear of poor achievement by younger children. This may cause parents to become worried about their child's ability to cope in the schooling environment (Deming & Dynarski, 2008). Dhuey et al. (2019) reported some schools retained younger children from lower SES families in early grades prior to testing years to improve school results.

School culture may also influence academic redshirting rates. A school may develop a reputation for being known to academically redshirt children (Huang, 2015) with the practice gaining momentum over time because of *folk wisdom* (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). Dougan (2015) suggested parents may then feel pressured to follow suit in a school where there is a culture for academic redshirting. Some of the parents interviewed by Dougan (2015) feared judgment from other parents when deciding.

In Australia, Dockett and Perry (2006) observed non-government schools to potentially influence starting school age because they stipulated their own age cut-off dates (e.g., March 31). Younger children, with birthdays from April onwards, are often forced to delay school entry or face being retained prior to entering some non-government schools. This is despite the current July 31st cut-off date for school entry in NSW, Australia.

The literature revealed there were particular characteristics of children which influenced whether Foundation teachers recommended academic redshirting of school entry. In the US, Donath et al. (2010) found teachers were more likely to advise parents to delay school entry if the child was not emotionally ready, immature for their age, or if a delayed start was recommended by the child's ECEC teacher. On the other hand, reasons for not academic redshirting included if the child was academically on par with their peers or if the child had low self-confidence. Teachers did not view the latter two reasons as hindering a child's readiness to learn during the Foundation year (Donath et al., 2010).

2.7.4 Government

Government funding allocated to children in ECEC and schools differs. According to Rice et al. (2019) \$111.8 billion was invested in education in Australia in 2015, with the bulk of the funding coming from various levels of government. Expenditure per student varied, as shown in Table 2.1. Comparing the figures for funding per student, it would appear to be more economical for the government for children to stay in ECEC (including preschool services) for a longer period.

Table 2.1*Allocation of Funding Per Student*

Student Type	Government	Private Sources	Total Per Student
ECEC	\$6,475	\$4,002	\$10,477
Preschool	\$7,150	\$3,288	\$10,438
Primary school	\$12,311	\$1,924	\$14,234
High School	\$13,841	\$5,212	\$19,052

Note. Adapted from *Education expenditure in Australia. Policy analysis and program evaluation*, by Rice, J., Edwards, D., & McMillan, J. (2019).

(https://research.acer.edu.au/policy_analysis_misc/29) Copyright 2019 by Australian Council for Educational Research.

This section has explored the influences on decision-making for various stakeholders including parents, ECEC, schools, and the government. It has been shown that parents who typically academically redshirt their children often share common characteristics, including being highly educated (Deming & Dynarski, 2008; Graue & DiPerna, 2000) and from a high SES background (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Deming & Dynarski, 2008; Frey, 2005). It was also shown that mass media has the potential to increase academic redshirting rates due to the inaccurate portrayal that academic redshirting is the norm (Bassok & Reardon, 2013). Social media was also found to influence parents' decision-making with Australian parents accessing social media platforms such as *Facebook* for information and advice regarding decision such as school entry options (Haslam et al., 2017). The parents' own schooling experience also has the potential to influence decision-making as parents want to replicate their own schooling experience if it was positive or provide their child with a different experience if it was negative.

From an ECEC perspective, the literature revealed that ECEC teachers felt their role had changed over the past 10 years as a result of varying parental expectations (Watkins, 2013). There has been a growing emphasis on academic readiness and parents expect their child to be school ready if they have previously attended an ECEC service (Hatcher et al., 2012; Wickett, 2017). ECEC teachers also reported parents were often sceptical of their recommendation for a delayed school entry (Watkins, 2013). From a school perspective, increased testing and reporting of results has resulted in some schools encouraging parents of younger children, particularly boys, to delay school entry. From a government perspective, it appears to be more beneficial financially for children to remain in ECEC for an additional year, as opposed to commencing schooling and having to be retained.

The next section will conclude the literature review after careful consideration of the various lenses (see Sections 2.3 to 2.7) that have been used to explore the literature regarding academic redshirting. A rationale for the current study will then be provided, followed by a chapter summary.

2.8 Conclusion

This phenomenological literature review has explored the scholarly literature in regard to academic redshirting from a variety of lenses. It has been shown that parents' decision-making concerning academic redshirting of school entry is a complex decision that requires careful consideration of a number of influences. First, it was shown that the conceptualisation of childhood has changed considerably over time. Childhood is now seen as "a time to be, to seek and make meaning of the world" (AGDE, 2022, p. 6). Parents now invest more time building their child's human capital accumulation prior to entering school (Kerr, 2022). Second, the purposes of schooling in Australia have evolved from public purposes of democratic equality and social efficiency (Labaree, 1997) to private purposes of individual

and economic gain. Changes to government funding of school resulted in an increase of non-government schools, offering parents more choice in their child's education. Third, parents' decision-making is often influenced by family and economic circumstances. Fourth, characteristics of the individual child were shown to influence parents' decision-making, with increased concern if the child was male or born close to the cut-off date. A child's relative age in comparison to their peers was an important consideration, as children who are younger for a cohort may be disadvantaged. Fifth, there are a number of stakeholders who have varied perspectives on school starting age that requires parental consideration. The examination of the literature from these various lenses have revealed that Australia is not a homogenous society, but rather includes a diverse range of families in terms of composition, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

2.9 Rationale for the Current Study

This literature review has revealed most research into the practice of academic redshirting has been conducted overseas, particularly in the USA and European countries (Edwards et al., 2011). There has been limited qualitative research undertaken. Noel and Newman (2003) focused on mothers' decision-making and reasons for academic redshirting. They found the decision to delay school entry was linked to perceived benefits of the practice, such as an academic advantage for the academically redshirted child over one's peers, or to reduce the likelihood of the child struggling at school (Noel & Newman, 2003). Dougan (2015) explored parents' decision-making in relation to academic redshirting practices in the US. She found the main reason parents preferred to delay school entry was to avoid their child being young in a cohort (Dougan, 2015). Another key finding was that parents faced pressure from other parents to send or delay based on school culture (Dougan, 2015). This resulted in some parents fearing judgment from other parents regarding the decision made.

While interest into academic redshirting practices in Australia has grown (see Edwards et al., 2011; Hanly et al., 2019; Mergler & Walker, 2017), there has been limited qualitative research undertaken. Using a national parenting forum, Mergler and Walker (2017) found the main influence on parents' decision-making was the child's birth month. Parents of children with birth dates close to the cut-off date for school entry reported high levels of anxiety and stress. This was attributed to parental concern about their child's readiness for school due to being considered young for the cohort. Another key influence on parents' decision-making concerned perceived or actual developmental delays or learning difficulties experienced by their child (Mergler & Walker, 2017).

This qualitative study makes a valuable contribution to the field of research through the exploration of the phenomenon of parents' decision-making in relation to academic redshirting practices. Being a phenomenological study, the aim is to explore the lived experience of Australian parents and to investigate in particular the essence of decision-making, from the perspective of parents. This study aimed to contribute a more comprehensive representation of academic redshirting practices in one state of Australia, namely NSW, through the inclusion of children who attended both government and non-government schools.

Few studies have investigated parents' reasoning for delaying school entry and those which have tended to focus solely on the mother's viewpoint. This study aimed to contribute to the field of research by incorporating mothers' and fathers' perspectives on decision-making. Parents' plans for the academically redshirted year are another under researched area in the literature (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). This study aimed to address this gap by exploring the experiences and opportunities parents planned for their child during the additional year before school.

After careful consideration of the existing scholarly literature in relation to academic redshirting, the following research questions were developed for this phenomenological study:

1. *What* is the lived experience for parents of decision-making concerning academic redshirting of their children?
2. *What* influences parental decision-making regarding whether a child is academically redshirted?
3. *Why* are particular experiences valued during the academically redshirted year?

2.10 Chapter Summary

The scholarly literature was explored in this chapter to frame the research questions and inform the methodology to explore the lived experience of parents in this study concerning their child commencing formal schooling and academic redshirting. The next chapter will examine the methodological approach to this study.

Chapter 3. Methodology

The previous chapter provided a comprehensive review of literature focussing on academic redshirting. The purpose of this study was to explore the *lived* experience of parents' decision-making concerning academic redshirting and school entry. The research questions which guided this study were:

1. *What* is the lived experience for parents of decision-making concerning academic redshirting of their children?
2. *What* influences parental decision-making regarding whether a child is academically redshirted?
3. *Why* are particular experiences during the academically redshirted year valued?

To address these specific research questions, a qualitative phenomenological approach was deemed most appropriate. This chapter will: explore the research approach and justify the selection of a qualitative study; discuss the philosophical assumptions and alignment of the chosen methodology and methods with the ontological and epistemological worldview that has shaped the study; and conclude with a chapter summary.

3.1 Research Approach

The approach to research may be qualitative or quantitative, or a combination of both referred to as mixed methods (Creswell, 2014). Each approach has diverse ontological and epistemological differences which were contested extensively during the *paradigm wars* of the 1980s (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) and are still a matter of contention. *Ontology* is the study of the nature of reality and a researcher's ontological stance provides insight into the process of knowing (Slevitch, 2011). *Epistemology* refers to the nature of knowledge and describes how we come to know truth or reality (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). It is important to choose the

approach that best aligns with the researcher's philosophical beliefs and the purpose of the research because these will influence how the study is conducted.

Qualitative research has its origins in constructivism-interpretivism (Sale et al., 2002). Constructivism-interpretivism adopts a relativist ontological position that implies multiple, constructed realities coexist (Ponterotto, 2005). Qualitative research enables the exploration of "the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). Reality is therefore subjective and influenced by individual experience, the context, and the social environment (Ponterotto, 2005). As a result, truth is based on interpretation or perception (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Constructivist-interpretivist epistemology contends the researcher and research participant/s mutually explore a phenomenon and findings are co-constructed (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

To achieve the purpose of this study, a qualitative approach using phenomenology was deemed appropriate. A rationale providing justification as to why Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was chosen will now be presented.

3.3.2.1 Rationale. There were several reasons why a qualitative approach incorporating IPA was the most suitable approach for this study. An inductive, *bottom-up* approach (Reid et al., 2005) to research was adopted, whereby the specific research questions determined the selection of the chosen methodology. Because the study focused on the *lived* experience of parents' decision-making concerning academic redshirting, a phenomenological approach was determined the most suitable qualitative methodology.

Other qualitative approaches which were considered for this study included narrative inquiry, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Each was deemed not as suitable for the purpose of this study, which was to explore the lived experience of parents' decision-making concerning academic redshirting. IPA is focused on exploring an *insider* perspective

of a given phenomenon (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Reid et al., 2005). Narrative inquiry was therefore considered as not suitable because the focus of the current study was the phenomenon of parental decision-making, rather than personal stories of families. A grounded theory approach was not considered due to its emphasis on theory generation through identifying group patterns; as opposed to focusing on an individual's subjective experience (Eatough & Smith., 2008). Ethnography was also not considered due to its typical focus of observing the shared culture of an intact group in their natural environment over time (Austin & Sutton, 2014; Creswell, 2014). A case study approach was not chosen because the researcher did not want to bind the study to a specific location.

A phenomenological approach was determined as the most suitable methodology for this study. This was because the focus of the study is on individual experiences of a particular phenomenon. When choosing between different phenomenological approaches, the researcher was looking for an approach which moved beyond descriptive to a more interpretive approach. The researcher was particularly interested in both phenomenology and hermeneutics, which IPA combines in its approach. IPA offers flexibility in the research design as the approach can be adapted to suit the researcher's style and topic area (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

There has been some scholarly debate regarding whether IPA is indeed phenomenological. Giorgi (1989) suggested all variations of psychological phenomenological approaches include four core characteristics. Namely, the research is rigorously descriptive, uses phenomenological reduction, explores intentional relationships between persons and context, and reveals the essences of the experience. Giorgi (2010) was highly critical of many IPA practices that he believed were not scientifically sound. He addressed four features of IPA analysis which were of particular concern. First, he argued that the method is not prescriptive

and can be modified to suit the researcher's needs. Second, he had issue with Smith's claim that IPA requires a personal way of working, which opposes interpersonal or intersubjective steps science demands. Third, he believed some rules are required to help guide IPA researchers in their analysis. Fourth, he proposed there was potential for bias in reporting the results due to the lack of need for all raw data to be accounted for.

Smith (2010) swiftly responded to Giorgi's (2010) critique of IPA by encouraging Giorgi to read the IPA literature more widely to address his concerns. Giorgi (2011) retorted by maintaining his stance, and claiming IPA was clearly not phenomenological because it did not advocate the use of phenomenological reduction or bracketing one's preconceptions. Smith (2004) had previously indicated that IPA identifies more closely with hermeneutic traditions and therefore does not advocate the use of bracketing due to the central role adopted by the researcher.

Despite the debate concerning whether IPA is phenomenological or not, this study makes a firm commitment to IPA based on the rationale outlined at the outset of this chapter. The next section will focus on the historical background of the philosophical foundations of phenomenology.

3.2 Philosophical Foundations of Phenomenology

In simple terms, phenomenology can be described as "the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience" (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 2). According to phenomenologist Amadeo Giorgi, phenomenology can be interpreted to mean different things (Giorgi, 1985). There are various types of phenomenology, each with their own phenomenological philosophies of human experience (Gill, 2020; Neubauer et al., 2019). Phenomenological approaches are often based on the work of either Edmund Husserl's (1900, 2001) *descriptive* or Martin Heidegger's (1927,

1962) *interpretive* approach (Dowling & Cooney, 2012; Gill, 2020). This sub section will focus on both Husserl's and Heidegger's approach to phenomenological thinking.

Husserl, the putative founder of phenomenology, based his ideas on the work of philosophers Kant (1997), Hegel (1977), and Brentano (1982, 1995). Husserl's phenomenology (1900, 1970) rejected positivism's focus on objective observations of external reality (Neubauer et al., 2019) and instead argued phenomena needed to be studied from the perceptions of an individual's consciousness. Husserl's phenomenology (1931) would best be described as *transcendental*; focusing on the detailed description of personal experience of a given phenomenon (Larkin et al., 2011). Identifying the essential qualities of an experience serves to enlighten others on a given experience (Smith et al., 2022).

Husserl (1982) used the term *intentionality* to refer to the *essence* of conscious experience. He believed our knowing could only be achieved through a state of pure consciousness (Husserl, 1931). To achieve this, a researcher must "set aside all previous habits of thought, see through and break down the mental barriers which these habits have set along the horizons of our thinking... to learn to see what stands before our eyes" (Husserl, 1931, p. 43). Husserl (1964) recommended the researcher to withhold the *natural* attitude which involves suspending naturalistic assumptions about knowledge, to instead concentrate on "clarifying the essence of cognition" (p. 18). This was referred to as adopting a *phenomenological* attitude (Finlay, 2011) which is an openness to the *other* through attempting to look at the world differently (Finlay, 2009). This can be achieved through suspension of one's natural attitude, through *epoché* and *phenomenological reduction* (Zahavi, 2021). While there are various interpretations of epoché, Zahavi (2021) asserted the aim was to suspend one's theoretical presupposition through bracketing "our preconceived ideas, our habits of thoughts, our prejudices and theoretical assumptions" (p. 269). The

epoché, as the epistemological device would enable a phenomenological way of knowing (Mortari & Tarozzi, 2010).

The work of Heidegger (1927, 1962) diverged from a *transcendental* emphasis to *hermeneutics* and *existential* phenomenology (Smith et al., 2022). The focus of Heidegger's (1927, 1962) phenomenological work shifted the focus from consciousness (Husserl, 1931) to *being*. Humans are considered a *person-in-context*; therefore, the emphasis was on exploring the *worldliness* of one's experience (Heidegger, 1927, 1962). He created a new word *Dasein*, to explain the concept of "*being with* or moving in time" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 150). A basic characteristic of *Dasein* included one's situated limits in terms of *thrownness* or the experience of being thrown into a world (Heidegger, 1927, 1962) thus limiting one's freedom and understandings.

In contrast to Husserl's (1964) transcendental phenomenology which was descriptive, Heidegger (1927, 1962) believed phenomenology *must* be interpretive to enable the exploration of a phenomenon more deeply. Therefore, the natural attitude was considered integral to knowing (Heidegger, 1927, 1962). He disagreed with Husserl (1982) on phenomenological reduction, arguing that to understand one's experience, interpretation is required. Heidegger (1927, 1962) believed our interpretation is inevitable and that bracketing can only be partially achieved. van Manen (1990) also rejected the idea of bracketing, and instead encouraged the researcher to acknowledge their assumptions as these may "persistently creep back into our reflections" (p. 4).

This section has provided a brief background to the history of phenomenology. It was established that there are various types of phenomenology, each with their own phenomenological philosophies of human experience (Gill, 2020; Neubauer et al., 2019).

This sub section focused on Husserl's descriptive phenomenology and Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology, both of which have often influenced the more contemporary phenomenological approaches (Dowling & Cooney, 2012; Gill, 2020). The next section will explore the various dimensions of the research paradigm which have influenced how the study was conducted.

3.3 Research Paradigm

The notion of a research paradigm was first introduced by philosopher Thomas Kuhn to the scientific community as "the entire constellation of beliefs, values, (and) techniques shared by members of a given scientific community" (Kuhn, 1962, p. 75). A research paradigm encompasses a conception of reality (ontology) and an idea of scientific knowledge (epistemology) which influence the methodology and methods chosen for a study (Mortari & Tarozzi, 2010). Table 3.1 shows the careful alignment of each approach in this study to my research paradigm which is hermeneutic phenomenology.

The literature indicated phenomenology could be considered for each dimension in Table 3.1 due to varying interpretations of phenomenology as a philosophy of research worldwide (Mortari & Tarozzi, 2010). Phenomenology was utilised as both the research paradigm and chosen methodology for this study. The next sub section will focus on phenomenology as the research paradigm. The remaining dimensions in Table 3.1 will be explored in depth in the sub sections that follow.

Table 3.1*Alignment of Research Approach*

Dimension	Approach
Research Paradigm	Hermeneutic (Interpretive) Phenomenology
Methodology	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
Methods	Semi-structured interviews with 10 parents Four focus groups with parents

3.3.1 Phenomenology as a Paradigm

Phenomenology aims to generate knowledge about the subjective experience of a phenomenon (Willig, 2013) through gaining insight into people’s motivations and actions (Lester, 1999). The phenomenon being explored in this study was parents’ decision-making concerning academic redshirting. Phenomenology as a paradigm is a variation of *interpretivism* (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012) which was discussed briefly in Section 3.1.

Epistemologically, phenomenology can be described as “... a way of thinking about knowledge (how do we know what we know?) and as a way to look at the world and make sense of it” (Mortari & Tarozzi, 2010, p. 16). Willig (2013) referred to a continuum of epistemological positions, placing the *realist* at one end and the *relativist* at the other. She described phenomenology as an *in-between* position on this continuum and argued that an individual’s experience always resulted from interpretation. Therefore, experience is “constructed (and flexible) rather than determined (and fixed) and considered ‘real’ to the person who is having the experience” (Willig, 2013, p. 12). The aim is to obtain

phenomenological knowledge of the experiential world of each participant; therefore, it does not matter whether each participant's account is an accurate reflection of reality (Willig, 2013). Rather, the researcher is attempting to get as close as possible to each participant's experience by stepping into their world. Phenomenological research therefore assumes that there is more than one world which can be studied (Willig, 2013). The participants in this study will each experience decision-making regarding school entry for their child differently. The aim is to capture what the world is like for each participant through exploration of their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of the decision-making experience (Willig, 2013).

The previous section showed phenomenological approaches to knowledge generation can be descriptive or interpretive. The research paradigm for this study is *hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology*. According to Larkin and Thompson, (2012), hermeneutic phenomenologists aim to understand a participant's relatedness to the world through their meaning-making of the experience.

Hermeneutic phenomenologists, however, do not believe that it is possible to produce a pure description of experience and that there is always a certain amount of interpretation involved (Willig, 2013). Truth is hidden and therefore the aim is to move closer to an understanding of what the experience is like for the participant by exploring the meaning between the lines of what is being said (Smythe, 2012). Therefore, the phenomenological researcher's role is an active one, working with each participant to co-construct meaning from the experiences shared. Consequently, the researcher is considered part of the world and as a result, will bring biases to the study (Neubauer et al., 2019) which need to be conveyed to the reader. In contrast to positivists, phenomenologists believe it is not possible for the researcher to be disconnected from their presuppositions (Hammersley, 2000). In this sense, Heidegger (1982) emphasised a need for the researcher to be aware of their own biases "so that the text

may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings" (p. 238).

Ontologically, hermeneutic phenomenology recognises that "lived experience is an interpretive process situated in an individual's lifeworld" (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 92).

Heidegger's (1927, 1962) work *Being and Time* considered ontology to be accessible through phenomenology and deemed "only as phenomenology is ontology possible" (p. 60). He described the task of ontology as to "explain Being itself and to make the Being of entities stand out in full relief" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 49). His work presented *Dasein* as a way of interpreting the meaning of being:

...as long as Dasein is (that is, only as long as an understanding of being is ontically possible), 'is there' being. When Dasein does not exist [the proposition of independent things] can neither be understood nor not understood. In such a case even entities within-the-world can neither be uncovered nor lie hidden. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 255).

Heidegger's (1927, 1962) concept of Dasein will be discussed further in the methodology section. This section has introduced phenomenology as a research paradigm. The ontological and epistemological positioning of this study within hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology has been conveyed. The next sub section will focus on the chosen methodology for this study which is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

3.3.2 Methodology

Research incorporating a phenomenological approach focuses on exploring *lived* experiences of a phenomenon (van Manen & Adams, 2010). The phenomenon being explored in this study was parental decision-making concerning academic redshirting. It was therefore

appropriate to use a phenomenological approach to enable deeper exploration of the lived experience of the decision-making journey for participants in the study. The chosen methodological approach for this study has been informed by the research paradigm which was discussed previously.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an example of a contemporary form of phenomenology that bridges the transcendental-hermeneutic divide (Neubauer et al., 2019). The evidence cited across the scholarly literature argued that IPA could be employed as a *method* or *methodology*. Using IPA as a method would have simply involved following specific research guidelines (Willig, 2013). Instead, IPA has been adopted as a methodology for this study and I have endeavoured to honour its philosophical and theoretical commitments (Willig, 2013) through both the construction and execution of the study.

IPA involves exploring the lived experience of a phenomenon, with a particular emphasis on *how* individuals make sense of these experiences (Smith et al., 2022). The aim was to privilege the voices and stories of the parents in the study, to understand how they experienced the decision-making regarding when their child should commence formal schooling. IPA is a more recently developed phenomenological approach (Smith, 1996) to research engagement which draws upon three major theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith, 2016).

The first major theoretical underpinning is phenomenology. Phenomenological inquiry is based on the premise that experience “should be examined in the way it occurs and in its own terms” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 8). Earlier forms of phenomenology are often referred to as descriptive, whereas later forms are often more interpretative by nature (van Manen, 2011). IPA draws its core ideas from several phenomenological philosophers including Husserl (1900, 1970), Heidegger (1927, 1962), Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Sartre (1943;

2003) who each have their own phenomenological philosophies regarding human experience (Gill, 2020; Neubauer et al., 2019). Whilst the focus for each philosopher differed, they all shared a general interest in what it is like to be human and the things which are important in our lived world (Smith et al., 2022). The core ideas for each phenomenological philosopher will now be explored in relation to conducting an IPA study.

IPA follows some of the ideas from Husserl's *transcendental* phenomenology, which were briefly introduced in Section 3.2. While Husserl (1982) aimed to find the *essence* of experience, IPA has the "more modest ambition of attempting to capture particular experiences as experienced for particular people" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 11). When analysing data, IPA observes Husserl's idea (1900, 1970) of "going back to the things themselves" (p. 252) as opposed to having predetermined categories (Smith et al., 2022). Husserl (1964) argued people tend to experience the world from the *natural* attitude, which results in taking experiences for granted and perceiving them from pre-existing expectations which are limiting (Smith et al., 2022). Instead, Husserl (1964) believed phenomenological reduction was necessary to bracket one's pre-conceptions. Therefore, it is important for IPA researchers to engage in reflection throughout the research process (Smith et al., 2022).

IPA follows more closely the ideas from Heidegger's *hermeneutic* phenomenology, which was also briefly introduced earlier. Heidegger (1927, 1962) used the term *Dasein* to describe the concept of "being with" (p. 150) or one's relatedness in the world. Heidegger (1927, 1962) used the term *intersubjectivity* to describe this relatedness which occurs when humans interact and make sense of each other (Smith et al., 2022). Heidegger (1927, 1962) also used the term *thrownness* to describe the concept of being thrown into a world of objects, relationships, and language (Smith et al., 2022).

For Heidegger (1927, 1962), interpretation of people's meaning-making of an experience is crucial element to phenomenological enquiry. Therefore, Heidegger (1927, 1962) did not advocate the use of phenomenological reduction. Instead, researchers are encouraged to reflect on a participant's experience of a given phenomenon whilst also reflecting on their own experience (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Like Heidegger (1927, 1962), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) highlighted the interpretive quality of our knowledge about the world and strongly rejected the notion of personal bracketing (Smith et al., 2022). Merleau-Ponty's (1962) work focused on the role of perception in how we engage with and understand the world. He believed human relations with others begins from a point of difference, which he referred to as our *embodied* position (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Experiences are therefore personal, and every person experiences the world through their own embodied response (Smith et al., 2022). This has important implications for this IPA study. First, as part of each participant's lived experience as a body-in-the-world, their storytelling may evoke feelings or sensations, or the use of embodied language to describe their experience which will help the researcher to understand (Smith et al., 2022). Second, it can be difficult to capture the entire experience for each participant, so it is therefore important to attend closely to meaning in analysis to ensure important aspects are not overlooked (Smith et al., 2022).

Jean-Paul Sartre's (1943, 2003) *existential* phenomenology extended on the work of Heidegger (1962) and the emphasis on the *worldliness* of one's experience. He described the self as not static but rather as an ongoing project, and therefore "existence comes before essence" (Sartre, 1948, p. 26). Sartre (1943, 2003) believed humans are constantly in the process of *becoming* rather than being, therefore individuals have freedom to choose their destiny and are therefore responsible for their actions. However, an individual does not exist

alone in the world, meaning one's perceptions of the world are influenced by others (Sartre, 1943, 2003). The implication of this for an IPA study is consideration of what Heidegger (1927, 1962) referred to as each individuals' worldly *person-in-context* and relationship to others (Smith et al., 2022) as potential influences on each participant's decision-making experience. Sartre (1943, 2003) extended this idea to understanding experience as dependent on one's relationships with others.

It has been established that various historical interpretations of phenomenology have evolved and changed since the work of Husserl (1900, 1970). However, the core focus of phenomenological research remains on the essence of meaning making regarding a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022).

The second major theoretical underpinning of IPA is hermeneutics. IPA is influenced by hermeneutics as demonstrated by its interpretive nature (Smith et al., 2022). Smith (1996) suggested a chain of connections is formed in IPA among the embodied experience, talking about the experience and the participant's sense-making of the experience. The focus for IPA is on the meaning of the experience (of parental decision-making) for each participant as their story was shared (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Several hermeneutic concepts were utilised in this study.

In hermeneutics, the notion of *horizon* is used as a metaphor "for the way that intellectual understanding mirrors everyday perceptions of visible objects" (Nenon, 2016, p. 248). Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975, 2004) used various spatio-temporal metaphors in his work. He believed "understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves" (p. 306). The metaphor *fusion of horizons* was used to describe the understanding that evolved from the synthesis of horizons between the researcher and

participant (Gadamer, 1975, 2004). He also believed that it was not possible or necessary to eliminate one's individual prejudices (ideas and attitudes) towards a situation. Gadamer (1975, 2004) argued that doing so would interfere with the interpretation process.

Ricoeur (1970) outlined two different approaches to interpretation, a *hermeneutics of empathy* and a *hermeneutics of suspicion*. IPA adopts a hermeneutics of empathy approach by attempting to obtain an insider's perspective into the participant's experience, to understand the meaning of the experience from their point of view (Smith et al., 2022). Furthermore, IPA goes further by incorporating a hermeneutic of *questioning* by asking the participant questions to help them make sense of their meaning-making (Smith et al., 2022). The use of a *double hermeneutic* was employed which involved a dual process whereby "the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them" (Smith, 2011, p. 10). However, this process may be limited by the level of disclosure from participants (Smith et al., 2022).

The use of the *hermeneutic circle*, which is prominent in IPA research (Smith, 2007) was also used as an analytical tool in the data analysis (see Chapter 4). This concept involves the interactive relationship between the part and the whole (Smith, 2007). Smith et al. (2022) described this relationship as operating across multiple levels such as a single word versus a sentence, a sentence versus a complete text, and an interview versus the entire research project (p. 23). It is therefore important for the researcher to engage in iterative cycles of data analysis to consider how different parts contributed to the understanding of the phenomenon as a whole (Neubauer et al., 2019). A hermeneutical framework suggested by Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014) which incorporated the hermeneutic circle was used during the literature review process (see Chapter 2).

The third major theoretical underpinning of IPA is idiography. Idiography focuses on particular instances of a phenomenon (Shinebourne, 2011). IPA is considered idiographic due to its focus on *individual* experiences of a given phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022). Meaning-making in IPA is conceptualised from a person-in-context viewpoint (Larkin & Thompson, (2012) whereby the focus is on the meaning and significance of the experience for that participant. Smith et al. (2022) describes IPA's idiographic commitment as occurring across two levels. First, IPA focuses on *detail*, therefore it is important for the analysis to be thorough. Second, there is a commitment to understanding how the experience has been understood from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Smith et al., 2022).

The aim was to explore what the experience of the decision-making concerning academic redshirting was like for *these* particular parents (Smith et al., 2022). This involved exploring each parent's perspective as a single case before searching for convergence and divergence across between cases (Smith, 2011a). The aim was not to generalise from the results, but rather to focus on the possible transferability of findings (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011) between the two groups of parents in this study.

This sub section has detailed the three major underpinnings of IPA. The next sub section will briefly outline the methods adopted for this study in line with the chosen research paradigm.

3.3.3 Methods

IPA focuses on exploring the *lived* experiences and understandings of a given phenomenon (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith et al., 2022). The first method involving an in-depth, one-on-one semi-structured interview was a suitable choice for this study (Grant & Giddings, 2002; Palmer et al., 2010). This interview method was chosen because it provided parents with an opportunity to share their stories of lived experiences surrounding the

decision-making process regarding academic redshirting. Semi-structured interviews enabled rich data to be gathered (Smith, 1995). This interview method also offered greater flexibility to explore areas which emerged unexpectedly.

The second method selected for this study was focus groups. Whilst focus groups are uncommon in IPA studies (Smith et al., 2022), there has been increasing interest in this innovative approach (Phillips et al., 2016). The main challenge for using focus groups in IPA is meeting the idiographic commitment to each individual's sense-making of the experience, which will be influenced by the group context (Tomkins & Eatough, 2010). However, Palmer et al. (2010) believed there were instances when a group discussion may elicit more experiential reflection in comparison to a one-to-one interview. They referred to research by Flowers et al. (2001) who suggested the group dynamics in each focus group contributed rich data to their analysis that would have otherwise been missed if the participants had been interviewed individually.

There were benefits to using focus groups in this study. First, it allowed for a wider geographical distribution of participants, rather than focusing on a particular locality. Second, it enabled greater participant numbers in addition to many voices and opinions being heard within a single data collection event (Palmer et al., 2010). Tomkins and Eatough (2010) suggested focus groups may be beneficial in phenomenological research as personal accounts may differ due to the interactive nature of a group. That is, participants may not be aware of their own implicit thoughts or opinions until they engage with others on the topic. Therefore, other people's sense-making can act as a catalyst for allowing these thoughts or feelings to emerge during the focus group (Tomkins & Eatough, 2010). The use of semi-structured interviews and focus groups will be explored in more specific detail in the next chapter.

3.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented and rationalised the methodological approach chosen for the study. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to explore the phenomenon of parents' decision-making regarding when a child should commence formal schooling. A phenomenological approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected as the most appropriate methodology for this study. The philosophical assumptions and alignment of the chosen methodology and methods with the ontological and epistemological worldview that has shaped the study were also explored in detail. The next chapter will focus on specific choices in the research design.

Chapter 4. Research Design

The previous chapter provided background information and a rationale for the selection of the chosen methodology for this study which was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The philosophical foundations of phenomenology were introduced and the alignment of the chosen methodology and methods to the researcher's ontological and epistemological worldview were conveyed, as these have influenced how the study was conducted. This chapter will focus on the specific choices in the research design including participant selection, interview data collection, and focus group data collection. The approach to data analysis will be detailed in a way which would enable the study to be replicated. Legitimation of the study in terms of trustworthiness will be explored. Ethical considerations will also be considered. The chapter concludes with a chapter summary.

4.1 Participant Selection

The study involved two groups of parents. The first group included 10 parents who were invited to participate in one on one, semi-structured interviews through advertisements placed on various online parenting pages and at Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services. Permission was obtained from site administrators or directors to advertise for potential participants once ethics approval (see Appendix C) had been granted by the Research Ethic Committee of the particular university supporting this study. Potential participants were invited to self-nominate by sending an email indicating their willingness to be involved in the study. An email response was then provided, which contained information for the potential participants, and consent forms to be signed and returned. To avoid any research bias in the selection of participants, those who met the criteria outlined below, were accepted in order from when consent forms were returned.

Because it was a qualitative study, participants were recruited using purposeful selection. Specifically, participants included parents who:

- Lived in NSW
- Had a child born between the months of January and July
- Were in the process of deciding whether to academically redshirt the child for the following school year

The intention was to conduct a multiple-perspectival study (Larkin et al., 2019; Reid et al., 2005), therefore *maximal variation* in experience was desired. It was hoped that by investigating the phenomenon of parental decision-making regarding academic redshirting from multiple perspectives, a more detailed insight into the decision-making experience would be revealed (Reid et al., 2005). The advertisement for prospective participants contained pre-screening questions designed to provide an indication of their intentions. For example, the information requested of parents on entry to the study included the child's birth month and the anticipated year they would commence formal schooling. 10 participants were then specifically chosen to include a relatively even spread across the following three subgroups:

- Parents who were favouring a delayed school entry for their child
- Parents who were favouring their child commencing school at the earliest opportunity
- Parents who were still undecided

It is acknowledged that some parents may have changed their mind or stated one position (for example, undecided) when in fact their responses may have revealed a different position (for example, favouring academic redshirting). Thus, some flexibility was

employed when recruiting participants for the study. Table 4.1 displays the characteristics of the group one participants.

Table 4.1

Participant Group One Characteristics

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Family	Decision	Older Siblings	Child's Gender	Birth Month	Starting School
Ashini	Sri Lankan	Nuclear	Send	No	Boy	April	2018
Brett	Australian	Nuclear	Delay	Yes	Girl	July	2019
Cindy	Malaysian	Nuclear	Send	Yes	Boy	June	2018
Craig	Australian	Nuclear	Unsure	Yes	Boy	February	2019
Hannah	British	Nuclear	Delay	Yes	Boy	July	2019
Kaitlyn	British	Nuclear	Delay	No	Boy	February	2019
Linda	Australian	Nuclear	Unsure	No	Boy	March	2019
Natalya	Russian	Single	Send	No	Girl	July	2018
Sarah	Australian	Single	Send	Yes	Boy/Girl	February	2018
Yvonne	Australian	Nuclear	Delay	No	Boy	January	2019

Note. Adapted from "Parental decision-making about school start age in Australia: Democratic for whom?", by K. MacKinnon, 2019, In V. Margrain & A. L. Hultman (Eds.), *Challenging democracy in early childhood education*, (p. 63). Copyright 2019 by Springer.

The second group of participants included parents who lived in NSW, Australia, and included rural or remote locations. Participants were purposefully selected based on geographical location to form four focus groups. This method was chosen for the convenience of participants. Each focus group was formed to include a mixture of parents who had academically redshirted their child, and those who had sent their child to school at

the earliest opportunity. This enabled both perspectives to be heard within each focus group.

Snowball sampling was required to recruit suitable participants for the study in some

locations. Table 4.2 includes the characteristics of the group two participants.

Table 4.2

Participant Group Two Characteristics

Group	Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Family	Decision	Older Siblings	Child's Gender	Birth Month	Starting School
1	Carol	Australian	Nuclear	Send	No	Girl	May	2018
1	Harshika	NZ/Indian	Nuclear	Send	No	Girl	May	2018
1	Heather	UK	Nuclear	Delay	No	Boy	May	2019
1	Samuel	Australian	Nuclear	Delay	No	Boy	April	2019
2	John	UK	Nuclear	Send	No	Girl	April	2018
2	Karina	Australian	Nuclear	Delay	Yes	Boy	March	2019
2	Maria	S. African	Nuclear	Delay	Yes	Girl	January	2019
2	Reshima	NZ/Indian	Nuclear	Send	No	Girl	January	2018
2	Sandra	UK	Nuclear	Send	No	Girl	April	2018
3	Amelia	Italian	Nuclear	Delay	Yes	Girl	March	2019
3	Heath	UK	Nuclear	Send	No	Boy	March	2018
3	Kelly	Australian	Nuclear	Send	No	Girl	May	2018
3	Nikhita	Indian	Nuclear	Delay	Yes	Girl	May	2019
3	Rowena	Australian	Nuclear	Delay	No	Girl	May	2019
4	Chelsea	UK	Nuclear	Send	Yes	Boy	February	2018
4	Ruthie	Australian	Nuclear	Delay	No	Girl	January	2019
4	Sabina	Australian	Nuclear	Send	No	Girl	January	2018
4	Sandrine	Australian	Nuclear	Send	Yes	Boy	March	2018

The next section will detail the data collection process for the interviews, followed by the data collection process for the focus groups. Table 4.3 provides a summary of the data collection for both methods.

Table 4.3

Summary of Methods Used and Data Collection

Method	Research Questions	Process	Participants
One-on-one Semi-structured interviews	1, 2, 3	Face to face or online Audio recording Transcript Line by line analysis Development of PETs * Development of GETs #	10 parents, who were: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Favouring a delayed school entry for their child • Favouring their child commencing school at the earliest opportunity • Still undecided
Focus Groups	1, 2	Face to face or online Audio recording Transcript Line by Line Analysis Development of Codes	Four groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three groups – urban • One online group – urban / remote Each group included parents who had either: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academically redshirted their child • Sent their child to school at the earliest opportunity

*PETs = Personal Experiential Themes #GETs = Group Experiential Themes

4.2 Interview Data Collection

Interviews were conducted either online or in a location where participants felt safe and comfortable (Smith et al., 2022). For example, the local library or coffee shop was deemed to be a suitable venue. At the beginning of each interview, verbal consent to participate was requested, even though written consent had been received prior. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and were reassured of confidentiality. They were also informed of places to access support if they experienced any discomfort throughout or after the interview. Participants were also informed that they could change their mind at any time during the interview and withdraw from the study without adverse consequences.

Because the study was phenomenological, the main objective of each interview was to elicit each participant's personal story (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). The aim of the initial question was to help the participant become comfortable talking, whilst also providing an opportunity to describe their experience in detail (Smith et al., 2022). Permission was sought to use a digital voice recorder to tape each interview. Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes. A schedule of nine predetermined questions were used to guide each interview (see Figure 4.1). Two pilot interviews were conducted (see Appendices D and E) to ensure the proposed questions were understood and appropriate, to gauge timing and to develop useful probes or prompts. A copy of the pilot interview schedule is provided in Appendix F.

Figure 4.1

Interview Questions

1. Can you please tell me a little bit about your family background?
2. Can you please tell me about your experience in deciding when to send your child to school?
3. What do you think have been the main influences affecting the decision about WHEN to send your child to school?
4. What types of skills do you think your child should have before they start school?
5. Are you aware of what the government policy is surrounding starting school age in NSW?
6. For parents who are deciding to delay school entry:
What are your plans for your child next year if they are not attending school?
7. A) Do you think anyone has influenced your decision?
B) Can you describe how your decision-making has affected your relationship with other people?
8. What do you think have been the positive and/or negative aspects of the decision-making experience?
9. Do you have any advice you would offer other parents who are deciding when to send their child to school?

The ordering of questions in the interview schedule (see Appendix G) was an important consideration. Each interview began with an open-ended narrative question – “*Can you tell me about your experience in deciding when to send child X to school?*” The intent was to begin with a narrative question to help ease each participant into the interview process before moving on to more complex or sensitive questions (Smith et al., 2022). Each participant was then asked: “*Can you describe how your decision-making affects your*

relationship with other people?” and *“What advice would you offer other parents who are deciding when to send their child to school?”* Questions were carefully designed to elicit positive and negative aspects of the decision-making experience for participants to reflect on. Probing questions, such as *“What do you mean when you say - ‘held back?’”* were used to aide clarification of terminology used by some participants (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Prompting questions were also used to explore areas of interest further (Smith, 1995). For example, *“Can you tell me a bit more about that?”* (Smith et al., 2022, p. 61). Each question was carefully designed to elicit answers which would help to address the specific research questions.

At the conclusion of each interview, the recording was transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were used to replace the real names of participants to protect their privacy. The process for data analysis of interview data will be discussed in Section 4.4.

4.3 Focus Group Data Collection

Four focus groups were formed to include three urban groups and one online group. The online group included a mixture of parents from urban and rural/remote areas. Allocation to each focus group was dependent upon either participant’s availability or their geographical location.

Each focus group was held in a conference room at a local community club or local library, enabling a somewhat familiar and safe environment for participants. The online focus group was held using the Zoom platform. A copy of the slides used during this focus group can be found in Appendix H. Permission was obtained from each participant to enable each focus group to be recorded using a digital voice recorder. A briefing occurred at the beginning of each session to ensure all participants understood the purpose of the study, the aims of the focus group, how the recorded session would be used and issues concerning confidentiality.

An icebreaker in the form of an introductory activity was used to enable participants in each group to introduce themselves and the decision made.

To achieve good quality data, consideration of the design of the focus group was important. A copy of the focus group schedule is in Appendix I. Colucci (2007) encouraged the inclusion of activity-oriented questions which involve participants being required to *do something*. For example, she described an activity called *freelisting* which involved the researcher asking participants to create lists. Participants in each focus group were asked to list all the reasons why parents may delay school entry for a child. This was completed individually initially, before participants were invited to share their ideas with the group. Examples of individual participants' responses are provided in Appendix J. This activity was then expanded to ask participants to *rank* the reasons. Each focus group worked together to rank the five top reasons for academic redshirting. A photograph of each group's final rankings was taken as evidence (see Appendix K).

Other activities included providing opportunities for discussion amongst group members. The discussions which occurred at the conclusion of each activity were extremely important to gain rich data (Colucci, 2007). There was an opportunity for each participant to share their story during the *storytelling* activity. *Case study scenarios* (see Appendix L) were extracted from interview data and used to explore convergence and divergence of focus group participants' experiences. This activity offered an opportunity to confirm the interview findings.

Various roles were adopted by the researcher during each focus group to ensure time was spent effectively. The main role was to observe group dynamics as this could potentially influence levels of disclosure by participants (Palmer et al., 2010). Careful consideration of the format for group discussions was necessary to provide opportunities for all participants to

contribute. Strategies were put in place to avoid some participants dominating discussions, including targeted questioning. This was important and consequently, some participants required encouragement or prompting by the researcher. Due to the multiple perspectives within each focus group, it was also important to ensure participants engaged respectively with each other during discussions, particularly when opinions varied. The researcher adopted the role of scribe to summarise the groups' ideas during discussions. Consideration of questioning techniques and responses during each focus group activity was essential so as not to influence participants in any way (Palmer et al., 2010).

4.4 Data Analysis of Interviews

An *inductive* approach was used, which involved collecting data and then immediately analysing it to determine if patterns emerged (Gray, 2004). IPA offers a flexible approach to data analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003) which can be adapted to meet the needs of the study. Smith et al. (2022) created a guide for analysis in IPA for novice researchers and this was utilised as the entry point for this analysis. The seven stages of the data analysis for the interview data are described in the sub sections that follow.

4.4.1 Reading and Rereading

The first transcript was read whilst the audio recording played. Due to the iterative nature of IPA, each transcript was read more than once to enable the development of new insights that were identified throughout the phase of data analysis (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith, 1995). Larkin (2021) recommended that researchers engage in careful reflection of one's ideas and preconceptions at the beginning and conclusion of the analysis, and this suggestion was taken up for this study. A summary of these initial reflections follows.

4.4.1.1 Initial Reflections. My interest in this research topic emerged just after my son had turned three, and I started to think about him starting school. In February each year,

friends posted images of their child's first day at school. I was surprised that friends with February born children were often not sending their children to school until they were six. Because my son was born in January, I had the choice to decide when he would commence formal schooling. If I sent him at the earliest opportunity, there would be children who were almost a year older than him in the cohort. If I delayed his school entry, he would be one of the eldest. After careful consideration, I decided to academically redshirt my son. I need to be mindful of this potential bias.

After applying to the university to complete the doctoral degree, I developed my research proposal and received ethics approval (2017-183H). I advertised for participants on several online parenting group pages and was able to include parents from locations across NSW, Australia. There was a large amount of interest in my research topic and lots of parents expressed interest in being part of the study. The greatest difficulty was coordinating schedules with potential participants to enable data collection.

I used Hermeneutic (Interpretive) Phenomenology to gain an empathic understanding of the lived experience of parents who were considering academic redshirting. I wanted to understand how these parents made this important decision and their reflections on the decision-making experience. I expected that some parents would find the decision-making particularly stressful, as I myself had experienced. However, I needed to be mindful that each parent will have a unique experience of the decision-making which may differ to my own experience.

Professionally, I came to this study with over 20 years teaching experience in a variety of settings including primary, secondary, and tertiary. In the primary school setting, I was the Physical Education specialist teacher and taught every class for one lesson per week. I recall a time in a Foundation class when a student who was 4.5 years, cried for her mother for the

entire sport lesson. All this student wanted was to be at home with her mother. I recall my heart breaking for her, as I reassured her that it wouldn't be long until school finished, and she could go home to see her mother. Later in the same year, I met the student's mother in the playground. She was worried her daughter wasn't performing well in the gymnastics unit. I explained that most of the students in the class attended gymnastics outside of school and were quite advanced for their stage level. Additionally, some of the students in the class were more than a year older than her daughter. From this experience, I could see that the students who had experienced a delayed school entry were benefiting academically from this decision.

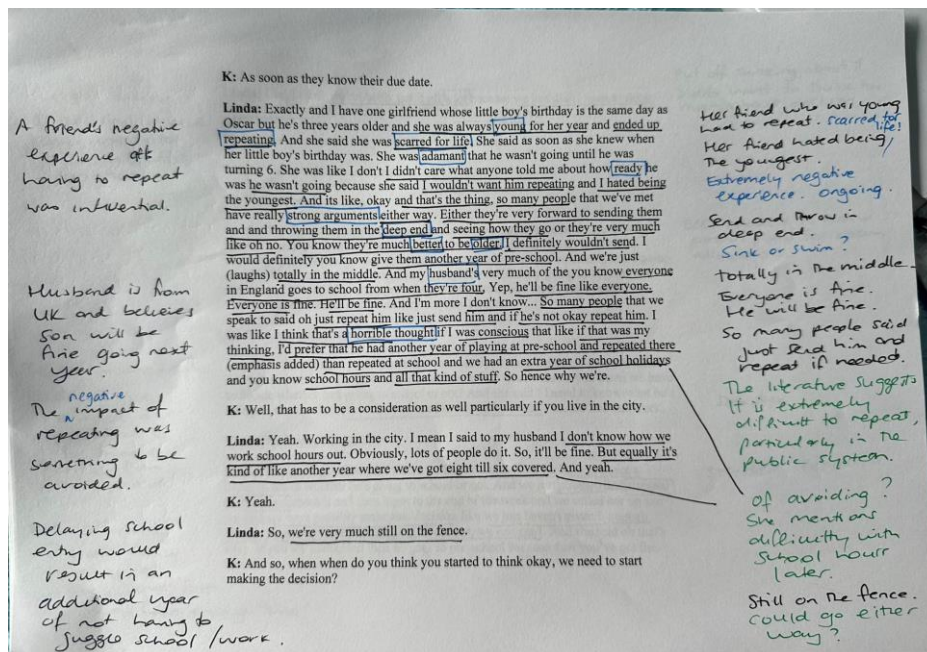
From a high school teacher's perspective, I have had the opportunity to teach numerous senior classes. It is my opinion that some of the younger senior students have lacked the maturity required for their final year of study and would have benefitted from being another year older. I have a personal interest of the impact of a student's age on their performance in the end of school examinations.

4.4.2 Exploratory Noting

Using a copy of the transcript with margins on each side, a careful, line by line analysis was conducted. The transcript was analysed using Smith et al. (2022)'s three levels of exploratory noting (descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual) on the right-hand side of each transcript, with different coloured pens for each level. Initial thoughts and descriptive commentary were recorded using a black pen; linguistic features were identified using a blue pen; and a green pen was used to document conceptual ideas and questions which developed from each reading (see Figure 4.2). The aim of the exploratory notes was for the interpretations to "stay close to the data" (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 107). An example of the full transcript is included in Appendix M, with a snapshot illustrated in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2

Photograph of Transcript with Exploratory Notes

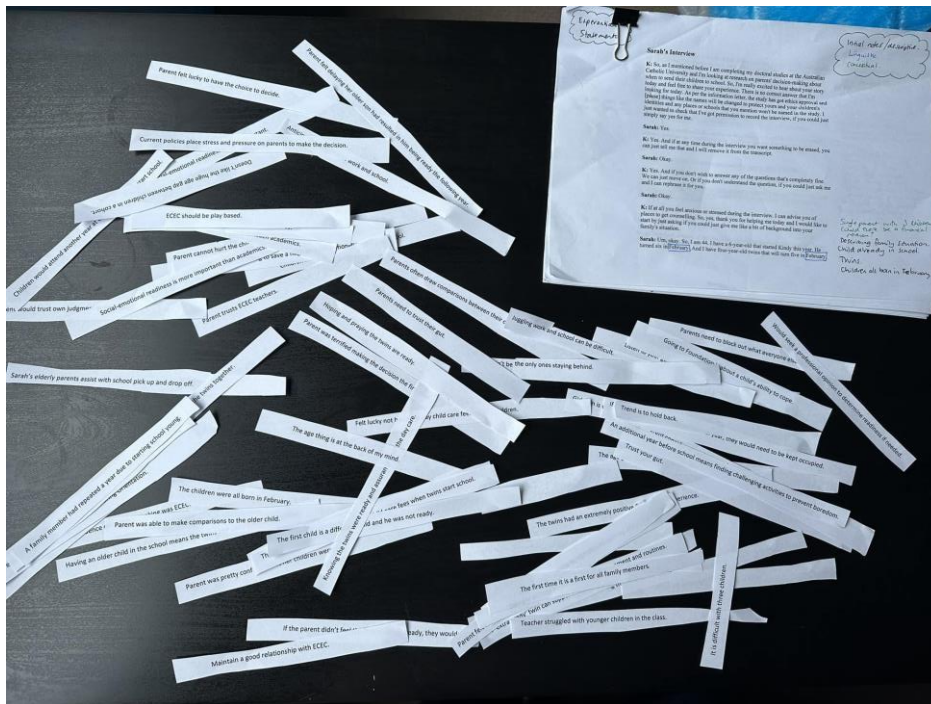


4.4.3 Constructing Experiential Statements

IPA analysis uses a *bottom-up* approach to analysis; therefore, categories of meaning were generated from the data, rather than using pre-existing categories (Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2022). The three levels of exploratory notes mentioned in the previous sub section were used to develop experiential statements on the left-hand side of the transcript. Each experiential statement was a phrase which provided an interpretative summary of what was happening for this participant (American Psychological Association, 2021). The experiential statements for each transcript were compiled into a Word document and then cut into individual strips (see Figure 4.3) in preparation for clustering.

Figure 4.3

Photograph of Experiential Statements



A sample of experiential statements for one participant has been included in Table 4.4. The experiential statements appear in the order in which they occurred in the transcript.

Table 4.4
Sample of Experiential Statements from Linda's Transcript

Experiential Statements
Parents change their mind about the decision every other day.
Has found the decision-making experience horrible did not see any positives of the decision-making experience.
Put off making the decision because they didn't want to think too much about it.
The organisation of ECEC service required a decision to be made earlier than anticipated.
Felt extremely stressed by having to make the decision and felt they didn't have enough time.

If Linda's son went to school next year, he would be 'the' youngest.

Has spent an awful lot of time thinking about the decision.

Parents are not the type who get stressed easily, but this decision is ridiculously huge.

Parent wishes there was no choice and there was a specific starting date.

Is it better for her son to be younger or older?

Leaning towards a delayed school entry.

Age of friends has made parents question their decision to delay.

The decision-making has been extremely stressful, trying to decide which path to take, and not knowing the outcome of the alternate path.

Parenting can be stressful, particularly when making decisions for the first time.

4.4.4 Searching for Connections Across Experiential Statements

Experiential statements were then clustered into groups of personal experiential themes (PETs) as shown in Figure 4.4. This process involved mapping to show possible patterns or links between experiential statements. There were several attempts at grouping the experiential statements, which were recorded in the Research Diary (see example in Appendix N). During the initial clustering, some groups contained large numbers of experiential statements. Those which were deemed similar in meaning were combined to form one experiential statement.

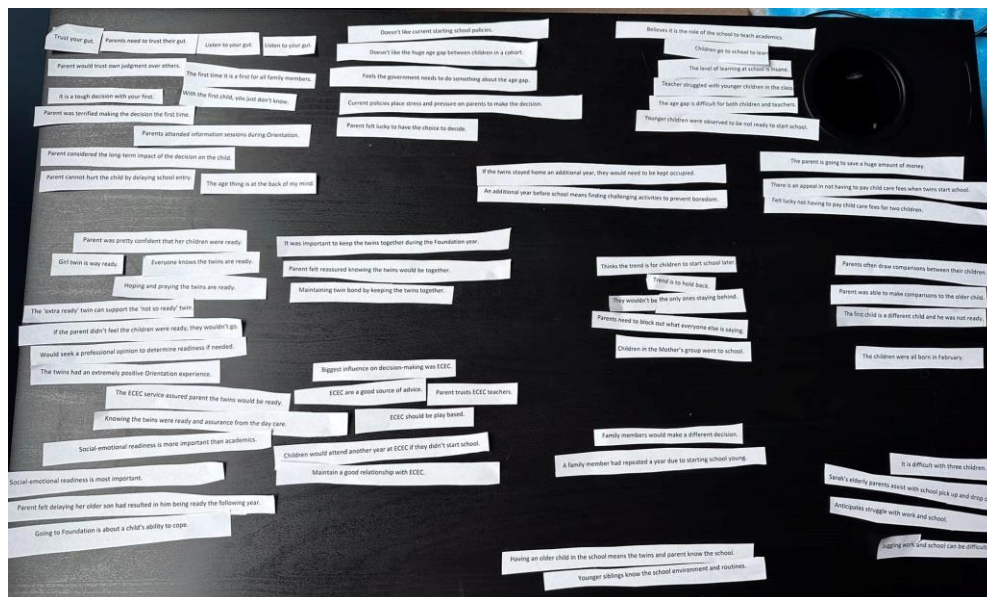
Figure 4.4*Photograph of Clustering of Experiential Statements*

Table 4.5 provides an example of the clustering of experiential statements into themes.

The clustering resulted in concepts or themes that made a significant contribution to the next stage of analysis, building personal experiential themes (PETs).

Table 4.5*Clustering of Experiential Statements*

Clusters

A - Comparison to peers

Age of friends has made parents question their decision to delay.

If the child went to school next year, he would be “the” youngest.

Is it better for the child to be younger or older?

B - An extremely stressful decision

Parenting can be stressful, particularly when making decisions for the first time.

Parents are not the type who get stressed easily, but this decision is ridiculously huge. Has found the decision-making experience horrible did not see any positives of the decision-making experience.

The decision-making has been extremely stressful, trying to decide which path to take, and not knowing the outcome of the alternate path.

Parent wishes there was no choice and there was a specific starting date.

C - Pressure of time

Put off making the decision because they didn't want to think too much about it.

Has spent an awful lot of time thinking about the decision.

The organisation of ECEC service required a decision to be made earlier than anticipated.

Felt extremely stressed by having to make the decision and felt they didn't have enough time.

Parents change their mind about the decision every other day.

Leaning towards a delayed school entry.

4.4.5 Consolidating and Naming the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

A Personal Experiential Theme (PET) was then created to represent each grouping of experiential statements. The naming of each PET required careful consideration to ensure it represented the main features of the experience and the participant's sense-making of the experience (Smith & Nizza, 2022). An example of a PET created from one grouping of

experiential statements for a participant has been included in Table 4.6. An example of a completed table of PETs for a participant can be found in Appendix N.

Table 4.6

Example of Personal Experiential Theme (PET)

Personal Experiential Theme	Sub-Themes	Experiential Statements
An extremely stressful experience due to the uncertainty and feeling of being rushed.	Comparison to peers	Age of friends has made parents question their decision to delay. If the child went to school next year, he would be “the” youngest. Is it better for the child to be younger or older?
	An extremely stressful decision	Parenting can be stressful, particularly when making decisions for the first time. Parents are not the type who get stressed easily, but this decision is ridiculously huge. Found the decision-making experience horrible did not see any positives of the decision-making experience. The decision-making has been extremely stressful, trying to decide which path to take, and not knowing the outcome of the alternate path.
	Pressure of Time	Put off making the decision because they didn’t want to think too much about it.

Has spent an awful lot of time thinking about the decision.

The organisation of ECEC service required a decision to be made earlier than expected.

Felt extremely stressed by having to make the decision and felt there wasn't enough time.

Parents change their mind about the decision every other day.

Leaning towards a delayed school entry.

4.4.6 Individual Analysis of Other Cases

IPA analysis is considered idiographic because the initial focus is on each participant's individual experience, with generalisations only made afterward (Smith, 1995). The first five stages of the analysis were then repeated for each remaining transcript, which was treated on its own terms. This process was documented in the Research Diary (see example, Appendix O). An attempt was made to bracket the ideas which emerged from the previous case (Smith et al., 2022) to allow new ideas to emerge.

4.4.7 Development of Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

The final stage of the analysis involved searching for connections between the 10 tables of PETs to develop group experiential themes (GETs). The aim was not to form a generalisation of the experience but rather provided a representation of the common and

unique features of the experience for the participants in the study (Smith et al., 2022). This involved searching for convergence and divergence across cases. The creation of the GETs and sub-themes required more than half of the participants from each participant group (that is greater than 5 out of 10 interview participants, and half the participants from each focus group) to have made specific reference to the concept. A prevalence table has been provided to demonstrate this requirement was met (see Appendix P). The table of five GETs can be found in Appendix Q. The details of each of the GETs will be articulated in the next three chapters that report on the data analysis. However, prior to reporting on these findings, the final part of this analysis involved the important step of engaging in careful reflection of one's ideas and preconceptions at the conclusion of the analysis (Larkin, 2021). A summary of these reflections follows.

4.4.7.1 Concluding Reflections. The following reflection is based on Smith's (2007) use of the hermeneutic circle to describe the relationship between the researcher and the object being interpreted. I started at one point in the circle, with my insider perspective as a parent who has previously made the decision to academically redshirt my eldest child. I brought with me over 20 years of teaching experience across primary, secondary, and tertiary education settings. I acknowledged my preconceptions (see Section 4.4.1.1) before moving around the circle to my first encounter with a participant. I listened closely to their story and recorded my initial reactions in the Research Diary (see example, Appendix R). I attempted to bracket any ideas which emerged before moving to the next interview with a different participant. This was extremely challenging, and I found myself naturally attempting to draw comparisons between participants' experiences as I listened to each story. I documented these difficulties in the Research Diary (see example, Appendix S). As I engaged with a new participant, I re-entered the hermeneutic circle from a different point.

4.5 Data Analysis of Focus Groups

While the use of focus groups in IPA studies is not common, there are different suggested approaches to the data analysis. Tomkins and Eatough (2010) observed a *top-down* approach to analysis may be adopted, whereby themes are developed from the group data set as a whole as opposed to a focus on individual participants (see Dunne & Quayle, 2001, 2002; Roose & John, 2003; Vandrevalla et al., 2006). However, the idiographic nature of IPA may be overlooked using this approach (Tomkins & Eatough, 2010).

To overcome this challenge, this study adopted a *bottom-up* approach, whereby codes were generated from individual extracts within the focus group data set (see Archer, 2015; Phillips et al., 2016). Quotations from every focus group participant were incorporated into the data analysis chapters to demonstrate how individual participants were experiencing the phenomenon in different ways. Palmer et al. (2010, p. 104) created a guide for analysing focus group data using IPA which has been adapted to meet the needs of this study. The six stages of the data analysis for the focus group data are described in the sub sections that follow.

4.5.1 Identifying Objects of Concern and Experiential Claims

The data were transcribed verbatim, with each individual participant's contribution identified. A copy of each transcript was then uploaded to NVivo 12. As each transcript was read, a line-by-line analysis of experiential claims and concerns were coded from the individual extracts (see Appendix T). Initial codes were then summarised and sorted into groups to show emergent patterns of commonality (Palmer et al., 2010). Figure 4.5 provides an example of the initial codes. The complete table of initial codes can be found in Appendix U.

Figure 4.5*Photograph of Initial Codes*

Name	Files	References	Created On
ADVANTAGES	4	87	4/02/2022 12:00 PM
DISADVANTAGES	4	61	4/02/2022 12:00 PM
WHAT IS HAPPENING OVERSEAS	4	59	4/02/2022 12:05 PM
FAMILY SITUATION	4	108	4/02/2022 12:06 PM
SCHOOL SYSTEM IN AUSTRALIA	4	235	4/02/2022 12:09 PM
SCHOOL READINESS	4	144	4/02/2022 12:10 PM
MAKING THE DECISION	4	264	4/02/2022 12:13 PM
INFLUENCE OF OTHERS	4	125	4/02/2022 12:25 PM
CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIVIDUAL CHILD	4	87	4/02/2022 12:34 PM
COMPARED TO PEERS	4	102	4/02/2022 12:37 PM
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE	4	58	4/02/2022 12:59 PM
WHERE YOU LIVE	3	83	4/02/2022 1:15 PM
COPING VERSUS THRIVING	3	8	4/02/2022 1:17 PM
MALALIGNMENT ACROSS STAKEHOLDERS	3	24	4/02/2022 1:21 PM

4.5.2 The Role of the Researcher

Being a phenomenological study, the researcher adopted an active role within each focus group. It was important to keep a reflexive journal (Research Diary) to document feelings and ideas after each focus group and during the analysis stage (Smith et al., 2012). The reflexive journal was also used to document notes on the group dynamics and interactions (Love, 2020). During each focus group, multiple hermeneutics were taking place. The researcher attempted to understand each participant's meaning-making of their experience in addition to trying to understand other group member's meaning-making (Tomkins & Eatough, 2010).

4.5.3 Storytelling

One of the focus group activities encouraged every participant to share their personal story of the decision-making. These stories were examined carefully to draw comparisons between participants' experiences (Palmer et al., 2010). Extracts from participants were

interwoven in the data analysis to show convergence and divergence of the experiences shared. Group interactions during the storytelling session were also analysed in an attempt to understand the influence of the group on the experiences shared. For example, the excerpt in Figure 4.6 involves Amelia from Focus Group 3 sharing the academic redshirting experience for her youngest child. It can be seen that Nikhita and Kelly both predict Amelia's responses before she shares her reasons. This has the potential to influence the experiences shared as the suggestions may change the course of discussions undertaken.

Figure 4.6

Excerpt of Group Interactions

Amelia Well my daughter, the younger one who's.... we held back. We have. I'm not joking when I say this. We have only held her back.

Nikhita Because of the experiences....

Amelia Because of my son.

Nikhita Yeah.

Amelia She is ten times, head and shoulders....

Kelly Ready. Yeah.

Amelia Ready, above my son, where my son was. She's bossy, assertive, she's the ringleader of all her friends. She's way (emphasis) too old I believe now to go into Kindergarten. She's with it. She's number three. So, she is so with it. But, where they're going, well do we want to do the same thing we did with him? So, we've held her back.

Kelly Yeah. And they don't know... Yeah

4.5.4 Language Use

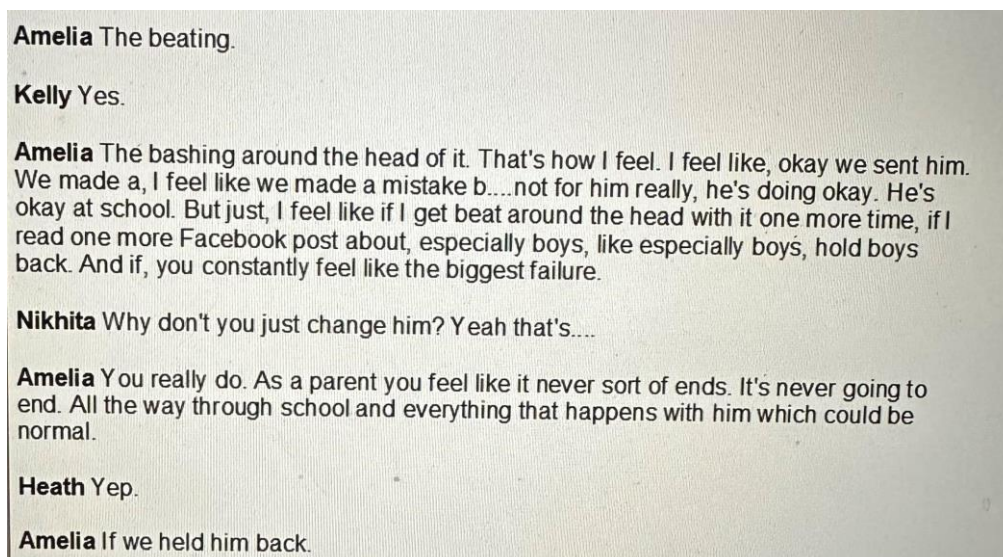
Throughout the focus group analysis, the language use by participants was monitored. In particular, the use of metaphor, euphemism and idiom was examined (Palmer et al., 2010). The analysis of language use involved examining patterns, context and function of the language chosen (Palmer et al., 2010). Each individual extract was carefully read to examine the use of metaphor, euphemism and idiom. Attention was also given to the use of emotive

language. Consideration of the function of the chosen language was also important to determine its purpose (Palmer et al., 2010).

For example, the excerpt depicted in Figure 4.7 involves Amelia from Focus Group 3 reflecting on the decision to send her eldest son to school at the earliest opportunity. She uses the idiom of “*the beating*” and “*the bashing around the head of it*” to describe her frustration at the mistake of sending her son to school and the perceived long-term impact of this decision. She describes feeling “*like the biggest failure*” because of a perception on social media that boys should be academically redshirted.

Figure 4.7

Excerpt of Language Use



4.5.5 Theme Development

This stage of the analysis involved revisiting the Initial Codes. These codes were refined (see Appendix V) as a result of the new understandings that developed as the data analysis progressed and from the re-reading of each transcript.

4.5.6 Comparison of Focus Groups

This stage of analysis involved exploring the commonalities and differences between the views and experiences shared across the four focus groups. Each individual participants' response to the *freelisting* activity, which involved participants writing down all the reasons for academic redshirting, was collected (see examples in Appendix J) and compared. The results of the *ranking* activity, which involved each group ranking the five top reasons for academic redshirting (see Appendix W) were also compared.

4.6 Legitimation of the Study

Several verification strategies were adopted throughout the research design, to increase the rigour and trustworthiness of this study (Morse et al., 2002). Yardley's (2000) criteria for assessing quality in a qualitative study was used. The study has shown consideration for *sensitivity to context* (Yardley, 2000) through an extensive review of literature. The study also demonstrated methodological coherence (Morse et al., 2002) through careful alignment of methodology and methods chosen.

There was evidence of *commitment and rigor* (Yardley, 2000). This study has been subjected to peer review whilst undertaking the course work units, and at various milestones including Confirmation of Candidature and Final Year Review. Commitment was demonstrated through the researcher's engagement in multiple courses during candidature including Qualitative Approaches, IPA, and NVivo. Rigour can be demonstrated through participant selection and quality of the methods adopted and data analysis (Smith et al., 2022). Conducting interviews and focus groups improves triangulation *within method* (Pringle et al., 2011) which increased the trustworthiness of findings.

Transparency and coherence (Yardley, 2000) was achieved by providing a detailed description of participant recruitment strategies, data collection methods and data analysis.

This would enable the study to be reproduced if desired. Memos were kept for the purposes of establishing an audit trail of decisions made throughout the research process (Connelly, 2016; Morse et al., 2002). The use of memos also helped ensure the research account presented was credible. These are included in the Research Diary (see example, Appendix X).

The study can also be measured by *impact and importance* (Yardley, 2000). The review of literature revealed little qualitative research has been undertaken regarding academic redshirting. This study makes a significant contribution to the field of research through its focus on parents' decision-making regarding school entry choices. The findings of this study are relevant to a variety of stakeholders including parents, teachers, principals, and government policy makers.

To assess the quality of IPA research, Smith (2011a) reviewed 293 IPA papers published between 1996 and 2008 and developed criteria for distinguishing quality. Three categories were developed: *acceptable*, *unacceptable* and *good*. Table 4.7 provides a summary of the qualities Smith (2011a) believed constituted a *good* IPA paper. The measure of quality of this thesis in relation to the qualities outlined in Table 4.7 will be considered in Section 4.6.1.1.

Table 4.7*Determining Quality in IPA*

Quality Indicator	Brief Description
The paper should have a clear focus	Higher quality papers often provided detail on a particular aspect, rather than being broad.
The paper will have strong data.	Higher quality papers often contain strong data which has been achieved through good interviewing.
The paper should be rigorous.	Convergence and divergence are indicated. High quality papers provide information on prevalence. Each theme should be supported by extracts from at least 3-4 participants in studies with more than 8 participants.
Elaboration of each theme.	High quality papers may include a sub-set for each theme so that each theme is elaborated on in sufficient detail.
The analysis should be interpretative not just descriptive.	High quality papers include interpretative commentary after each extract. The double hermeneutic is utilised.
The analysis should be pointing to both convergence and divergence.	High quality papers address the similarities and differences between individual experiences for each theme.
The paper needs to be carefully written.	The reader should be engaged with the narrative unfolding. The reader should feel as though they have learnt a great deal about participants' experiences of the phenomenon.

Note. Adapted from "Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis", by J.A. Smith, 2011a, *Health Psychology Review*, 5(1), 24. Copyright 2011 by Taylor & Francis.

More recently, Nizza et al. (2021) identified four markers they deemed represented high-quality IPA (see p. 371). Table 4.8 is an adaptation of these markers to demonstrate how the current study meets the quality indicator for good IPA as determined by these four markers.

Table 4.8

Four Markers of Good IPA

Quality Indicator	Brief Description
Constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative	The analysis includes carefully chosen extracts from participants that have been intertwined with my interpretation to create a persuasive and coherent story.
Developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account	The analysis is given depth through a focus on the experiential meaning of the participants' accounts.
Close analytic reading of participants' words	Meaning is given to the data through a thorough analysis and interpretation of the chosen extracts.
Attending to convergence and divergence	Cross case analysis provides opportunities to search for patterns of similarity between participants' experiences. The idiographic nature of IPA also enables patterns of divergence to be explored.

Note. Adapted from "Achieving excellence in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): Four markers of high quality", by I.E. Nizza, J. Farr, and J.A. Smith, 2021, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), p. 371. Copyright 2021 by Taylor & Francis.

4.6.1 Reflexive Statement

The process of reflexivity provides an opportunity for researchers to reflect upon their standpoint of the phenomenon (Willig, 2003). It is also considered an essential component of the phenomenological attitude (Smith et al., 2022). Willig (2003) referred to two types of reflexivity: personal and epistemological. Personal reflexivity involves reflecting on specific attributes the researcher brings to the study including values, background, and experiences. Awareness of these attributes are important in order to monitor the potential influence on the study (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Epistemological reflexivity, on the other hand, requires consideration of how the researcher's position influenced or constrained how the study was conducted (Willig, 2003).

4.6.1.1. Personal Reflexivity. I came to this study with a personal interest in the phenomenon of parents' decision-making concerning academic redshirting. My initial stance (see Appendix A) revealed that prior to conducting this study, I believed academic redshirting could have a detrimental effect on the child's academic achievement in the early years of school. I needed to be mindful of this preconception as I conducted the study. I also came to this study with an insider perspective, having personally experienced the decision-making experience myself. To overcome any potential influence, a reflexive journal was kept to document thoughts and feelings during the research process (see Appendix S).

As a novice phenomenological researcher, I actively sought professional learning opportunities to improve the quality of my IPA. I originally analysed the interview and focus group data using NVivo 12. However, after attending various IPA workshops offered by Dr Elena Gil-Rodriguez, an expert IPA tutor from England, I re-analysed the interview data set by hand as this was strongly recommended strongly during the workshops. This enabled me to get closer to my data and strengthened the quality of the analysis. After consulting with Dr Jarek Kriukow, an experienced data analysis expert from Scotland, I realised I had mistakenly

used the codes which had emerged from the interview data set, rather than using the focus group data to generate new codes. He advised me to redo my analysis of the focus group data using a *bottom-up* approach, which I did. Towards the end stage of my data analysis, I attended Professor Jonathan Smith's Advanced Workshop on IPA which was offered online via Zoom. This workshop helped me to evaluate my study. Tables 4.7 and 4.8 also provided useful quality indicators to ensure this IPA study was conducted to the highest standard.

Table 4.7 provided a summary of the qualities Smith (2011a) believed constituted a *good* IPA paper. These qualities were considered in the development of this thesis. The study has a clear focus, with a particular interest in the phenomenon of parents' decision-making concerning academic redshirting. Strong data was collected through the methods of semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions. The analysis provided clear examples of convergence and divergence between participant experiences, with extracts from multiple interview and focus group participants used to support claims. Each theme was elaborated on in sufficient detail through the inclusion of sub-themes. An interpretative account of each extract is provided in addition to the use of the double hermeneutic.

I have also used the four quality markers for good IPA (see Table 4.8) as proposed by Nizza et al. (2021). First, the data analysis provides a compelling, unfolding narrative of participants' experiences of the decision-making. Carefully chosen extracts are included to highlight the important features of the stories shared. Second, a vigorous experiential account has been developed to represent the differing decisions made and the outcome for participants. Examples from both interview and focus group participants are provided for each theme. Third, the analysis provides a close analytic reading of the extracts provided to determine the meaning shared. Fourth, the analysis addresses convergence and divergence of participants' experiences throughout each theme.

Overall, this study has strengths and weaknesses. The strengths include: my commitment as a novice researcher to upskill and produce a quality IPA study; pilot interviews were conducted to ensure the interview schedule contained questions that would produce quality data; and the findings and discussion sections of this thesis have been merged together to enable themes to be related to the existing literature (Smith et al., 2022).

Weaknesses include: interview and focus group technique; and inflexibility using the interview and focus group schedule, for the reasons outlined forthwith. If I were to repeat the study, I would talk less during each interview and avoid interrupting the participant. I would also use more strategies to manage the dominant focus group participants. I would aim to be more flexible with the interview and focus group schedules to enable any participant to discuss key features of the experience which may deviate from the schedule. I would record the focus group to enable closer examination of the group dynamics, rather than relying simply on my notes. These lessons are instructive for my developing expertise in IPA.

4.6.1.2. Epistemological Reflexivity. The role of the researcher may have influenced or constrained how the study was conducted (Willig, 2003). This study adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. It was mentioned previously, Heidegger (1927, 1962) disagreed with Husserl (1964) on the use of phenomenological reduction. Heidegger (1927, 1962) argued that interpretation by the researcher is inevitable, and bracketing can only be partially achieved. While I attempted to bracket ideas which developed at each data collection, I found it difficult to prevent myself searching for commonalities between the experiences shared.

The phenomenological researcher adopts an active role as they work with each participant to co-construct meaning from the experiences shared. Subsequently, the researcher is considered part of the world and will bring their professional and personal subjectivities to the study (Neubauer et al., 2019). I came to the study with a predisposition and a particular

positioning as I had previously chosen to academically redshirt my son. To limit the influence of these values throughout the study, I took care to avoid sharing my own experience or personal opinion with participants.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Consideration of ethical issues are evident throughout the research design. Specific choices were made regarding recruitment and selection participants, data collection and data analysis. Prior to data collection, the study received ethics approval (2017-183H) by the Australian Catholic University *Human Research Ethics Committee* (HREC). The researcher then approached the administrators of various online parenting groups and directors of ECEC services to receive permission to approach potential participants for the study. The *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*, provides guidelines for conducting ethical research whilst focusing on four core values: research merit and integrity, justice, beneficence, and respect (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC], 2007; 2018). Each of these values will now be discussed in relation to this study.

4.7.1 Research Merit and Integrity

A comprehensive review of literature was conducted. The study is justifiable because there has been little research, particularly qualitative research, exploring academically redshirting in Australia. The study also has merit because the outcomes have value for children and parents through uncovering influences on parental decision-making concerning school entry age. The findings will be shared through future academic publications. There was no potential conflict of interest because the study received no specific sponsorship or funding (Oliver, 2010).

4.7.2 Justice

Recruitment of potential participants for the study was conducted in a fair manner. I advertised on various online parenting sites to recruit parents. An information letter outlining the title of the study, purpose of the study and potential readers was provided. Participants were recruited based on selection criteria and were chosen in order of response. Individual participants and relevant parent organisations were offered access to the findings of the study which were reported accurately and free of any bias.

I have avoided any deceptive practices (Creswell, 2012; Christians, 2005) as misrepresentation is not ethically justifiable. Plagiarism was avoided through acknowledgment of original authors of ideas adopted within each chapter. To avoid any potential conflict of interest, persons known to me were excluded from the study. This was important because friends or colleagues may have felt obliged to participate if approached (Oliver, 2010).

4.7.3 Beneficence

It was important to consider the benefits and possible harms associated with participation in this study. A perceived benefit for participants was the opportunity to discuss their thoughts and feelings involved in the experience of deciding whether to academically redshirt their child. Sieber and Tolich (2013) found psychosocial benefits to participants, resulting from having someone listen to their experience, particularly if it had been stressful. Participation in this study also enabled participants to reflect on their experience, which may have helped them clarify their understanding of the experience (Sieber & Tolich, 2013). Another perceived benefit was satisfaction for the participant that they were contributing to a body of knowledge, which may ultimately benefit the wider community. Specifically, it may help others to understand the dilemma and conflicts (Oliver, 2010) faced by parents as they decide school entry options for their child.

There is always a degree of vulnerability in human research, as “nothing in life is risk free” (Sieber & Tolich, 2013, p. 19). Research is considered low risk when the only potential foreseeable risk is discomfort (Australian Government, 2007). Participation in this study could have caused emotional harm, such as inducing feelings of anxiety in participants. Participants were advised to utilise counselling services if required. There was also a possibility that participation in the study could influence parental decision-making choices. I was not trying to direct participants towards a particular viewpoint, but rather providing them with an opportunity to discuss their experience (Oliver, 2010).

4.7.4 Respect

Throughout the research process, I showed utmost respect for participants as human beings. Individual differences in terms of gender, ethnicity, and level of education of participants (Oliver, 2010) were taken into consideration in terms of both research design and anticipated interactions. For example, the language used was appropriate for the participants involved in the study. Each participant’s time was valued and interviews or focus groups were completed in a timely manner (Sieber & Tolich, 2013). The value of autonomy was appreciated through recognition of the right for individuals to make their own life decisions (NHMRC, 2007, 2018). I respected each participants’ beliefs concerning academic redshirting, regardless of whether I agreed.

Informed consent refers to participation which is voluntary (Christians, 2005). This means consent is freely given, without physical or psychological coercion. An information letter outlining the title of the study, purpose of the study and the potential readers was provided. Those who agreed to partake in the study signed a written consent form, acknowledging the right to withdraw at any time up until data analysis. Participants were offered the option to view the transcribed data. Privacy was respected in several ways. Confidentiality was assured which allowed participants to freely express their true feelings

around the experience (Oliver, 2010), whilst respecting rights to privacy. With the selection of pseudonyms, it was important to select appropriate names, with consideration of the participant's gender and ethnicity (Oliver, 2010) so that the reader has some understanding of each participants' background.

Integrity of the data was respected in several ways. All information collected was treated as confidential. Audio interviews and focus group data were transcribed by the researcher, with pseudonyms substituted for real names. Raw data was only viewed by members of the research team. Paper copies of consent forms or analysis notes were converted to electronic format as soon as possible. Storage of data was secure with all electronic data kept in a password protected electronic space, with the password only known by me. Hard copies were stored in a filing cabinet which was locked.

4.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter has shown that there were many considerations in the planning and implementing of the research design to ensure alignment of the various dimensions of the research approach including research paradigm, methodology and methods. The rationale for specific choices regarding participant selection, interview data collection, and focus group data collection have been conveyed to the reader in this chapter. The approach to data analysis for the interview and focus group data has also been presented here. Legitimation of the study in terms of trustworthiness was explored and the reasoning underpinning the research design in terms of rigour, authenticity and transparency have been articulated. Ethical considerations were reported to demonstrate that the research was conducted within the expectations outlined by the university and the national research ethics framework. The next chapter will be the first of three analysis chapters which will explore the main findings of the study.

Chapter 5. Cycles of Indecision

The previous chapter provided a detailed description of the methods used for data collection. The purpose of this study was to explore the *lived* experience of parents concerning academic redshirting and school entry. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) qualitative design was chosen to allow parents to reflect upon and share their personal story of the decision-making experience, while also enabling the researcher to interpret and respect each participant's meaning making. The specific research questions which guided this study were:

1. *What* is the lived experience for parents of decision-making concerning academic redshirting of their children?
2. *What* influences parental decision-making regarding whether a child is academically redshirted?
3. *Why* are particular experiences during the academically redshirted year valued?

As mentioned previously, the hermeneutic circle was utilised at various points during this phenomenological study, namely in reviewing the literature and again now at the point of data analysis. Gellweiler et al. (2018) suggested two different methods for interpretation of data. The first method introduces the sub-themes (*parts*) before addressing the overarching theme (*whole*). However, this study adopted the second method whereby each overarching theme (referred to as *group experiential theme* [GET] in this study) is introduced before exploring each sub-theme. The literature has played a significant role in the data analysis of this phenomenological study, where it has been used to support and draw comparisons with the researcher's findings (Rees, 2011; Fry et al., 2017).

5.1 Data Analysis Overview

Data gathered through individual and focus group interviews were analysed robustly (see Sections 4.4 and 4.5) and a series of overarching themes, referred to here as *Group Experiential Themes* (GETs) were created. This involved searching for patterns of convergence and divergence across the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) and creating GETs to represent the commonalities and uniqueness of the experience for the participants in this study (Smith et al., 2022). The five GETs that have been created form the basis of the reporting of the data analysis for this study and are presented across the next three chapters. First, Chapter Five will focus on the key concept of *Cycles of Indecision* which will be explored across the following two GETs:

1. *Parents were influenced by other parents as they navigated this important decision and its potential impact on their child's future; and*
2. *Parents' experiences showed that the burden of decision-making often fell upon the mother.*

Second, Chapter Six will explore the key concept of *Ambiguity* that permeated the data through a further GET:

3. *There was ambiguity for a number of parents as they considered the best decision for their child.*

Third, Chapter 7 will focus on the key concept of *Experiences of Misalignment* through the analysis of the following two GETs:

4. *Parents displayed varying levels of parental readiness for their child's transition to school; in addition to difficulty assessing their child's readiness for school.*
5. *There was an apparent misalignment in views among various stakeholders regarding when a child should commence formal schooling.*

The next section introduces the key concept of *Cycles of Indecision*, as experienced by many parents in the study as they navigated the different school entry options available for their child. This key concept introduces new theorising into the field and makes a significant contribution to knowledge regarding the process of academic redshirting in this context.

5.2 Cycles of Indecision

Currently, in the context of Australian schooling policies, flexibility exists with the provision of both a minimum age cut-off and mandatory deadline regarding school entry. In NSW, Australia, the context of this research, a child is eligible to commence formal schooling provided they turn five by July 31st, however, they must be in compulsory schooling by the age of six (State of New South Wales [Department of Education], 2023). It was evident through the individual interviews and focus group discussions, that many parents who had the choice found the decision-making particularly challenging. Mergler and Walker (2017) went so far as to suggest that this decision was “possibly THE hardest decision a parent has to make” (p. 97). Their study revealed parents experienced intense levels of stress and anxiety due to the uncertainty surrounding the decision-making.

Many parents in this study also found the decision-making particularly daunting, especially those who were making the decision for the first time. It was apparent that many parents experienced cycles of indecision as they considered the options available. Kaitlyn used the metaphor of a rollercoaster ride to represent her fluctuating levels of anxiety as she navigated her way through the decision-making process: “*The rollercoaster ride of anxiety. Going up and down. Should I? Shouldn't I? ... I don't want to disadvantage him*” (Kaitlyn, Mother, as cited in MacKinnon, 2019, p. 58).

The level of anxiety experienced by parents like Kaitlyn was exacerbated by varying levels of knowledge and experience of the Australian schooling system. As she weighed up

the advantages and disadvantages of a delayed school entry for her son, it was evident the main cause of Kaitlyn's anxiety could be attributed to her desire to make a decision that would not disadvantage her son. This, however, was difficult for Kaitlyn to determine due to her lack of familiarity with the current schooling system as this decision involved her eldest child. These cycles of indecision continued for many parents as will be illustrated below.

The next section will introduce the first of two GETs which will form the focus of this chapter and the overarching themes that contribute to the theorising of the substantive findings of this thesis, the model of Cycles of Indecision. Each GET has been elicited from the analysis conducted on the lived experience of parents in this study. Within each GET, a series of sub-themes can be identified inviting critical analysis at a deeper level. Table 5.1 provides a summary of the first GET and sub-themes.

Table 5.1

Group Experiential Theme One

Parents were influenced by other parents as they navigated this important decision and its potential impact on their child's future.

1.1 Parents were influenced by the opinions and decisions of other parents.

1.2 Mothers often reached out to other parents online to help with the decision-making.

1.3 Parents were concerned about the long-term impact of the decision for their child beyond school.

Participant voices in the form of quotes have been integrated into the analysis to exemplify and validate the claims put forward for consideration. It is important to note at this point that, the parents who were interviewed in the first round of interviews were in the process of decision-making, whereas the parents in the focus group interviews conducted later in the study, were reflecting on their decision-making experience. The analysis draws upon and makes comparison to previous research literature related to each GET. Smith et al. (2022) suggested it was possible to merge the analysis and discussion sections to enable the themes to be related more closely to the existing literature and identify the new propositions that have been generated throughout this study. New insights into the phenomenon under study are presented in a later chapter by way of discussion of the findings. It is important to note that each of the participants referred to themselves as ‘mother’ or ‘father’. While some may argue that more gender inclusive language could be adopted, use of the terms ‘mother’ and ‘father’ was deemed appropriate as this is how the participants themselves identified within each of the family situations presented in this study.

5.3 Group Experiential Theme 1 - Parents were influenced by other parents as they navigated this important decision and its potential impact on their child’s future.

It was evident that many parents in the study were influenced by the opinions and decisions of other parents, both in person and online. Mothers often reached out to other parents through social media sources to help with their decision-making. Many parents were worried about the potential long-term impact of their decision on their child’s future. Each of these influences will be considered in turn as sub-themes identified through the data analysis, and the parents’ perspectives will be unpacked in this chapter. The first sub-theme will focus on the influence from other parents due to varying perspectives on school entry age.

5.3.1 Sub-Theme 1.1 Parents were influenced by the opinions and decisions of other parents.

The opinions and decisions of other parents were recurring influences across both interview and focus group participants. Many parents mentioned feeling influenced by other parents regarding school entry for their children, either in person or online. Yvonne recalled: *I felt certain that it's not the right choice to send him... next year. And then I've got everyone else saying things like "oh if you don't send him, he'll be taller than everybody else" or "he'll be old" or you know, things like that, that don't really matter but... sort of play on you.* (Yvonne, Mother)

Despite claiming to have felt certain that a delayed entry was the right choice for her son in the previous extract, Yvonne's use of the phrase "*sort of play on you*" suggested that the opinions of other parents had caused her not to feel entirely comfortable with her decision. In a similar way, Ashini described that her friends were "*shocked and horrified*" at her family's decision to send their son to school at the earliest opportunity. She explained: *I've got Swedish, some good friends and they're like shocked and horrified. So, their little boy is basically a year older than Leeroy and they're going to be going to Kindy [Foundation] together and they're quite good friends. But you can one hundred per cent see the difference. Like yes, I can totally see the difference... and they're quite shocked and horrified, I think. Like they try not to be too judgmental, but I can... see it... like "really, you're sending? Okay".* (Ashini, Mother)

On the other hand, some parents in the study felt no influence by other parents in the decision-making. Carol boldly claimed: "*I don't listen to people*" (Carol, Mother, FG1) and spoke with confidence of her decision to send her daughter to school at the earliest opportunity. Kelly used the phrase "*block out all the noise*" in reference to choosing to ignore the opinions of other parents. She explained:

I mean at the end of the day, I just had to block out all the noise and I thought I'm not going to worry. I can't control ... what other people decide. I can't control who's in the class and who isn't. (Kelly, Mother, FG3)

The terminology used when referring to academic redshirting practices was shown to vary due to different perspectives offered by parents. For example, many parents often referred to a delayed school entry using negative connotations. Phrases such as “*held him back*” (Heather, Mother, FG1) or “*starting late*” (Brett, Father) were frequently used by parents in the study. Negative connotations may influence parents’ decision-making due to the implied harmful impact of a delayed school entry for the child.

On the other hand, some parents viewed a delayed entry positively. These parents referred to a delayed school entry as an opportunity for the child to have “*another year of play*” (Kaitlyn, Mother) or “*be a child for longer*” (Sandrine, Mother, FG4) prior to commencing formal schooling. Kaitlyn, who was struggling with the feeling she was holding her son back by delaying his school entry, recalled receiving the following advice from an acquaintance via a private message on *Facebook*: “*If you choose not to send him, don't use that term [held back]. Say, “I've decided to give him another year” ... [or] “I've decided to give him another year of play”*” (Kaitlyn, Mother). This advice encouraged Kaitlyn to change her reference to a delayed school entry from a negative connotation to a positive one. This extract revealed the use of private messaging on social media enabled parents to offer advice or support without judgment. When examining Australian mothers’ *Facebook* use, Chalken and Anderson (2017) found respondents were less open to sharing their opinion on public forums. Parents were also more likely to use privacy-protective strategies to avoid judgment and conflict surrounding motherhood and parenting issues (Chalken & Anderson, 2017). This will be discussed in more detail in the next sub-theme.

The terminology used by parents in the study to describe children who commenced school at the earliest opportunity also varied. Many parents viewed starting at the earliest opportunity as “*sending early*” (Harshika, Mother, FG1) or starting “*too early*” (Yvonne, Mother). Harshika felt that the terminology used had shifted due to the increasing number of parents choosing to delay school entry, which had resulted in increased pressure to follow suit.

It seems like that the norm is to actually say school starts at six and sending early is the... [on-time] ... but it seems like it's the other way, so parents are viewing it the other way. On-time is six. And if you're sending them at five, it's early. (Harshika, Mother, FG1)

Harshika felt other parents viewed her decision to send her May-born daughter to school as “*sending early*”, due to the birth month being close to the cut-off date. The literature supported this, indicating children who were born in the three months prior to cutoff dates were more likely to be academically redshirted (Donath et al., 2010; Huang, 2015). Heath also believed that there had been a general shift towards delayed school entry. His use of the phrases “*it's more normal now*” or “*the odd one out*” in the extract which follows suggested parents may feel influenced to conform, rather than have their child being different to their peers.

It's almost like twisted round to [pause] it's more normal now for the child to go a year later. And therefore, if you're not doing that, you're made to feel like you're the odd one out and the pressure is on you to hold your kid back. (Heath, Father, FG3)

The suggestion of a general shift towards a delayed school entry mentioned by both Harshika and Heath was supported by research undertaken by Hanly et al. (2019) which indicated half of all children born between January and July in the 2009 and 2012 Foundation cohorts in NSW delayed school entry. Trends in academic redshirting practices were also

identified according to geographical location, ranging from 8 to 54 per cent in some areas (Hanly et al., 2019). This may be attributed to parents consulting with others in their local community and implementing the same decision or moving to a location with like-minded families. Amelia explained: “*So, what you're hearing amongst your other parent peers and what the trend might be and... to do the same thing that everybody else is doing*” (Amelia, Mother, FG3). Heath, who had recently emigrated from the UK, recalled being surprised that there were opportunities for choice to decide school entry in Australia. He recalled:

But even so... I didn't even realise it was a choice. And then suddenly found that we're in Balmain and there's a lot of people are holding their children back an extra year and it's... we didn't even realise it was gonna [sic] be a thing. (Heath, Father, FG3)

In a similar way, parents who favoured sending their child to school at the earliest opportunity may choose to reside in areas where this decision is more common. Nikhita indicated her friends from India often chose to live in specific suburbs with other Indian families, who often sent their children to school at the earliest opportunity. Nikhita revealed:

... In my community where I come from in India ... my friends who are Indians, whether they're born here or they've moved here, are staying in suburbs where there are a lot of Indians. They all send their kids earlier.... I don't fit the mould...which is why I'm not living in one of those suburbs where that is the thing. (Nikhita, Mother, FG3)

Nikhita explained that her friends wanted to live in a community of like-minded families, with similar values regarding education. She believed Indian parents valued their child’s education and prioritised their child’s academic performance. Nikita clarified:

Because there's a lot of pressure there for starting selective exam tuition...But I know that my friends and... for them that's the priority, that the child does well academically. And you

know, that... the sooner they start and get into the workforce, and all of that. (Nikhita, Mother, FG3)

In India, a delayed school entry is strongly linked to poverty (Jha & Lewin, 2014). This may help to explain a preference by Indian families to send their children to school at the earliest opportunity, to enable an earlier entry to the workforce which will benefit the family financially. This view was supported by the literature which suggested children who were academically redshirted may be disadvantaged through the loss of potential earnings if they enter the workforce a year later than other children of the same age (Deming & Dynarski, 2008; Dhuey, 2016; Elder & Lubotsky, 2009). Nikhita suggested parents in India had been “*conditioned*” to value early school entry as a way of improving a family’s economic situation in the following extract:

And if you value, if you've grown up like that. If you've been conditioned as parents like that, you would naturally think that your child going to pre-school and playing at age 5, 5.5 is just not done. That mindset is they will be left behind in the grades of life... So, that's their mindset and they feel so strongly and passionately because of their own conditioning as children, and the education system in India is like that.

(Nikhita, FG3)

Nikhita also believed there were “*pockets*” across Sydney where families often made the same decision to either send or delay. She described her friends feeling a sense of normality because they were living amongst other families who were making the same decision. Nikhita explained:

And because it's normal for most people in the suburbs to do that, they're not the minority, right? They're part of the group. So, I think that it's interesting that just in

Sydney there's just these pockets... and its different for each. I'm sure your Chatswood experience would be different. Balmain experience will be different... and... Parramatta experience will be different. (Nikhita, FG3)

Hanly et al. (2019) reported clusters within some communities across NSW where academic redshirting practices were more prevalent. It was evident from Focus Group 3's discussion that many parents also believed trends in decision-making were suburb specific, with parents opting to live in areas where there were other families who often made the same decision. Kelly shared her family's personal experience of living in various suburbs across Sydney. She spoke of notable differences in suburb trends regarding decision-making which she believed was due to socioeconomic circumstance.

And I felt that... in Leichardt, the preference was definitely to hold back, whereas in Earlwood, it was less so. And I think mainly, it's probably economic. That there are more people... around Earlwood/Kingsgrove area who literally can't afford another year of child care... I would say cost is probably one of the big factors. (Kelly, Mother, FG3)

In Focus Group 4, Sandrine agreed with Kelly's belief that academic redshirting practices varied dependent on the suburb. She believed "*that there's going to be a bigger divide between... the rich and the poor...*" (Sandrine, Mother, FG4) as a result of academic redshirting being more prevalent in affluent areas. She proposed:

I would say that...in the poorer areas of... Australia, they... would be sending their kids early because of... costs. Parents have to work, so... if they've got to pay for childcare... it would be then yes, they're going to go to school. So, I could see that there's going to be a bigger divide between... the rich and the poor... because you'll have... those people that can afford to keep their kids home longer... holding them

back and then... those people who can't afford it... obviously sending their kids to school... (Sandrine, Mother, FG4)

The decision to academically redshirt a child based on the trends in more affluent areas could be seen as problematic. Sandrine expressed concern that parents were choosing to academically redshirt their child without consideration of their individual capabilities. She suggested: *“We're getting more and more kids being held back...who really should... there shouldn't be any question about them going to school”* (Sandrine, Mother, FG4). There was a concern academic redshirting may result in children like hers, who had commenced school at the earliest opportunity, to be disadvantaged. Sandrine's concern was validated by various literature which suggests academic redshirting results in increased expectations for all children regardless of their age (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Deming & Dynarski, 2008). The curriculum may also no longer be developmentally appropriate for the younger children in the cohort (Jaekel et al., 2015; Norbury et al., 2016).

Many parents felt strongly influenced by other parents to delay school entry if their child was male. The literature indicated male children were more likely to be academically redshirted in comparison to their female peers (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Edwards et al., 2011). Cindy expressed feeling particularly influenced by other parents to delay entry for her June-born son due to his birth month and the fact he was male. She recalled: *“My feelings are kind of like... I'm a bit nervous about sending him because everyone say [sic] 'but he's a boy and he's young'”* (Cindy, Mother). The other parents were possibly concerned that Cindy's son could be up to 18 months younger than some of his peers. John showed concern for a “huge gap” between children in a cohort: *“You can imagine, especially 18-month difference if it was a younger boy and an older girl. It's a huge gap”* (John, Father, FG2). Cindy revealed due to feeling “everyone” was encouraging her to delay school entry for her son, had she been making the decision for the first time: *“I would probably have held him back a year just*

because everyone would have told me to. So, yeah that's probably the biggest influence”
 (Cindy, Mother, as cited in MacKinnon, 2019, p. 58).

It was revealed in the previous extract that Cindy only felt confident to proceed with her intention to start her youngest son at the earliest opportunity because she had previous experience in the decision-making to draw upon. This seemed to be a defining moment for several parents, with prior experience being used as a filter to the influence of others. Parents with more than one child often felt they were in a better position to determine their subsequent children’s readiness for school (Edwards et al., 2011). However, not all parents had prior experiences to draw upon. Heather revealed feeling strongly influenced by other parents to delay school entry for her May-born son. In her case, she changed her decision. However, it was evident during the focus group discussion that Heather was still not entirely happy with her decision, and she questioned the role of external influences on her decision-making. She revealed:

And I feel like I may have done him a disservice now, because I've not sent him. And I think, I do question, question my decision. And was it our decision? Did we really make it? Or did we let other people lead us into making that decision? (Heather, Mother, FG1)

In this case, Heather conveyed feeling she had “*done him a disservice now*” which suggested she was not entirely convinced she had taken her child’s individual capabilities into consideration. Instead, Heather felt she had allowed others to influence her decision-making. However, not all parents in the study felt influenced by the opinion of others. Natalya expressed feeling confident in her decision to send her July-born daughter to school at the earliest opportunity despite other parents and teachers at the school trying to convince her to change her mind. She explained:

Most of them are trying to talk us out of this decision and giving some of downfalls... other parents talking about sending their kids later... The teachers in the year form... also had conversations with us, asking us to reconsider. They talk about high school. They talk about... when they're teenagers they will be like a year younger than the other children, and some other children will be drinking and partying and she won't be able to. This makes absolutely no sense to me because all of them will be underage still. So, I just don't see it as a valid argument at all that... 15-year-olds will be drinking, but not 14-year-olds. This is just absolutely stupid to me. (Natalya, Mother)

Natalya did not believe the reasons provided by other parents and teachers in the extract above to delay school entry were sufficient or relevant for her child. She remained undeterred by the reasons put forward and indicated she intended to proceed to send her daughter to school at the earliest opportunity.

Another source of influence was identified in the form of parenting groups, such as mothers' groups or antenatal groups. Some parents in the study felt compelled to follow the decision of other parents in these groups due to the children often sharing a common birth month. In Ashini's case, her preference to delay school entry for her son was strongly influenced by feelings of discomfort because their family's decision was different to the rest of the families in the mothers' group. Ashini did not want her son to be seen as different from his peers. She revealed: *"I still would have preferred to have held him back... especially now... out of my mothers' group... we're the only boy that's sending early"* (Ashini, Mother). This finding contradicted reports by Dockett and Perry's (2004) that parents focused on a child's adjustment to school in terms of fitting in, rather than being different from their peers.

This sub-theme has shown many parents were influenced by other parents, both individually and in groups and as such there was little certainty in decision-making. Rather,

many parents expressed feelings of anxiety, confusion and ongoing indecisiveness. The next sub-theme will focus on the use of online sources to consult with other parents.

5.3.2 Sub-Theme 1.2 Mothers often reached out to other parents online to help with the decision-making.

In the US, it was reported that 31 per cent of parents used online sources such as social media as a parenting resource to give or receive support over the course of a month (Duggan et al., 2015). The rise of social media platforms has enabled parents, particularly mothers, to connect with other parents via online parenting groups; with *Facebook*, blogs and parenting websites being the most popular sources (Haslam et al., 2017). The gender dimension was attributed to a perception that online parenting groups were often pitched towards mothers (Maslen, 2022), as evidenced by terminology commonly used within these groups (for example, ‘Darling Daughter’).

McDaniel et al. (2012) explored how social media and blogging influenced the maternal wellbeing of new mothers. Their research revealed that new mothers spend approximately three hours per day on the internet. Chalken and Anderson (2017) reported similar findings, with one in five mothers in their Australian study indicating they spent more than two hours a day on *Facebook*. Using social media enabled increased social connections, with mothers able to share successful parenting experiences with others (McDaniel et al., 2012).

The social media platform *Facebook* enabled parents in the study to reach a wider population to consult with regarding the major decision concerning when to send their child to school. It was found mothers often reached out to other parents online for support and advice in the decision-making process, particularly when they were unsure. Kaitlyn explained the value of posting online:

It's an opportunity for you to sort of ask a group of people a question and just see... survey essentially... you can survey that many people and see what the answers are. Just give you a gauge as to what has happened for other people. And that's not going to give you the answer... but it just gives you a bit of an idea as to other people's experience and then... tells you what that might mean for you or your son. (Kaitlyn, Mother)

This finding supported previous studies which also revealed mothers were more likely to use social media to discuss parenting issues (Chalken & Anderson, 2017; Maslen, 2022). Kaitlyn appreciated the ability to essentially survey a wide population of parents on their child's starting school experience as she navigated her own decision-making. Mothers often valued the accessibility and immediacy of multiple viewpoints available through social media sources when making decisions about their child (Moon et al., 2019b). Kaitlyn expressed feeling relieved that the general response from other parents to her forum post supported her intention to delay school entry for her son.

I think I must have had 60 or something responses and they were all you know very much about no, don't send. Don't send. Don't send. Which... made me feel better at the time cause [sic] I thought okay, well if the general response is don't send then I don't have question. I'm just not going to send. (Kaitlyn, Mother)

The use of social media such as *Facebook* enabled parents such as Kaitlyn the opportunity to connect with a broader group of parents within the community. Chalken and Anderson's (2017) study revealed more than half of the Australian mothers surveyed had increased their use of *Facebook* since becoming a parent. The way *Facebook* was used had also changed, with mothers using the social media platform to access, share and discuss information regarding their children. It was, however, common for mothers to use privacy protective strategies (changing their profile name or picture or accessing private groups)

when posting in online groups as many had experienced judgmental behaviours from other mothers (Chalken & Anderson, 2017). The mothers in this study described changing their online behaviour to become less open about sharing their views in public forums. For example, Kaitlyn was able to post anonymously, which enabled her to seek guidance and support whilst also protecting her family's privacy. Respondents were able to share personal stories, guidance or reassurance based on their own experiences of decision-making. The online forum post had generated numerous stories from parents who had regretted sending their child to school at the earliest opportunity. Kaitlyn recalled:

The overwhelming response - it seems to be that nobody ever regrets keeping them another year and sending them. But there are lots of regrets to people sending them earlier. (Kaitlyn, Mother)

The need to avoid regret was a common reason parents discussed to support a delayed school entry. Focus group parents Ruthie and Maria both reiterated similar responses when discussing their own experiences of engaging with other parents on social media sources regarding this important decision. Ruthie mentioned: *"I hear lots of regrets about people sending early but no regrets about sending later"* (Ruthie, Mother, FG4). In a different focus group, Maria explained:

And past parents' experiences who have been through this, plays a big role in helping to make your decision. So often you hear, on the forums as well, "you'll never regret holding back, but you may regret it sending early." (Maria, Mother, FG2)

However, not all parents who had posted or engaged with an online forum felt that there was a consensus. Linda recalled reading numerous online forums regarding starting school age and she felt that parents presented strong arguments both for and against delaying school entry.

So many people that we've met have really strong arguments either way. Either they're very forward to sending them and throwing them in the deep end and seeing how they go, or they're very much like oh no... they're much better to be older. (Linda, Mother)

While parents were looking for clarity by conversing with others, it was not always forthcoming. As a result of these strong arguments, Linda remained confused by the contrasting opinions and was still somewhat undecided at the time of the interview. In times such as this, mothers often used *maternal instinct*; a phrase coined by Moon (2019a) to describe how they decided when there was no consensus. Maternal instinct was described as weighing up the advice given and making the best decision for the child based on the mothers' knowledge of their child, the situation, and any other important factors (Moon, 2019a).

The creation of the Internet has enabled people to connect easily with others regardless of location. Williams Veazey (2016) found migrant mothers, who were defined as those living away from their country of birth, often utilised social media sources as a form of social support. However, she found the advice offered to parents sometimes conflicted with practices adopted in the home country, resulting in increased anxiety surrounding the complex decision-making processes for migrant parents.

A finding that emerged from the analysis of this study was that parents who had emigrated to Australia shared concerns with comparative conversations regarding varying commencing school ages across countries. In particular, parents from the United Kingdom (UK) found it difficult to comprehend why parents would delay their child's school entry. Heath explained: *"By coming to Australia he already went kind of four months later than the kids he was at preschool within the UK"* (Heath, Father, FG3). This was a point which Heather expanded on. She recalled:

That was the thing, I think was the push for in my group... My antenatal group were from Coogee, a lot of expats, Irish, English... and a few of them went back to England. Same antenatal group, so same aged children and they were starting school and part of me was like "Beth's kids have started school. Beau would be going to school as well. If... we lived in England, he would be going to school. He's going." And I enrolled him at the primary school, and he was going to school. (Heather, Mother, FG1)

Heather's extract revealed she had clearly intended to enrol her son to commence school at the earliest opportunity. However, it was revealed in the previous sub-theme that she eventually had changed her mind and delayed her son's school entry. Hannah also expressed feeling influenced by her mother's group in the UK:

We had the equivalent of a mothers' group. And I had friends who had children who were the same age. And... school starting age in the UK is much younger and... they start in September. ... So, all his friends had already started... school in that September. And so, I was just kind of like, why would I wait? Like, he's perfectly able to start school. All his friends at home had started school. And... he's so very bright. He learned to read very early. (Hannah, Mother)

Because the children in Hannah's mothers' group had already commenced formal schooling in the UK, she believed it made sense for her son to also start school here in Australia. However, Hannah's research into the Australian schooling system, combined with her husband's teaching background, resulted in a mutual decision to delay school entry for their son. Despite this, Hannah admitted to feeling negatively impacted by social media posts regarding the progression of her son's peers in schooling in the UK.

When you look at things like on Facebook so they're starting there... people posting they're like "oh so and so is starting Year 2" ... and so you really kind of have that... comparison and ... it still jars a little bit. (Hannah, Mother)

Coyne et al. (2017) believed using social media to draw social comparisons was problematic for mothers due to a tendency to relate the information to one's own experiences. Hannah's reference to "it still jars a little bit" in the previous extract exposed the emotional turmoil she was continuing to experience at the thought her son was being 'left behind' his peers. She pondered:

What possible reason could I have for, for not starting, you know, for him not going? He's eligible. And... and because I didn't really... then then I think, probably through reading the groups and stuff, I realised that there was a choice. I didn't really necessary realise. There isn't, like I said there isn't really in the UK, um unless there is kind of special circumstances. And people are campaigning for some of the children to be able to start later. (Hannah, Mother)

This sub-theme has revealed mothers often used social media sources to seek support and information from other parents online. It was shown that the experiences of other parents had a significant influence on parental decision-making regarding when their child should commence formal schooling. Many parents valued hearing about other parent's experiences, both positive and negative, as they shunted back and forth through their decision-making cycles that were continuously changing due to the opinions of other people, both in person and online. Parents also valued the opportunity to reach a wider parent population, given the potential long-term impact of the decision on their child. This will now be discussed in the next sub-theme.

5.3.3 Sub-Theme 1.3 Parents were concerned about the long-term impact of the decision for their child beyond school.

It was apparent that whilst taking onboard the experiences shared by others and the advice offered, parents' concerns regarding the decision-making often extended beyond their child commencing formal schooling. Many parents spoke of feeling anxious and stressed by the enormity of the decision, showing particular concern for the potential long-term impact of their decision-making on their child's future. Craig explained: *"Because it's... something that can potentially affect their whole life, I think"* (Craig, Father, as cited in MacKinnon, 2019, p. 67).

Craig's concern regarding the long-term impact of the decision may be attributed to what he described as his first-born son starting school *"on the wrong foot"*. He wondered: *"Whether it's caused him, you know [to] start off school on the wrong foot... too immature for it"* (Craig, Father). There was concern that the decision could potentially impact the son's entire schooling journey. Craig's concern was validated by Norbury et al. (2016) who indicated early school failure may lead to lowered self-esteem in children, which may negatively impact on attitudes towards school in later years. Page et al. (2019) also reported that children who were relatively older than their peers experienced greater success and performed more strongly at school due to their additional maturity. Craig felt his son, who had been one of the youngest in the cohort with a February birthdate, had struggled immensely maturity-wise in comparison to his peers.

It's about maturity and stamina and then also thinking about it, how it will be just ongoing. Like we feel like Adam, each year, is going to be struggling with maturity just because all the other ones are just a bit older than him. (Craig, Father)

When weighing up the decision for her first-born son, Sarah recalled assessing the potential harm of both options (to delay or to send) for her son. Sarah then relied on her maternal instinct to choose the option she believed would cause the ‘least’ harm to her child. She recalled:

I remember saying with Matthew... by keeping him back I cannot do any harm to the child. I cannot hurt him by doing what I'm doing. But if I decided to send him and it was too early, it actually could have lasting long-term damaging effects on him.

(Sarah, Mother)

On the other hand, Cindy revealed that she was sending her second born son to school at the earliest opportunity to avoid a negative long-term impact. She was worried that a delayed entry may result in him becoming bored at school, which could then impact on his entire 13 years of schooling. Cindy explained that her eldest son, who had been formally assessed as gifted, had experienced several behavioural issues at school which she attributed to boredom. Cindy was concerned that if her second son was also gifted, a delayed start could result in a repeat of the difficulties the family had previously experienced with the first son. She explained:

But it's not preschool that I'm worried about if I hold him back another year. It's school – it's the next 13 years at school, whether he'll be bored the next thirteen years because he starts at the head of the game, and he just keeps going. (Cindy, Mother)

Cindy's concern was validated by Australian research undertaken by Martin (2009) who assessed the long-term impacts of delayed school entry on motivation, engagement, and performance in high school. His findings showed poor long-term outcomes for children who had been academically redshirted; reporting higher levels of disengagement, lower homework completion and poorer academic achievement.

Concern regarding the long-term impact of the decision on the child was also experienced by other parents who favoured sending their children to school at the earliest opportunity. Heather had been convinced she was sending her first, May-born son to school at the earliest opportunity and he was enrolled to start. However, the long-term impact of the decision weighed heavily on Heather's conscience. Whilst the ECEC teacher and schoolteacher both reassured her that her son would cope if he started school, they indicated potential long-term social issues in high school for consideration. As the school year approached, Heather eventually changed her mind and academically redshirted her son.

I enrolled him. He was going. And that was the end of it. And I didn't care what anyone was saying, like I know he's ready and I'm sticking to my guns. And then it, just as it got closer and closer, it got me is the crunch, and his primary school and the pre-school teacher were all saying "It will be alright. He will be okay. But... what about when he turns 16?" And everyone goes "oh he's not 16 yet and everyone's driving, and he can't" and what about... I can't think that far ahead.... (Heather, Mother, FG1)

Consideration of the long-term impact of the decision was contemplated by many parents in the study. Despite her claim "*I'm sticking to my guns*" in the previous extract, Heather admitted to finally succumbing to the pressure of external influences and the potential long-term impact of her decision through her reference to "*the crunch*". Linda felt it "*seems ridiculous*" to be worrying about their son's secondary schooling before he had even started school. She revealed:

So, I've said to my husband the last few days because he's been very much like we're going to send him, we're just going to send him. I've said I think we need to start thinking about not the now because I think he'll be fine if we send him next year, he'd

be fine. But more about the Year Seven or Year 12 which seems ridiculous because we've got no idea what's going to happen then. (Linda, Mother)

Ashini also shared feeling frustrated by the potential long-term impact of her decision to send her July-born son to school at the earliest opportunity. Whilst recognising that initially, her son may cope with the expectations and demands of the Foundation year, Ashini expressed concern that her decision to send him could impact him throughout the rest of his schooling.

Even if he's fine in Kindy [Foundation], he may not be fine in Year Two and Year Four and Year Six and Year Eight... when he's going through puberty and all the rest of it. So, it's just going to be one of those never-ending things. (Ashini, Mother)

Her use of the phrase “*one of those never-ending things*” exposed Ashini’s anxiety of the potential long-term impact of her family’s decision to send their son to school at the earliest opportunity. She expressed apprehension regarding potential feelings of regret if the decision were to impact negatively on her son as he got older. Ashini’s concern was affirmed by participants in Focus Group 2 who discussed the differences in level of maturity which often emerged as children moved into adolescence. Maria explained:

Often issues show up in high school and that transition... that age gap discrepancy and maturity really shows [sic] then.... it may not be showing now but it can show the cusp of adolescence, and that can come up its own issues. (Maria, Mother, FG2)

The literature also revealed parents often considered the long-term impact of this decision on the child. In Mergler and Walker’s (2017) study, parents were concerned about the high school years, particularly if their child would be considered young for the cohort. Parents instead indicated a preference for their child to be older and more mature to deal with issues commonly associated with the teenage years such as peer pressure and drinking.

Sandrine indicated: *“I've heard it a lot. Why would you want to send?... Everyone else will be drinking when they finish the HSC and your child won't be”* (Sandrine, Mother, FG4). Karina agreed, showing concern that a child who starts at the earliest opportunity will feel left out because they will *“be at uni and not driving and not being [sic] able to go and drink”* (Karina, Mother, FG2). However, some parents thought it was absurd that future experiences related to their child's driving and alcohol use was influencing parents' decision-making. Kelly asked *“... Did you really make a decision about your child's education based on whether or where they're going to sit in the car?...”* (Kelly, Mother, FG3) in reference to obtaining a driver's licence.

The concerns about the long-term impact of the parent's decision on their child's learning and development were not confined to the years of schooling. Some parents expressed apprehension regarding the impact of the decision on their child's life after school. Maria predicted parents wouldn't find out whether their decision was the 'right' or 'wrong' one until their children graduated from school. She predicted: *“We'll only know when they graduate probably... whether it was the right decision or wrong”* (Maria, Mother, FG2). Parental concerns regarding the long-term impact of starting school age on future life outcomes were validated by the literature which showed that there were negative long-term impacts of starting school at the earliest opportunity, with lower rates of participation in tertiary education (Bedard & Dhuey, 2006; Black et al., 2011). The notion of a 'right' or 'wrong' decision will be explored more deeply as a separate sub-theme in the next chapter.

Some parents were concerned about their child's ability to socialise with their peers during the tertiary years. Kaitlyn reflected on her own experience of starting university at a young age, which had a significant influence on her decision-making. Kaitlyn expressed a desire for her son to be 18 years of age when he started university so that he would be of legal age to socialise with his friends at adult venues.

And I debated that in terms of you know, if he's the oldest what happens at university... beyond university? And I was the youngest in my year. So that's another thing that affected me thought process wise... I started uni at 17...I was able to go clubbing with a fake ID... Lucky that was the case. Because otherwise that would have affected my friendship, my bonding, and that kind of thing in that new environment... Like that's ... a silly thing but it's true. It's real, like at that age... if you were unable to go out with friends...So... whilst it didn't affect me and I still went to uni and I did a Bachelor of Science and it didn't affect me directly, the fact that I went to school early, that consideration as to what that meant ... when they turn 18 and all the rest of its important to me. (Kaitlyn, Mother)

Whilst there has been a significant shift in how Australians consume alcohol in the last decade, drinking still plays an important role in the social experience for 18–24-year-olds with many using alcohol as a tool to relax (DrinkWise Australia, 2017). Kaitlyn's concerns regarding her son being of legal drinking age at university were affirmed by other parents from Focus Group 2. Maria referred to several social opportunities a school leaver may potentially miss out on due to being younger than their peers.

With the first child when you put on, post on Facebook forums, you know, what did you do? That is a reason a lot of parents actually said “well, all their friends will be clubbing, and my child won't be able to.” Or “all their friends will be drinking but my child won't be able to.” (Maria, Mother, FG2)

Other parents, such as Brett, considered it important for his daughters to finish school at 18 years of age. He believed that being an adult offered greater employment opportunities to school leavers. This was affirmed by Page et al. (2019) who found long-term impacts of relative age on career choices. They found children who were relatively older for their cohort

exhibited higher levels of self-confidence, risk taking and competitiveness which were often associated with economic success.

At the other end of the scale, not about starting school but finishing school, she'll be 18 and so will Maddie. So, they'll be 18 when they finish. That gives them a lot more options in terms of employment and hopefully more or, I don't know, more um maturity when they finish school. (Brett, Father)

This sub-theme has shown that many parents in the study revealed apprehension and anxiety regarding the potential long-term impact of their decision-making on their child's schooling. In particular, parents were concerned about the high school years, and their child's ability to deal with issues such as peer pressure and drinking. Some parents were concerned about the impact of the decision-making on their child's life after school, including the child's ability to socialise with their peers during the tertiary years.

The first GET has explored some of the deep complexities involved in the decision-making and the fluidity and fluctuations that parents experienced throughout the decision-making cycles. The diverse set of experiences and narratives provided to date revealed parents experienced a range of feelings, including anxiety, stress, concern, and indecision. Mothers in this study often turned to social media to seek support and advice from a wider parent population. It was apparent that many parents experienced a cyclic process of juxtaposing differing points of view and narratives shared by other parents as they moved through the decision-making process. The potential long-term impact of the decision for the child was an important consideration and likely contributed to negative feelings expressed by parents as they navigated their decision-making. The next section will introduce the second GET that addresses the key concept of decision-making and the complexities that shape this difficult process of indecision, including the demanding roles experienced as mother in comparison to father, and the emotion that was deeply embedded in the uncertainty of

decision-making for mothers as time unfolded. In reporting the conversations that are the focus of this analysis, it will be recalled that the terms mother, father, wife, and husband are those adopted by the participants, not the researcher.

5.4 Group Experiential Theme 2 - Parents' experiences showed that the burden of decision-making often fell upon the mother.

Part of the lived experience shared by parents in the study revealed that the burden of decision-making concerning school entry often fell upon the mother. Several reasons for this will now be considered. The reported level of input from fathers was shown to vary, with the majority having minimal involvement in the decision-making. It was evident the mothers' decision-making experiences often emulated *intensive mothering ideology*; a maternal ideal which commonly required mothers to invest a significant amount of time and energy into their child's upbringing (Hays, 1996). Mothers in the study conveyed intense feelings as they considered the impact of their decision-making on their child's entire schooling experience and beyond. Each of these reasons will now be considered in turn as sub-themes identified through the data analysis, with parents' perspectives intertwined to support the claims put forward. The first sub-theme will focus on the varied input from fathers in the decision-making.

Table 5.2

Group Experiential Theme Two

Parents' experiences showed that the burden of decision-making often fell upon the mother.

2.1 The reported level of input from fathers in the decision-making varied.

2.2 Mothers' decision-making was often influenced by intensive mothering ideology.

2.3 Mothers often shared intense feelings concerning the decision and its potential impact on their child.

5.4.1 Sub-Theme 2.1 *The reported level of input from fathers in the decision-making varied.*

Some parents described the decision-making experience as a collaborative partnership. Others indicated the father and partner, or husband had a dominant role in the final decision-making for the family. Most mothers, however, reported minimal input from the father of the child. This section will explore the varying levels of input of fathers in the decision-making, as depicted by the mothers in this study.

The decision-making experience was described, by some parents, as a collaborative effort. For these families, both parents considered the various choices available and made a mutual decision together. Brett recalled discussing the decision for each child with his wife, the mother of the children, before they both agreed that a delayed school entry would be the best option for both daughters. He explained: *“Harriet and I have discussed it... we...both agree that it's nicer to let them be older when they start”* (Brett, Father). John also indicated the decision for their family had been a “no brainer” due to both parents sharing similar views. He revealed: *“If you both know that child is ... ready and you both feel that child needs the stimulation then, you know, to us it was... a no brainer”* (John, Father, FG2).

Similarly, Harshika recalled consulting with her husband, the father of her child, regarding their mutual decision to send their daughter to commence school at the earliest opportunity. She described various attributes which she believed indicated her daughter was ready to start school. Harshika explained:

So, my husband and I were deciding and like I said, she is turning five in May. For us... Jacinta was just... she's confident. She's always been good with older kids. She's always been quite mature for her age and always a keen, keen learner. Like she was always doing things earlier than...and not gifted, I'm not saying she's gifted. She's just always had interests. Reading she's always been interested in, always interested in

doing activity books. And so, for us... my husband and I were both in unison. We were still younger for our class. So, I finished school when I was 16. I had no issues and ... based on our school experiences, we never saw anything negative of being younger.

(Harshika, Mother, FG1)

Harshika referred to each parents' own experience of starting school young with no issue. Mergler and Walker (2017) found parents who had a positive experience starting school at the earliest opportunity often felt justified in replicating the same decision for their own children.

However, it was evident the decision-making was not always a collaborative effort involving both parents. Some mothers reported the husband's/father's choice in the decision-making was the most influential. In these cases, the husband/father also wanted the child to commence formal schooling at the earliest opportunity. This may be attributed to their own schooling experience or potential financial savings from the child starting school. Ashini confided multiple discussions had taken place with her husband regarding the decision due to their differences in opinion. During these discussions, her husband repeatedly referred to his own experience of starting school young, believing this had shaped the person who he had become. He wanted his son to have the same experience and opportunity to find oneself in the face of adversity. Ashini recalled:

I've had lots and lots of discussions about it and I guess my husband and I were at odds to be honest. I would have preferred to hold him back, especially because he's a boy and he's the oldest [child] and he's little as well. He's physically little. But my husband, not growing up in Australia especially, and because he was young as well and he felt it... made him who he was. To be pushed out of his comfort zone and not being the biggest and not being the smartest and not... being the fastest and all that

kind of thing. So, for him he just thinks it makes someone. I don't necessarily agree.

(Ashini, Mother)

Ashini's husband and the father of her child was quite adamant the couple would be sending their young son to school at the earliest opportunity, despite her reservations regarding his gender and physical size in the previous extract. Ashini indicated her preference to delay school entry was due to the belief there was an advantage to being older in the cohort. This preference was validated by research undertaken by Noel and Newman (2003) who reported one of the two main reasons mothers delayed a child's school entry was due to the perceived advantage of the child being older than their peers. Ashini explained:

... If he didn't feel that strongly about it, we would have sent him the year after. It really came down to that. Because even though I feel like... he's ready... I don't feel so bad... I don't feel anxious about that... I still would have preferred to give him that extra you know advantage, I guess. But... my husband won this battle unfortunately (laughter). (Ashini, Mother)

Several parents in the study indicated that fathers often used their own schooling experiences to justify their desire for their child to commence school at the earliest opportunity. Linda, whose family had immigrated to Australia from the UK, indicated her husband believed "*he'll be fine*" in reference to their son commencing school at the earliest opportunity in Australia. She reported:

... Our different views I guess on schooling come from because in England you start school at four. It's kind of a no brainer. Everyone goes to school at four. That's what happens. And here obviously it's different. And my husband's very much of the... "everyone in England goes to school from when they're four there. He'll be fine, like everyone. Everyone is fine. He'll be fine." (Linda, Mother)

The notion of “*he’ll be fine*” (Linda, Mother) or “*he’ll be right*” (Cindy, Mother) showed fathers were often content with their child coping at school, as opposed to thriving. Cindy indicated her husband was eager for their son to commence schooling at the earliest opportunity. She, however, was more indecisive, and felt nervous about the decision due to their son’s young age.

My husband is fairly gung-ho about “let’s just send him. He’ll be right” (laughter). I’m like okay... I flip back and forth. My husband’s very adamant. He’s ready, send him, what are you thinking about? You know, save childcare fees (laughter). I’m like, yeah, I know but. So, I get... nervous about sending him. Because I think he’s still so little. He’s four and a half, going to big school. That’s a big... it’s a big thing. (Cindy, Mother)

Cindy’s husband had clearly considered the financial savings for the family from not having to pay childcare fees for an additional year. Ashini also referred specifically to upcoming changes to childcare payments which would impact on some families. The *Child Care Subsidy* came in to effect in July 2018 to provide subsidised ECEC to eligible families (Parliament of Australia, 2019). It was estimated at the time, around 70.7 per cent of families would receive more assistance under the new scheme (Parliament of Australia, 2019). Ashini indicated her family would be part of the 24.3 per cent who would receive less assistance under the proposed changes. This may have contributed to Ashini’s husband’s strong desire to send their son to school at the earliest opportunity. She revealed:

... with the change in the rebate. Is that going to impact people sending their kids later? Because... for us, we’re going to lose the rebate next year, next June to be fair. So, if there are other people in that situation. Of course, yes, we’re fortunate because it’s means tested and what not. But... it’s a lot of money. So, I wonder if people are

going to go well instead of paying an extra 10 grand or whatever it is, maybe we can send them to school? (Ashini, Mother)

Typically, it was mothers who took primary responsibility for the decision-making concerning school entry. Historically, traditional family roles depicted the husband as the main breadwinner and the wife as the nurturer. For example, Sandra's husband travelled frequently for work, and therefore responsibility for decisions concerning their children was entrusted to Sandra as the primary carer. She explained:

He's in Dublin this week. He's away a lot ... That's his job. He does that kind of stuff and then I've given up my career in IT... He's interested to hear all about it but he's kind of like ... you know what you're doing. (Sandra, Mother, FG2)

In this family's case, Sandra clearly considered her husband's role in the family unit to be the breadwinner. She indicated that she had given up her career to raise the children and naturally assumed primary responsibility for any decisions made. After listening to Sandra's storytelling, Reshima clearly resonated with Sandra's decision-making experience, responding: "*sounds like my husband. Literally no input whatsoever*" (Reshima, Mother, FG2).

In contrast, Sabina described a role reversal in her family; revealing herself to be the main breadwinner, whilst her husband was the stay-at-home dad. As a result, Sabina believed her husband should get more say in the decision-making regarding their children due to his role as the primary carer in the family.

My family is a little bit different where I'm actually the main breadwinner of the family and I've got a domestic engineer husband. So, he is the stay-at-home dad. ... He's the one who probably should be involved in this interview. Though our decisions have been completely mutual... because he's the one who is mostly involved with school pickups and all that stuff, he's the one who actually gets more say because... he's the

one that's involved in that daily running of things. So, I think we're both fairly equal in making the decision. But I think his opinion matters more a little bit because he's the one that is involved so. (Sabina, Mother, FG4)

Some mothers reported their husbands were not concerned about the decision regarding age at school entry and were content for their wives to make the final decision. This indicates the husbands may be less concerned about the long-term impact of the decision-making on the child's future. This finding complemented previous research which revealed fathers, regardless of class, often take less responsibility regarding school decision-making (Brown, 2022; Daminger, 2019). Brown (2022) reported fathers did not consider school decision-making as an important part of their parenting role. Sandrine revealed: *My husband was very relaxed about it all and it was all up to me and even with the school, it was like he was fine with both choices and it's all up to me [laughs]. So, it was all up to me in the end.* (Sandrine, Mother, FG4)

Whilst some mothers like Sandrine accepted the level of input into the decision-making was minimal from their husband, others would have preferred more input from their partner. Kelly expressed feeling extremely uncomfortable with having sole responsibility for this important decision. Her use of the phrase *"it really shouldn't be so hard"* indicated she was frustrated with the uneasiness she felt and the general indecisiveness of other parents. *So, but then he was also like, the decision is with you. This is my two cents, but you've gone and done all the research on it (laughs). And so, ultimately, I know, but I reckon just the like feeling of uneasiness. Like the fact that parents are just so torn up about it, it really shouldn't be so hard.* (Kelly, Mother, FG3)

It was mentioned previously, mothers frequently utilised social media for parenting support or advice. Mothers like Kelly often turn to online parenting groups for advice and

support when making important decisions such as when their child should commence formal schooling. Chalken and Anderson (2017) found almost one third of mothers connected with others online via *Facebook* for parenting support due to a lack of family and community support.

It was often the mothers who researched school entry options. Focus group participants Karina and Reshima both revealed their husbands were content for them to research school entry decisions and make the best choice for their family: “*You’ve read more about this on Facebook, you do it*” (Karina, Mother, FG2) and “*It’s like yeah, you’ve spoken to everybody under the sun... you make the decision*” (Reshima, Mother, FG2).

It has been shown that the reported level of input from fathers in the decision-making varied for parents in this study. Some recalled the decision-making experience as a collaborative effort, with both parents working together to reach a mutual decision. In some families, it was reported that the husband/father held a more dominant role in making the final decision. For most families, however, the level of input from the child’s father was described as minimal. As a result, mothers often resorted to social media to access advice and parenting support to help with their decision-making. However, engagement with social media often revealed a competitive atmosphere, where intensive mothering ideals were often encouraged (Coyne et al., 2017). This will be explored further in the next sub-theme.

5.4.2 Sub-Theme 2.2 Mothers’ decision-making was often influenced by intensive mothering ideology.

The stories and experiences of the decision-making shared by the mothers in the study often reflected what American sociologist Sharon Hays (1996) referred to as *intensive mothering ideology*. This ideology prescribed a set of ideals that were perceived to represent a ‘good mother’. Often adopted by middle-class mothers, appropriate methods of child

rearing were defined as “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive” (Hays, 1996, p. 54). These child rearing methods often placed additional pressure on mothers to be the primary caregiver and invest significant time and energy on their children (Coyne et al., 2017). Amelia described intensive ideological ideals through her reference to the notion of today’s mothers trying to make everything ‘picture perfect’ for their children. She explained:

This whole concept of our generation making everything perfect for our children. Never have to struggle... Their shoes are tied up, and their lunches in their bags... Whereas when my generation, or certainly the generations gone by, it wasn't a focus because... we didn't 'molly coddle' our children so much. (Amelia, Mother, FG3)

A mothers’ involvement in school decision-making was often framed by intensive mothering ideology (Parcel et al., 2016). According to its child rearing ideals, mothers are expected to research, prioritise, and monitor every aspect of their child’s life (Daming, 2019). Chelsea believed mothers often took on the entire burden of decision-making regarding school entry, resulting in increased pressure when choosing the best decision for the child. She anticipated:

Whether those parents are making a decision or whether it's just the mums and I feel like the mums are having all the pressure of making that decision and it depends on their situation to which direction they take. (Chelsea, Mother, FG4)

Kaitlyn’s remark at the commencement of her interview conveyed the pressure she was experiencing regarding this decision. She indicated: “*I'm going to be, I'll probably be one of the ones who's going to be struggling at the end of this. Just decision wise, I'm really struggling with it actually*” (Kaitlyn, Mother). The struggle Kaitlyn described could be attributed to mothers’ beliefs about ‘good parenting’ (Brown, 2022; Daming, 2019). Ashini

recalled feeling “*really anxious*” and “*pretty bad*” about her family’s intention to send their son to school at the earliest opportunity. Her revelation “*it just wasn’t fair to him*” in the extract which follows is evidence of her maternal need to protect her child.

At first, when we first had this conversation with my husband it was pretty heated because I felt really anxious about it. I really didn't feel good about sending him early, especially because it would have been like a year and a half ago and he, he was a bit slower to talk and you know there were some, you know, some just some iss[ues].... and I just felt like, it just wasn't fair to him. So, I did feel pretty bad, you know. We did have some heated discussions about it. And then I just slowly got more and more comfortable with it. (Ashini, Mother)

Hannah believed that mothers took responsibility for making decisions regarding their child very seriously, and often felt the need to check their decision-making with others. This was particularly evident for mothers whose children were commencing their schooling journey. Hannah explained:

Like every decision you make has to be checked with 20,000 people to make sure that it's the right one... Even if it's like, “what's the best water bottle to buy? What's the best lunch box to buy?” Whatever it is... even the really small, like minute decisions are being put out to... a forum of 20,000 people. So, the idea you would choose your child's ... school starting age without discussing it with 20,000 people... I think from that point of view, it's an extra burden I think that ... Mothers' take really seriously. (Hannah, Mother)

However, drawing social comparisons between their own and the experiences of others shared online may also result in mothers questioning their own parenting ability (Coyne et al., 2017). The use of social media was found to exacerbate and promote intensive mothering ideology (Valtchanov et al., 2016) through the display of behaviours aligning

with this ideology and online judgments of others' parenting choices. Maslen's (2022) study revealed many mothers felt judged by other parents when using *Facebook* to offer advice or seek support on parenting issues. Valtchanov et al. (2016) believed these judgmental online experiences reinforced intensive mothering through the promotion of narrow views of 'good mothering' and limited discussion of alternative approaches to mothering.

This sub-theme has shown that the responsibility for decision-making concerning when a child should commence formal schooling is often bestowed upon the mother. The level of input from fathers was shown to vary. As a result, mothers often turned to social media for advice and support in making this important decision. Online parenting groups, however, have been shown to promote intensive mothering ideology (Parcel et al., 2016). As a result, mothers shared intense feelings as they navigated this important decision, due to the additional pressure often placed on them to make decisions that were in the best interest of the child.

5.4.3 Sub-Theme 2.3 Mothers often shared intense feelings concerning the decision and its potential impact on their child.

It has been shown previously, the burden of decision-making regarding a child's school entry often fell upon the mother. As a result, mothers in this study often expressed intense feelings including guilt, regret, failure, judged, frustrated, confused and anxious as they shared their unique experiences of the decision-making.

During a focus group discussion, Heather revealed feelings of guilt at the potential negative outcome of her decision for her son. Her struggle to decide which school entry option would cause her to "*feel more guilty*" clearly showed the intense pressure she had placed upon herself as a mother to make the best decision for her child. She reflected:

What will I more feel more guilty about? Will I feel more guilty about the fact that I held him back and now he's in the class where he is bored and not challenged... Or will I feel more guilty about sending him early and having him struggling and he's you know grappling around trying to keep up with the big boys and he can't, or sit down and listen and he can't, because he's not the same as everybody else? What would make me feel the worst? You know and I still, I don't know the answer to that. I still don't know the answer to that. I think I might regret not sending him early.

(Heather, Mother, FG1)

It was apparent Heather's feelings of uncertainty were evident during the focus group through her repeated claim of "*I still don't know the answer to that*". This may have been attributed to a potential fear her child was missing out or was being left behind, which developed after listening to the other parents share their child's schooling experience.

Heather expressed the feeling of regret multiple times during the focus group discussion.

I mean I don't care what everyone, all these excuses and reasons. And that's why I suppose now I didn't do it and I hear people like yourself, I'm like... oh I probably should have sent him... I think I could very well regret sending him later. (Heather, Mother, FG1)

Amelia also openly shared her feelings of guilt and regret with a different focus group. She attributed her older son's schooling challenges over the years to the fact he had been sent to school at the earliest opportunity. She revealed: "*I constantly say to my husband 'See. See? It's [be]cause he's young. See?'*" (Amelia, Mother, FG3). Amelia felt the difficulties her son was experiencing at school were due to him being young in the cohort. However, Graue et al. (2002) suggested that being young did not necessarily correlate to a child automatically struggling during the first year of school. Nevertheless, if other

characteristics such as being male or physically small were also present, the risk of struggling increased (Graue et al., 2002).

Amelia's feeling of guilt and regret appeared to be compounded by social media posts which predominantly promoted delayed school entry, especially for boys. She expressed feeling like "*the biggest failure*" for sending her older son to school at the earliest opportunity. Wickett (2019) suggested parents often feared their child would be seen as different or falling behind their peers, which could imply the parents were not providing 'good parenting'. Amelia revealed:

That's what I constantly beat myself up about... The bashing around the head of it. That's how I feel. I feel like, okay we sent him... I feel like we made a mistake... not for him really, he's doing okay. He's okay at school. But just, I feel like if I get beat around the head with it one more time, if I read one more Facebook post about, especially boys, like especially boys, hold boys back... you constantly feel like the biggest failure. (Amelia, Mother, FG3)

The feeling of regret was constantly conveyed throughout Amelia's recollection of her son's schooling journey to date. She attributed the challenges experienced to her son's young age, which could potentially have been avoided if the decision made had been different. She revealed: "*As a parent you feel like it never sort of ends. It's never going to end. All the way through school and everything that happens with him, which could be normal*" (Amelia, Mother, FG3). Amelia's feelings were affirmed by mothers in Noel and Newman's (2003) study, who chose to delay school entry as a result of the desire to protect their children from struggling in school. However, this was not the case for Linda, who indicated other people had advised her to send her son to school at the earliest opportunity and repeat him if necessary. She recalled:

So many people that we speak [sic] to said, 'Oh just repeat him' like 'just send him and if he's not okay repeat him'. I was like I think that's a horrible thought. If I was conscious that, like if that was my thinking, I'd prefer that he had another year of playing at pre-school and repeated there [emphasis added] than repeated at school.
(Linda, Mother)

Some parents felt judged by other parents for choosing to delay school entry. Maria felt other parents assumed there was something wrong with her January-born daughter, because she was a girl and starting school older. This caused Maria to feel confused and uncertain about her decision because other parents were questioning her choice. Valtchanov et al. (2016) also reported mothers felt overtly judged for their parenting decisions.

And I found it particularly hard also as I said with the first.... her being a girl to make that decision because I kind of felt more judged, like there was something wrong with her because I decided to hold her back in a way... you know boys it's like a given, they're a boy. Then you're more likely to hold back a boy and girls not so. This is the ... kind of talk, chatter that goes on. (Maria, Mother, FG2)

Kaitlyn revealed feeling extremely anxious as she struggled to decide what was best for her son. She explained: *"So, I think part of the part of the problem is the anxiety on my part of when and what the best decision is"* (Kaitlyn, Mother as cited in MacKinnon, 2019, p. 67). At the time of the interview, Kaitlyn was still deliberating whether to send her eldest son to school at the earliest opportunity or to delay entry. She believed the main source of her anxiety was caused by the uncertainty she felt in choosing the best decision for her son. Mergler and Walker (2017) reported similar findings, revealing parents who were in the process of making the decision for the first time often felt anxious and confused. In Kaitlyn's case, the uncertainty surrounding what the best decision was had caused her to feel uncomfortable and at times, upset. She revealed:

Still not happy with it [the decision], I guess... [I've] just got to make, I just want to do the right thing. So, I still feel uncomfortable, I guess I just don't know, and I won't know until he goes whether it's the right decision or not. So yeah, I still feel really quite anxious, nervous. Yeah, depending on the day, upset. I just don't know if it's the right one. So that's why. (Kaitlyn, Mother)

Further evidence of the emotional toll this major decision has on parents, particularly mothers, was revealed in Heath's story. Heath recalled meeting with the school to discuss the family's decision to send their March-born son to school at the earliest opportunity. The school strongly advised the parents to academically redshirt their son and the meeting ended with the mother feeling emotionally distraught. Heath recalled: *"It's just like. No, my wife is in tears about it... and if I'd really truly felt that their only motive was that genuine concern for my son, maybe"* (Heath, Father, FG3). Heath's recollection of this meeting and the impact it had on both parents will be explored further in Chapter 7.

This sub-theme has revealed mothers often experienced intense feelings as a result of the burden of decision-making often falling upon the mother. The stories and experiences shared have exposed that the mothers in this study experienced feelings of guilt, regret, failure, judgement, frustration, confusion, and anxiousness as they navigated the decision-making for their children.

This GET has explored the lived experience of the decision-making, as shared by parents in this study. The stories and experiences reported here exposed complexities inherent in the burden of decision-making concerning school entry when it often fell upon the mother. The reported level of input from fathers or male partners varied, with many providing minimal input into the decision-making. The decision-making experiences shared by mothers often reflected intensive mothering ideology. Intense feelings were frequently expressed by

mothers as they considered the impact of the confluence of indecision, feelings of emotionality and uncertainty regarding their child's entire school experience and beyond.

5.5 Chapter Summary

The key concept of *cycles of indecision* was introduced in this chapter and explored through two GETs, namely:

1. *Parents were influenced by other parents as they navigated this important decision and its potential impact on their child's future; and*
2. *Parents' experiences showed that the burden of decision-making often fell upon the mother.*

The indecision may be attributed to parents exhibiting varying levels of knowledge and experience of the Australian schooling system. The current provision of a minimum age cut-off and mandatory deadline for school entry in Australia affords some parents the flexibility to decide when their child will commence formal schooling. The stories and experiences of parents shared in this chapter has shown that many parents found the decision-making to be challenging, especially those who were making the decision for the first time. They also found it cyclical as their conversations with others continued, emotions caused uncertainty, and there was little sense of confidence, particularly by the mothers that they landed on the 'right' decision, both in the short-term and long-term.

It was evident many parents experienced cycles of indecision as they navigated the options available in relation to their child commencing formal schooling. The findings reported in this chapter revealed parents were strongly influenced by the opinions and decisions of other parents. It was exposed that mothers often consulted with other parents online regarding decisions involving their children. It was shown mothers' decision-making was often influenced by intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996). As a result, mothers

often took on the burden of decision-making for their children and as a consequence exhibited intense feelings. Concern regarding the potential long-term impact of their decision-making also contributed to parents' indecision.

The findings presented within the two GETs explored in this chapter make an important contribution to the existing body of knowledge, by illustrating that the lived experience and perceived enormity of this decision for many parents in this study were characterised by ongoing cycles of indecision. The next chapter will focus on concepts of *Ambiguity* based on the experiences of parents as they shared their perspectives on how they navigated the decision-making.

Chapter 6. Ambiguity

This chapter is the second chapter that reports on the analysis of the data focussing on the lived experiences of parents engaging in decision-making regarding their child's entry into formal schooling. It has been established that parents experience cycles of uncertainty throughout this process, including feelings of ambiguity. In this chapter, the key concept of *Ambiguity* will be explored as parents navigated the complexities surrounding Australia's schooling system and the admission to the Foundation year. It was evident during the interview and focus group discussions that parents had varying levels of understanding of the Australian school starting age policies. The next section introduces the concept of ambiguity, which will be main focus of this chapter.

6.1 Ambiguity

In Australia, there are different rules and regulations regarding school starting age for each state and territory. It is proposed that the current wording of the NSW school starting age policy is ambiguous, which causes confusion for parents. It is also suggested that the choice afforded to some parents (dependent on the child's birth month) through the provision of a minimum and mandatory starting age for school entry also creates ambiguity due to the multiple misinterpretations of school policies and the varying opinions of significant others, including family and friends.

The current school starting age policy in NSW, Australia states that a child is eligible to commence formal schooling provided they turn five by July 31st; however, they must be in compulsory schooling by age six (State of New South Wales Department of Education, 2023). It was apparent parents interpreted the meaning of this policy in different ways. For example, Reshima believed she had no option but to send her January-born daughter to school at the earliest opportunity. She indicated: *"I don't have any choice, the system says*

that I can't hold her or delay her entry because she will be six before the school year starts, albeit by a fortnight" (Reshima, Mother, FG2). However, other parents believed that Reshima had the option to delay due to the ambiguous wording of the policy, which can be interpreted differently. The wording stipulates the child must be in school by their sixth birthday. Some parents interpreted this to mean the child did not necessarily have to have commenced schooling by their sixth birthday if, for example, their child turned six during the school holidays prior to school commencing. This was the case with my son who turned six in the January of the school year. School did not commence until the first week of February, so he was already six on his first day of Foundation.

The current school starting age policies in Australia afford some parents choice to decide when their child will commence formal schooling. This is dependent on the child's birth month, with academic redshirting an option for children born between January and July. It is proposed that offering choice increases confusion for these parents, as a result of having more than one option available. It may also place increased pressure on parents who feel a need to make the 'right' decision. As Linda described: *"That constant thought about if he is the youngest what does that mean? But equally if he is the eldest what does that mean? Which is better? Is there a better?"* (Linda, Mother).

The identification of the concept of ambiguity has been built on the generation of themes as described earlier in Chapter 4. The next section will introduce the third group experiential theme (GET) and sub-themes (see Table 6.1) which will enable the exploration of the key concept of ambiguity more fully. Extracts from parents in this study have been intertwined throughout the analysis to demonstrate how participants were experiencing the decision-making. The findings will also be compared to current research literature, and it will become evident that the identification of the concept of ambiguity as experienced by the parents in this study is a new concept in the field of academic redshirting.

Table 6.1*Group Experiential Theme Three*

There was ambiguity for many parents as they considered what the best decision for their child was.

3.1 Parents expressed a mixture of feelings regarding the choice to decide, with the majority viewing the choice positively.

3.2 There were varying levels of uncertainty surrounding the right or wrong decision being made.

3.3 Parents often relied upon their own or others' schooling experiences which were often outdated to help navigate decision-making for their child.

3.4 Some parents experienced feelings of ambiguity and disappointment post-decision making despite feeling confident at the time

6.2 Group Experiential Theme 3 - There was ambiguity for a number of parents as they considered what the best decision for their child was.

It was outlined at the outset of the data analysis that flexibility in current school starting age policies in Australia affords *some* parents the choice to decide when to send their child to school. In NSW, parents with children born between the months of January to July can choose to send their child to school at the earliest opportunity or send them to school a year after the child is first eligible. Parents in this study expressed a mixture of feelings regarding this choice, with the majority viewing the choice positively. However, part of the lived experience of the decision-making for parents revealed high levels of confusion and anxiety, particularly for those who were making the decision for the first-time.

It was evident there were varying levels of confusion due to a lack of clarity felt by parents when determining the best decision for their child. It was mentioned earlier, some parents were worried about the long-term impact of the decision for their child, which intensified the stress and anxiety for these parents. The importance of making the best decision was considered pivotal in ensuring a positive outcome. It was apparent during both interview and focus group discussions that parents often relied upon their own or others' schooling experiences to navigate the decision-making for their child. Some parents experienced feelings of ambiguity and disappointment post-decision making despite feeling confident of their decision to enrol at the time. The first sub-theme will focus on the ambiguities and confusion expressed by parents regarding the choice to decide.

6.2.1 Sub-Theme 3.1 Parents expressed a mixture of feelings regarding the choice to decide, with the majority viewing the choice positively.

Most parents who benefited from the flexibility offered in school starting age policies viewed having the choice to decide positively. These parents often took the responsibility for decision-making very seriously, carefully weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of each option for their child. Sabina valued having the freedom to make what she determined was the 'best' decision for her individual child, rather than being constrained by a particular deadline. She shared: *"I think that's a good thing because that just allows parents to assess their own child and it's just an individual thing... instead of just like being forced to do something, it can be on an individual basis"* (Sabina, Mother, FG4). Cindy reiterated Sabina's view that having the choice enabled parents to decide for the particular child. Cindy indicated: *"but the positive is, I think that we had that choice. Which means that if he was a different child, we could actually have said we will start him in 2019"* (Cindy, Mother).

Sarah, however, displayed feelings of ambivalence regarding the choice. On the one hand she counted herself lucky she was provided with the choice to decide when to send each of her three children to school due to their birth month. On the other hand, she believed having the choice placed additional stress and pressure on parents as there was a need to consider various options. This finding was validated by Mergler and Walker (2017) who reported parents felt overwhelmed, anxious, and stressed about ambiguities implicit in the decision.

I think that it's so open-ended that it puts a lot of stress and pressure on parents to make a decision. I mean my kids are born in February, so I have a choice. If my kids were born six weeks earlier, we wouldn't have had a choice. If they were born in December, then they go to school that year, you know what I mean? So, I was lucky with all three of mine because I had a choice. But then sometimes choice is difficult because it gives you that choice where sometimes if you don't have a choice then it's straightforward. (Sarah, Mother)

Whilst most parents appreciated having the choice, some felt this increased the enormity of the decision, particularly when they were confused about what the impact would be on their child's chances of success at school and beyond. Linda revealed: *"Oh God it's been horrible. I kind of didn't really appreciate what a huge decision it would be"* (Linda, Mother). Mergler and Walker (2017) suggested that deciding when their child should commence formal schooling is 'the' hardest decision parents will make for their children. Linda expressed finding the decision difficult as she considered the lack of knowledge concerning school entry choices available for her son. She indicated the main source of her confusion and ambiguity was having the choice, but not knowing what to do. She revealed: *"But we don't actually have to send them and so we don't know whether we should or not"* (Linda, Mother). This caused some parents like Linda to become overwhelmed with the

decision-making. Her reference to “*a ridiculously huge decision*” in the extract below conveyed her angst at the potential long-term impact of the decision for her child. *There's not that much stuff that will phase us, but this just seems to be like a ridiculously huge decision and... I just wish there was a cut-off date, and we had no choice and we just had to send him, whereas [the] preschool's attitude was like “isn't it wonderful that you have the choice? Isn't that lovely? Like lots of people would like to have the choice... they don't. You do. It's great”. It's like... “Hmm. No, it's not. No, it's really not brilliant.”* (Linda, Mother)

Linda's revelation of “*I just wish there was a cut-off date, and we had no choice*” was indicative of Linda feeling frustrated at being tasked with the responsibility for the decision-making and indicated a preference not to have had the choice, and thus avoid the feelings of ambiguity. This may be attributed to Linda, as a first-time decision-maker, not feeling suitably qualified to make such an important decision and experiencing a lack of clarity as to the long-term impact of such a decision.

Linda was not the only parent who indicated a preference to not have the choice to decide, based on her lack of clarity regarding the outcome. It was revealed in Chapter 5, Kaitlyn had experienced fluctuating levels of anxiety as she contemplated the school entry choices for her son. She expressed a similar sentiment as she reflected on her experience during the decision-making: “*And obviously I wish there was no decision that's for sure*” (Kaitlyn, Mother). Ashini shared feeling annoyed ambiguity implicit in the current school starting age policies in Australia in the following extract:

Yep, definitely holding back. Definitely holding back. I ... pretty much don't know anybo[dy]... like people are holding back in bloody January. Like it's so ridicul[uous]... like, that's why this system really annoys me ...that, you know... and I get it, people are trying to do what's best for their children and I understand that, but I just feel like it shouldn't be our choice. (Ashini, Mother)

The ambiguity implicit in the range of choices underpinning decision-making was discussed extensively in Focus Group 3, with many parents in this group unaware that there was a choice available to some parents. Heath recalled finding it “*a bit strange*” that Australia’s schooling system provides choice to parents to decide when their children start school. He shared “*There’s no choice. There’s no debate. You go. So, kind of, it was a bit strange when we got here. And so, like we didn’t even realise until we started getting into it that you could even choose*” (Heath, Father, FG3). Amelia resonated with Heath’s story and responded: “*We didn’t either. We sent our son because we didn’t... because we were living overseas*” (Amelia, Mother, FG3).

The experiences of parents struggling to navigate the Australian school system were not isolated to families immigrating from the United Kingdom. Amelia shared her family’s experience of raising her children in South America. She indicated that it was commonplace in Chile for children to catch buses to day care independently.

In South America, they got on buses. No, I’m not joking. We were in Chile, and they would get on buses [to day care] at three. Nannies would put them on buses and so my son was just going. (Amelia, FG3)

When Amelia’s family immigrated to Australia, she enrolled her son to start formal schooling. This decision was based on the family’s prior experiences with schooling overseas. Amelia was shocked to learn that there were children in the class who were more than a year older than her son.

And then we came here, and we went “oh look, he’s ready for school” and we send him to school and then realised that kids were six, still not at school and we’re like... in South America... they send them. You go, you go. So that’s kind of, we’re in this mindset of children go into formalised schooling and then got back here... we sent our son... because we were living overseas...and then went “oh my gosh there’s kids a

whole year older than him” ... and he couldn't even speak English... he was speaking Spanish. Oh, poor kid. (Amelia, FG3)

In Focus Group 2, Sandra also found the choice to decide school entry in Australia a bit strange and questioned: *“Why, why do they? It's so complicated.”* (Sandra, Mother, FG2) regarding the flexibility offered to some parents. She indicated the UK school starting age policies were less complicated and reduced the likelihood of significant age differences between children in a cohort. She explained: *“I'm just kind of thinking like, you know, in the UK, you just don't have this issue of this 18-month gap”* (Sandra, Mother, FG2).

This sub-theme has revealed feelings of ambivalence and confusion were common across the individuals and focus groups, particularly with parents who lacked confidence and knowledge about child development and education. It was apparent the parents in this study experienced varying levels of uncertainty as well as knowledge and expertise regarding the decision-making, which will now be explored in the next sub-theme.

6.2.2 Sub-Theme 3.2 There were varying levels of uncertainty regarding the decision-making and the potential outcome for the child.

It was evident the flexibility in choice resulted in increased stress and anxiety for many parents as they struggled to determine the best decision for their child. This was particularly evident amongst parents who were making the decision for the first-time and had limited experience with and knowledge of the Australian school system.

Parents who were making the decision for the first-time often grappled with the enormity of the decision, feeling a pressure to make the ‘right’ decision, however, there was ambiguity surrounding what the right decision was and the reasons for doing so were unclear. Reshima questioned whether she had made the right decision by sending her January-born

daughter to school at the earliest opportunity, due to noticeable changes in her daughter's behaviour and attitude towards learning during the first term. Of particular concern to Reshima was her daughter displaying feelings of failure through her actions and expression.

I'm having doubts after Term One, whether that was a good decision or not. So, socially... totally in her element. I can't even convince her to stay at home with me. It's... where she wants to be... But ... very much the literacy and numeracy side of things and the emphasis on that, and the feelings of failure that I'm starting to hear, her language has shifted... And so, I'm hearing language coming from her about "I can't do it", "I don't know how", "I don't understand that", "I don't want to do it because I don't know how to do it", as opposed to just keep giving it a try... (Reshima, Mother, FG2)

The noticeable changes in her daughter's behaviour and attitude towards learning had contributed to what Reshima described as a negative experience starting school. This caused Reshima to doubt her decision to send her daughter to school at the earliest opportunity. Her daughter's development of feelings of failure were potentially attributed to drawing comparisons of ability within the cohort. The literature confirmed children who were academically redshirted were more likely to excel academically and in the sporting arena, in comparison to their younger peers (Deming & Dynarski, 2008).

In contrast, some parents who were making the decision for the first-time expressed confidence in their decision-making during the focus group discussion. Harshika believed the decision to send her eldest child to school at the earliest opportunity had been the right decision. This was determined by Harshika's observations of her daughter's behaviour during the first few weeks of the school term. She recalled: *"About two to three weeks ago we were like yep, we made the right decision for her. She's happy. She's confident. She's never cried going to school. She's been able to manage you know, her routines and everything"*

(Harshika, Mother, FG1).

Despite affirming that sending her May-born daughter to school at the earliest opportunity had been the right decision in the extract above, Harshika later revealed she had consulted with her daughter's classroom teacher for reassurance. Mergler and Walker (2017) reported parents experience feelings of concern if their child is going to be one of the youngest in the cohort. Harshika's experience is yet another example of parents potentially feeling unqualified to make the 'right' decision. She revealed:

But like I said, we were still questioning it [the decision] until probably about two weeks ago... I had a quick word with the teacher on the side. He's just like yes... she is the youngest. She's the only four turning five. But he says, you wouldn't guess. And when she goes [to] after school care the teachers all thought she was turning six this year. (Harshika, Mother, FG1)

Sandra also expressed feeling confident her April-born daughter was ready to commence formal schooling in Australia. This was despite acknowledging her daughter had been frustrated during her first term, possibly due to being young in the cohort. She indicated her daughter was acutely aware of her limitations in comparison to what the other, older students could do. At the time of the focus group, Sandra believed sending her daughter at the earliest opportunity had been the right decision because her daughter had already commenced her schooling in the UK. Her daughter possibly just needed more time to settle in to her new school and life in Australia.

But I wouldn't say she feels a lack of confidence, but she's frustrated. She's a bit frustrated at times that she can't do things but... she's enjoying it so much that I know... from my perspective it's the right decision. And in England she's already done a year already. (Sandra, Mother, FG2)

Despite Sandra expressing confidence she had made the right decision to send her daughter to school at the earliest opportunity, it came to my attention in the following year Sandra had chosen to repeat her daughter in the Foundation year. I reached out to Sandra for a follow-up interview to hear her story, to which she agreed. A detailed exploration of the reasons for her daughter's retention is presented later in this chapter (see Section 6.2.4).

Many parents who were making the decision for a second or subsequent time indicated that the decision-making this time round was not as stressful as the first time. These parents often felt more comfortable making the choice for their subsequent children due to increased familiarity and knowledge of the school environment and routines. Sarah explained: *“when your first goes you don't actually know what's happening... you have nothing to rely on in terms of you haven't done it before and you just hope that you do the right thing”* (Sarah, Mother).

Sarah recalled making the decision for her first child had been more difficult because she had no previous experience or clarity of knowledge to draw upon. The phrase *“you just hope that you do the right thing”* in the previous extract emphasised her ambiguity when making the decision for the first time. Sarah described feeling more at ease with her decision to send her twins to school because the entire family unit was now familiar with the school environment.

I think having... Matthew in the school, they [twins] know the routine, they know the school, they know the teachers, they know the environment. So that was probably a big plus and I think for me as well, I do as well. With Matthew I was terrified about how we would handle it but because I know how it works (now), I know what they do that's put me at ease a little bit more. (Sarah, Mother as cited in MacKinnon, 2019, p. 67)

Likewise, Hannah also expressed feeling more confident making the decision for her second son because she had previous personal experience to draw upon. Feelings of confusion and ambiguity that she had experienced in the first instance had dissipated. She reiterated Sarah's sentiments and attributed unfamiliarity with the school environment as the main cause of her ambiguity during the decision-making for her first child. Hannah questioned a first-time decision-maker's capability to make an informed decision given their lack of experience with schooling systems.

I think we are more confident in our decision having seen our older child go to Kindy [Foundation], that we know what's involved, you know, whereas before you... don't really know. You haven't got any personal experience of that child being in Kindy [Foundation], so how are you meant to make a decision about whether or not they're gonna [sic] kind of cope? Whereas now... we've got a bit of personal experience to draw upon as well... this time I haven't really asked for anyone's opinion. (Hannah, Mother)

However, not all parents felt more confident making the decision for the second time. Craig revealed feeling more stressed when making the decision for his second son, due to what he described as a negative experience with his first son. In Craig's case, familiarity with the school environment and expectations made the decision more difficult the second time round: *"It's just about worrying if you're... making the right decision for your kid. That's... what we're concerned about with Adam"* (Craig, Father). The previous negative experience with his eldest which was discussed in the previous chapter was still clearly impacting on Craig's decision-making this time round, as he was still undecided as to whether to send his second son at the time of the interview. He revealed:

We still haven't decided what we're going to do, but a lot of it is stemming from how

Adam [older son] is going at school. His teacher's been saying he's been really tired.

Yeah, just a whole lot of things... but we feel like we should have kept him back a year.

(Craig, Father)

The feelings of ambiguity Craig described regarding the decision-making this time may be attributed to Craig believing his second son was more socially and emotionally ready to start school in comparison to his first-born. However, Craig's experience with his eldest being young for the cohort had resulted in a negative schooling experience to date, which caused him to be hesitant to make the same decision again.

Adam [older child] is a bit less social than Peter [younger child]. So, yeah in a way I think Peter will be more ready for school at five than Adam was. But yeah, we're still, it's just this thing about whether it would be much better for him [Peter] to start when he's much older. (Craig, Father)

Amelia also had a previous negative experience to draw upon when making the decision for her third child. She shared her eldest children's experiences at school, clearly attributing each child's academic performance to their relative age in the cohort. *"So, I've got the girl who's old for her year and the boy who's young for her [his] year. She does ridiculously well at school. He struggles"* (Amelia, Mother, FG3). The literature supported this, with studies revealing academic redshirting often provided a child with a competitive edge over younger peers (Martin, 2009).

As a result of her son's struggles due to starting school and being young for his age, Amelia and her husband chose to delay school entry for the third child, a March-born daughter. However, Amelia shared feelings of ambiguity as to whether she had made the right decision, and worried her daughter would be too mature for her peers when she started school. Dockett and Perry (2004) reported parents tended to focus on their child's ability to

fit in with the cohort, rather than stand out. Amelia's decision-making for her third child confirmed Sandrine's concern mentioned earlier, that parents were not making the decision based on a child's individual capabilities.

My daughter, the younger one... we held back... I'm not joking when I say this. We have only held her back because of my son. She is ten times, head and shoulders ready, above my son, where my son was. She's bossy, assertive, she's the ringleader of all her friends. She's way [emphasis] too old I believe now to go into Kindergarten [Foundation]. (Amelia, Mother, FG3)

It has been shown in this sub-theme that many parents found the choice of when to send their child to school to be extremely challenging. This was often attributed to pressure felt by parents of the need to make the right decision, yet feeling uncertain as to what this should be due to a lack of clarity or insufficient knowledge regarding what was best for each child. The complexities involved in the decision-making for parents were experienced by both first-time decision-makers and those who were making the decision for subsequent children. A lack of familiarity with the school environment resulted in many parents experiencing feelings of ambiguity and confusion and ultimately relying on their own or other's schooling experiences in the decision-making process, rather than policy, knowledge, or advice from professionals. This will be explored in the next sub-theme.

6.2.3 Sub-Theme 3.3 Parents often relied upon their own or others' schooling experiences which were often outdated to help navigate decision-making for their child.

Research has shown that an individual's positive and negative memories of their schooling experience are retained long after finishing school (Turunen, 2012). It was therefore common for parents to refer to their own or others' schooling experiences as they made sense of their own decision-making. This sub-theme outlines some of the positive and negative experiences shared by parents that potentially influenced their decision-making.

Parents who themselves had had a positive schooling experience often chose to replicate the same decision for their child. This finding was affirmed by Dockett et al. (2012) who reported parents often wanted their child to have a similar experience to their own schooling experience. Maria shared a personal insight into both her own and her sister-in-law's varying experiences starting school, yet each mother chose to replicate the same decision for their own children.

My sister-in-law is also a March baby, and she was the youngest. And my daughter and my nephew are two weeks apart and he got sent through young and I held [my daughter] back. ... So, they're exactly the same age and we were the same age... She obviously felt like she coped, and I felt like it was a benefit [to be older] ... She sent both her children the year they turned five and I held both my children... back. And they're exactly the same age. (Maria, Mother, FG2)

Parents who had started school at the earliest opportunity and had a positive experience were often keen to replicate this same experience for their children. Sandrine believed there had been no issues for her, socially or academically, starting school young for the cohort. This influenced her own decision-making, with Sandrine electing to send both sons to school at the earliest opportunity.

I'm a June baby, so I went to school when I... was four and a half. I was one of the youngest of my friends. I had no issues socially, emotionally. I went to a selective high school. I had... no issues academically. So, for me... I think also my background did obviously influence my children... going so. (Sandrine, Mother, FG4)

Some parents relied on the positive experiences of others to help with the decision-making. Ashini referred to her brother's own positive experience of starting school at the earliest opportunity to help relieve some of the angst she was experiencing: *"And also, my*

brother was exactly the same. He's an April baby and he went younger... he enjoyed it"

(Ashini, Mother). Ashini referred to the closeness in age of her son to her brother at the commencement of school to help validate her family's decision to send her July-born son to school at the earliest opportunity.

Parents often take their own personal or family experience of starting school into consideration when making choices for their own children (Graue et al., 2002; Miller, 2015). This, however, may be problematic as ECEC has undergone significant change in Australia over the past two decades (COAG, 2008). Mergler and Walker (2017) indicated many parents relied heavily on their own schooling experience when deciding when to send their children to school. For example, parents may choose to academically redshirt their child if the parent themselves had a negative experience being one of the younger children in a cohort. In contrast, parents who had themselves experienced a positive start to school by being older often favoured a delayed school entry for their own child (Mergler & Walker, 2017). Whilst some parents may be eager for their child to have a similar school experience to their own, other parents may want their child to have a different experience (James & Beedell, 2009).

Parents who themselves had experienced a positive experience of delayed school entry often replicated this decision for their own children. Mergler and Walker (2017) also found parents who had a positive experience themselves with delayed school entry often felt justified in academically redshirting their own child. Brett believed his schooling experience had been more enjoyable due to him being older in the cohort. He elected to delay school entry for both his daughters in the hope they would have a similar, enjoyable experience.

I was actually really happy about being an older student and you know being on July 31st, I was one of the first people to get my license and have a car and have a motorbike license and be able to drive and buy a beer and all that sort of stuff, which was good. It's a good thing, it gave me more freedom and independence and opened

up lots of other social opportunities as well... maybe that's not a great thing for grades or studies. But it... definitely made my life much more enjoyable as a teenager. Finishing school and being able to have that choice. And when I started university, to go to O week and not be one of people who couldn't get into the bars and that sort of stuff. So, I went straight from school to university. So that played on my mind as well.

(Brett, Father)

On the other hand, parents who themselves had a negative school experience often used this experience as a catalyst to make a different decision for their own child. This was affirmed by research which showed some parents wanted their child to have a different experience to their own (Dockett et al., 2012). Natalya described her own experience of being older at the end of schooling and feeling quite restricted in her final year.

I'm very comfortable with this decision... I remember when I was in high school it was quite painful because I felt like I'm so grown up and I'm still at school... I'm 18 and... I want to go and explore the world and (laughs) I'm still really sort of tired...of still being at school when I felt like an adult already. You know, so I thought finishing school a year early will be great. (Natalya, Mother)

This memory of feeling grown up and ready to “*go and explore the world*” strongly influenced Natalya’s desire for her own daughter to commence school at the earliest opportunity. This would mean her daughter could have an extra year at the end of formal schooling to pursue her own interests. Formally known as a *gap year*, it encompasses the year between secondary school and university in Australia (Curtis, 2014). Data revealed 14 per cent of school leavers in NSW take a gap year at the end of formal schooling (AG-DESE, 2020a).

Harshika also saw value in providing her daughter with a gap year. She spoke of her sister's experience of using the gap year to seek employment. However, an Australian study by Curtis (2014) proposed taking a gap year potentially delayed an individual's completion of tertiary study and subsequent entry into the workforce.

I started TAFE when I was 17... It was not until I came out the other end and... I couldn't drink at my graduation (laughs) because drinking age was 21... And I was young... I should not have started TAFE at 17. That was way too young. I was starting with kids that were 19... But then I thought well if Jacinta is going to be in the same position, if she's going to be young... I'll be pushing her for a gap year. Go have a year. Do what my sister did... she just worked. She worked in the framing business. But she just had a year off before she went to uni and when she got to uni, she was right. She was like... do the gap year. Go, go to work. Go... part-time.

(Harshika, Mother, FG1)

Whilst most parents used memories of their own negative schooling experience as a catalyst to make a different decision for their child, this was not the case for Heather. The memories shared during the focus group discussion revealed she had felt bored in primary school, likely due to not feeling challenged by the schoolwork or her peers. Whilst Heather had excelled in academic learning, she described her transition to high school as negative, due to a more diverse range of abilities. Despite her own negative experience, Heather chose to academically redshirt her son as a result of the potential influence of others which was discussed previously in Sub-Theme 1.1.

I think I could very well regret sending him later. Because I know what I was like as a kid. I was bored in primary school. I was an A star student. Like I said, it wasn't until I got to the end of high school, and you realise, you're not the 'be all and end all' and there are kids that are the same as you, if not better than you. And it, I think that sets

you up, because it kind of makes you go, I don't want to do this anymore because I've always been used to being the biggest and the best and the brightest. And now I'm... like the perfectionist that can't do anything because they're just so scared... of failure...I'm a little bit like that... (Heather, Mother, FG1)

Many of the negative experiences which were shared involved *retention*, or the need to repeat a school year. Several parents referred to family members, who were often male and young for the cohort, having to repeat a year. This was the case for Sarah's brother, who was born extremely close to the cut-off date of July 31st in NSW. She recalled: "*And you know my brother went when he was July baby and he ended up repeating when he was younger*" (Sarah, Mother). This finding was confirmed by Mergler and Walker (2017) who reported males who had commenced school at the earliest opportunity were more likely to repeat the Foundation year in comparison to girls. Winsler et al. (2012) argued male children were more likely to be repeat the Foundation year because they often arrived at school with lower levels of skill across multiple domains (language, cognitive, social, motor, and behavioural) in comparison to female children, which placed them at a disadvantage in the Foundation year. Children who repeated the Foundation year often did not catch up to their typically progressing peers (Mendez et al., 2014).

Rowena referred to two family members, who were both male and young for their cohort, having to repeat a year at school. The impact on both family members was negative, with both expressing regret that they had started school at the earliest opportunity. Mergler and Walker (2017) suggested parents who had a negative experience starting school on-time felt justified in delaying school entry for their own child. In this case, it appeared Rowena and her partner academically redshirted their May-born daughter to avoid a similar, negative schooling experience. She explained:

With my partner and his dad, they were both in a situation where they were smallish to start with... and they both started young. They were end of May births. And they really regret that they had to start school. (Rowena, Mother, FG3)

Academic redshirting was often the preferred strategy because there was less stigma associated with the practice because it occurred prior to school, as opposed to other practices such as retention or social promotion (Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Lincove & Painter 2006; Dougan & Pijanowski, 2011; Stipek, 2002). Kelly's husband shared feeling the retention could have been avoided had he been academically redshirted prior to starting school. She recalled:

My husband was telling me... he was July and he started when he was 4 and he feels he was always too young. And he ended up repeating a year back in high school... and he feels... if he was a year older when he started, he might not have had to do that. (Kelly, Mother, FG3)

The effects of retention can be long-lasting. Martin (2009) reported a negative effect of grade retention on motivation, engagement, and achievement for Australian students during the high school years. He suggested social promotion rather than retention was best for the child, even if the child was male or young for a cohort. Kelly's husband felt that the situation of him repeating a year could have been avoided if he had started school the year after he was first eligible. Whilst the circumstances of the retention in this case were not known, Brett believed it would be tough for any child to repeat a year in the same school. He suggested:

Making your child repeat a year in the same school is really tough. The only other way to do that is to start it again next year at a different school. Nobody would know that they were you know repeating. The kids wouldn't know any different. They would just be starting at the same time as everybody else. Whereas if you're at a school and

then your child repeats a year because they're struggling or whatever. That's pretty tough on them because everybody looks at that like they failed. (Brett, Father)

It has been shown through this sub-theme that parents who themselves had a positive schooling experience often wanted to replicate this experience for their own children. These parents frequently made the same decision for their child that they themselves had experienced. Some parents relied upon the experiences of other family members to help with their decision-making. Many parents shared negative stories involving family members who had been retained. Some parents experienced feelings of ambiguity and disappointment post-decision making despite feeling confident at the time. The next sub-theme explores focus group participant Sandra's experience of repeating her daughter in the Foundation year.

6.2.4 Sub-Theme 3.4 Some parents experienced feelings of ambiguity and disappointment post-decision making despite feeling confident at the time.

It became evident that even though some parents were confident with their decision to send their child to school on-time, feelings of ambiguity, confusion and disappointment emerged during the Foundation year. The case of Sandra exemplifies this experience.

Sandra was a participant in Focus Group 2. Her family had recently immigrated to Australia from the United Kingdom (UK). At the time of the focus group interview, Sandra's April-born daughter Natasha had commenced her first term of Foundation in NSW, at the earliest opportunity. Sandra had been confident that Natasha was ready to commence formal schooling in Australia because she had previously started Reception (first year of school) in the UK. Despite indicating at the time of the focus group interview that she felt she had made the right decision by sending Natasha to school, Sandra elected to repeat Natasha in Foundation the following year. This sub-theme explores the reasoning behind this decision.

During the focus group discussion, Sandra had shared openly that whilst her daughter was enjoying the first term of school, there had been some issues. Her daughter Natasha was aware there were children in the class who were older than her and they were able to do things that she couldn't. This had often resulted in feelings of frustration for her daughter. She described:

I wouldn't say she feels a lack of confidence, but she's frustrated. She's a bit frustrated at times that she can't do things but... she's enjoying it so much that I know... from my perspective, it's the right decision. And in England she's already done a year already... So, we've come over and just carried on what's normal for her... I feel she's definitely ready for school. And she's resilient. She's a resilient child. So, if an older child... came along and said something... she'd give it back... verbally. (Sandra, Mother, FG2)

Sandra's confidence in the decision to send Natasha to school at the earliest opportunity, was largely influenced by the fact that Natasha had previously started Reception in the UK. However, as the 2018 school year progressed, it became apparent to Sandra that the first year of schooling in Australia was very different to the first year of schooling in the UK. Sandra believed Natasha's young age in comparison to her peers was the predominant reason as to why she had struggled immensely during the Foundation year.

So, we moved out here last January... And she was already in Reception in the U.K., which was working out perfectly fine. But now I realise, having started her over here, that Kindy [Foundation] is different to Reception and no one made us aware of that. So, we put her into school last year thinking that it would just be a continuation of what she was already doing. And then probably within the first term, and we realised that she was just not being able to make friends, really struggling so socially, she was acting out a little bit, crying all the time. Just, just really wasn't ready but we didn't

know whether that was just sort of teething from coming from the UK and all the things that had changed for her, like, you know, the house, the country, leaving the grandparents behind. So, the teacher was really supportive, and she said, let's stick with it. You know, we'll see if we can sort of help her out and help with the friendships and stuff. But it just... never really got going. And it was just a struggle for her that year. And she was a bit alienated from the other members of the class that were obviously a bit more mature than she was. (Sandra, Mother, FG2)

Natasha's struggles became apparent during the first term and persisted throughout the year. Sandra met with the school on several occasions to discuss the situation and found the school to be extremely supportive in trying to help Natasha form friendships with her peers. However, towards the end of the school year, a decision was made to repeat Natasha in the Foundation year the following year.

Around October time, we decided, with the teacher as well and the headmistress, that it would be a good idea to repeat Kindy [Foundation] all over again and give her a chance to really you know, thrive socially, because academically she was absolutely fine. There was [sic] no issues whatsoever. And she's sort of one of the kids that was probably more able with the reading and spelling and all that kind of stuff. But yeah socially - that was the problem, socially with, within the group. (Sandra, Mother, FG2)

Because there were no academic concerns, Sandra revealed there was a possibility that repeating the Foundation year could become boring for Natasha. However, Sandra was confident this would not be an issue because the private school Natasha attended modified the way the curriculum was taught each year.

No problems at all, because the school that she's at, they change the curriculum slightly every year, so it doesn't become boring. Like for example, this year they've

decided to do more outside play. So, they go over to where they do the OOSH [Out of School Hours] club and they've been doing quite a lot of their Maths out, out in the open, you know, going to collect books and leaves and stuff like that rather than doing it at the desk. So, it feels like a different activity, even though it's still numbers. It's completely different. And they've made it sort of fun. So, they do that every year, they try and change it up a bit. So, she hasn't once come home and said, "Oh I've done this before, I'm bored." You know, like it's all been different. (Sandra, Mother, FG2)

Sandra expressed concern that repeating a year in the same school has the potential to be problematic. She revealed feeling worried about the reaction from the Year One girls, when they realised her daughter Natasha was repeating Foundation.

The ones [girls] that are now in Year One... at the start they were saying, "why isn't Natasha in my class?" ... "Is it because she's a baby?" And they started to... be a bit mean to her about it. And... I was sort of saying to the children, "No, no, it's not Natasha's fault. It is my fault. Actually, I put her in when she was too young. She's...not six yet, so that's why she can't come to your class." And they accepted that completely and forgot all about it. And it was just nipped in the bud. And that was fine... I was a bit worried about that at the beginning, like they were gonna [sic] think, there's even more reason to alienate her and make her feel... rubbish (laughs). But actually, we got rid of that little problem at the beginning very easily. (Sandra, Mother, FG2)

Sandra's revelation of "it is my fault" to the children in the extract above validated the sentiments of many interview and focus group parents, that the burden of the decision-making fell heavily upon the mother. In Sandra's case, she took sole responsibility for the decision-making and the consequences of the decision made. Reflecting on the decision,

Sandra recalled Natasha's behaviour at home as being extremely challenging at the time.

She was... fine at school... keeping it together. And then she'd come home and ... just go nuts. You know, she'd start slamming doors, she'd throw things, she'd scream... like a tantrum that you'd expect a two or three-year old to have really. And I think it was just, it was just too much, too much stimulation, too tired. She wouldn't, she didn't want to know about after-school clubs or anything like that. I didn't even put it on the table for her in the end. I just said, you know, you're too tired. We're just gonna [sic] come home and rest. And now she's doing some things for at least three or four days after school, and she wants to be there and do that. So, it's just been such a massive change in like what she wants to get involved in, from shutting down completely last year. (Sandra, Mother, FG2)

Sandra was pleased to report a positive change in Natasha's behaviour at home during the repeated year. She felt Natasha was better able to deal with the demands of Foundation the second time round because she was older. Sandra was also confident Natasha was now ready to move into Year One.

She's ready for Year One. You know, just at the beginning of this term, I've just seen her suddenly grow up and she's ready for another challenge now. She's seen like the little Kindy girls come in for their Orientation...And she's like, all right, I'm a big girl now. I'm gonna [sic] go to Year One now. And she's happy about it as well. (Sandra, Mother, FG2)

Upon reflection, Sandra now believed that repeating Natasha in the Foundation year had been an overall positive experience. She mentioned that the entire family have now settled into life in Australia, and that Natasha has fitted in better socially with her peers in the current cohort due to being closer in age.

So, she's actually now with her right peer group... so, she's made more friends. It's just been much, much easier for her. And I think after the move as well, you know, we've settled here. We've had some really lovely family days out and stuff. So, she's started to think of Australia as her home, rather than being homesick. So, it was kind of, I think, a lot of different things, but mainly she was too young (laughs) is what I now realise for her year, that's, that's what it was really over everything else. (Sandra, Mother, FG2)

When reflecting upon the whole experience, Sandra realised that sending Natasha to school at the earliest opportunity had been a mistake. Despite feeling at the time of the focus group interview that the decision to send was the right one, in hindsight this proved not to be the case. Sandra revealed: *“I think I made the wrong decision... we just shouldn't have put her in”* (Sandra, Mother, FG2).

Sandra revealed that moving to Australia from the UK was another predominant reason Natasha had struggled during the Foundation year. Sandra described feeling confused by the flexibility in choice offered to some parents in the education system here in Australia. *And yeah, I mean, that was so new for us when we first got here. And I was thinking at the time, why would people not just put their kids in school? ... Why would they hold them back like this? It just doesn't make sense to me. Because we didn't have any choice in England... You just go when you go. And if you struggle through because you're a June or July baby, which is gonna [sic] be the babies of the class... you just struggle through and that's the end of it.* (Sandra, Mother, FG2)

Sandra's question regarding why parents would choose to *“hold them back like this”* by delaying school entry reiterated the view of many interview and focus group parents who

also associated delayed school entry with holding a child back. However, it became apparent during this follow-up interview that Sandra's feelings regarding starting school age had changed from her experience with Natasha.

Actually...now I've realised, and I've looked at this so much and experienced it myself. Why don't, why don't we do these things in England? This is ridiculous. They're far too young to go to school. You know, so I've completely changed my perspective on everything really to do this. (Sandra, Mother, FG2)

With previous experience to now draw upon for future decision-making, Sandra was conscious not to repeat her mistake of sending Natasha to school at the earliest opportunity, with her second daughter. Despite previously believing that delaying school start was holding a child back, Sandra believed the experience with Natasha had opened her eyes to the realisation that most children are not ready to commence formal schooling at the earliest opportunity. She indicated that a lack of clarity regarding the impact of early entry underpinned her decision-making at the time.

I wouldn't make the same mistake with my second daughter now... she will be...five and a half when she goes into Kindy [Foundation]... because I can't send her at four and a half. But after Natasha, I wouldn't anyway. I just wouldn't do it. They're just not ready, are they? Most, most kids anyway (laughs). From what I've seen, they're just, they're just not ready... it has been a bit of a ride (laughs). But it's all good now (laughs). (Sandra, Mother, FG2)

This sub-theme focused on the two predominant reasons Sandra believed influenced her decision to repeat her daughter Natasha in the Foundation year. First, being born in April and starting school at the earliest opportunity resulted in Natasha being extremely young in comparison to her peers. This led to significant social issues due to differences in maturity levels. Second, the move to Australia from the UK resulted in Sandra not being fully aware of

how the Australian schooling system worked. It was assumed the Foundation year in Australia would be a continuation of the Reception year in the UK. This was shown not to be the case. Based on her experience with Natasha starting school, Sandra indicated that she would be delaying school entry for her second-born daughter.

The third GET, which has formed the focus of this chapter, indicated that the majority of parents in this study viewed the choice to decide school entry for their child positively. However, many of these parents also believed that having the choice increased the enormity of the decision. This resulted in ambiguity and ambivalence for these particular parents as they struggled to determine the best decision for their child from the school entry options available. The potential long-term impact of the decision on the child's schooling and beyond was shown to be an important consideration for parents. Parent in the study often referred to their own or others' schooling experiences which were shown to be influential in the decision-making. It was evident many parents struggled with the decision-making, not only prior to enrolment but, as the case of Sandra demonstrates, even post-enrolment, due to concern surrounding making the best decision for their child.

6.3 Chapter Summary

The key concept of Ambiguity was introduced in this chapter and explored through the third GET, namely:

3. There was ambiguity for a number of parents as they considered what the best decision for their child was.

It was proposed that the current wording of the NSW school starting age policy is ambiguous, and open to different interpretations regarding the rules and requirements. This caused increased confusion regarding school entry choices for parents in the study. It was also suggested that offering some parents choice to decide when their child should commence

formal schooling creates further ambiguity due the provision of different options, which potentially can have a long-term impact on the child's future. The stories and experiences shared by parents in this chapter has shown that many parents were confused and overwhelmed as they navigated the decision-making.

It has been shown that most parents in this study viewed the choice offered to some parents through the flexibility in current school starting age policies positively. However, at the same time, it was also revealed feelings of uncertainty were experienced as parents afforded the choice to decide navigated the various school entry options available. It was evident many parents relied upon their own or others' schooling experiences to assist with the decision-making, however, this was shown to be problematic due to changing expectations of the Foundation year. It was also revealed some parents experienced feelings of ambiguity and disappointment post-decision making.

The findings presented within the third GET explored in this chapter make an important contribution to the existing body of knowledge, by illustrating the complexities parents experience as a result of ambiguous starting school age policies and the provision of choice to some parents. The next chapter will focus on the concept of *Experiences of Misalignment* and the proposed misalignment across stakeholders regarding when children should commence formal schooling and their level of readiness to do so.

Chapter 7. Experiences of Misalignment

This chapter is the third and final chapter that reports on the analysis of the data. In this chapter, the key concept of *Experiences of Misalignment* will be revealed through an exploration of varying conceptualisations of school readiness. It will be shown through the stories and experiences shared from participants in this study that there is an apparent misalignment of views between various stakeholders regarding when a child should commence formal schooling. The next section introduces the concept of experiences of misalignment, which will be the main focus of this chapter.

7.1 Experiences of Misalignment

It has previously been shown that many parents in the study experienced cycles of indecision and feelings of ambiguity as they navigated the conversations regarding when their child should commence formal schooling. The transition to school is a time of major change for all involved including the child, family, ECEC setting and the school (Boyle et al., 2018; Niklas et al., 2017). Starting school is often a particularly challenging time for children as they learn to adjust to a new environment, new people, and new routines (Edwards et al., 2009).

Developmentally, children approach this important transition with varying levels of readiness. This may be attributed to differing experiences prior to school which have influenced the development of social-emotional and academic skills (Edwards et al., 2009). It has been previously outlined that various definitions of readiness exist, in addition to multiple ways of determining the variables that shape school readiness (Dockett & Perry, 2002). It will be argued that this has contributed to an apparent misalignment of views among various stakeholders, including parents, ECEC teachers, and school personnel regarding when a child should commence formal schooling. As a result of this misalignment, many parents in the

study received conflicting advice from stakeholders which caused increased confusion and frustration, contributing further to the cycles of indecision that they have identified during this period of decision-making. Heath's story clearly exemplifies the misalignment in expectations between parents, ECEC teachers and school personnel.

Heath reported contradictory opinions offered from the ECEC teachers and the school regarding his son's school entry. He recollected, "*So, we had like long day [care] going 'Yeah, he could stay here but [he's] kind of pretty much past it' and the school kind of saying 'Oh we don't think he should come' "*" (Heath, Father, FG3). As a result of the conflicting advice, Heath expressed feeling frustrated. On the one hand, the ECEC service had clearly indicated to Heath that his son Freddie needed to commence formal schooling in order to be challenged appropriately. On the other hand, Heath and his wife felt extremely pressured, to the point his wife was in tears, by the primary school to delay school entry. Heath's story will be elaborated on later in the chapter. This misalignment between the opinions and advice provided by the school staff and the teachers in the early childhood setting was a common experience for many parents in this study.

This misalignment of views, as evidenced by the stories and experiences shared by parents in this study, is a major finding for this study. It was evident this misalignment contributed significantly to the struggle of many parents as they navigated this major decision. The next section will introduce the fourth group experiential theme (GET) and subthemes (see Table 7.1) which will enable a comprehensive exploration of the key concept of experiences of misalignment from a school readiness stance. The inclusion of quotes from participants in this analysis will strengthen and support the claims put forward. Comparison between the current findings and previous literature will reveal that this key concept of experiences of misalignment is a significant finding of this study and has major implications for policy making. The themes are outlined forthwith.

Table 7.1*Group Experiential Theme 4*

4. Parents displayed varying levels of readiness for their child's transition to school; in addition to difficulty assessing their child's readiness for school.

4.1 Parents demonstrated varying levels of readiness for their child's transition to school.

4.2 Parents had varying views of a child's school readiness skills.

4.3 Parents believed the contemporary expectations of the Foundation year have changed.

7.2 Group Experiential Theme 4 - Parents displayed varying levels of readiness for their child's transition to school; in addition to difficulty assessing their child's readiness for school.

It was reported previously that the transition to school is a time of change for all family members. It was apparent from the stories and experiences shared that parents displayed varying levels of *parental* readiness for their child's transition to school. Whilst some parents expressed excitement at the new phase as the child started school, others appeared apprehensive and ambivalent about sending their children to school.

It was evident many parents found it difficult to assess whether their child was ready to start school. Historically, school readiness was measured according to a child's academic and social-emotional skills (Mergler & Walker, 2017). The majority of parents in this study indicated that their child's social-emotional skills were the most important consideration for assessing school readiness. Many parents also considered their child's enrolment in an ECEC service in the year before school as essential to ensuring their child's readiness to start school.

This was deemed particularly important, as many parents believed the expectations of children in the Foundation year had increased significantly in comparison to their own first year of school experience. The first sub-theme will explore the varying levels of parental readiness for their child's transition to school.

7.2.1 Sub-Theme 4.1 Parents demonstrated varying levels of readiness for their child's transition to school.

The transition to school is a significant change for the entire family. Children become more independent as they adapt to their new role as a 'student' in the school environment (Dockett et al., 2012). Parents, the child's primary socialisers, relinquish some of their supervisory control of their children to school teachers (Griebel & Niesel, 2009). Parenting roles may change as the child starting school may provide parents with additional time to explore new opportunities including employment or study (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Kaplun et al., 2017). It was apparent that whilst some parents in the study appeared 'ready' for their child's schooling journey to commence and the subsequent changes to roles, others were clearly 'not ready'.

Some parents who were planning to send their child to school at the earliest opportunity expressed excitement as they started preparing for this important transition for the whole family. Natalya appeared to embrace the changing demands on her time (Dockett & Perry, 2004) as she consulted with other parents for advice about starting school. She conveyed enjoyment for the social aspect of her new role as a 'school parent', as she discussed various decisions regarding schooling with her friends. Natalya recalled: *"I started asking my friends who have bigger children... can you give me some tips about packing lunches? And any apps you can recommend, and that was really nice and positive that... they could help out with their experiences"* (Natalya, Mother).

During her interview, Ashini also shared feelings of excitement as she discussed the impending transition to school. She revealed that despite initially being hesitant to send her April-born son to school at the earliest opportunity, both she and her husband were “now” ready for their son’s school journey to commence. She claimed: “*We're ready. You know, we're ready for him to go to school now*” (Ashini, Mother). The use of the term “now” suggested both parents had become content with the decision for their son to commence formal schooling. Having recently moved to a new area, it was also apparent Ashini viewed her son’s transition to school as an opportunity for her family to develop new social connections in their local community. She revealed:

It's really exciting to see him go through the Orientation and doing it really confidently and... making little friends and we've kind of just moved to the area. Like it's been a year now but just really, it's just really a nice next phase I guess, because there are lots of little kids around the area and they all go to school together and... it's different I guess to where we lived because we were in kind of more apartment living and no one really knew anyone... we weren't at school yet, so we weren't making friends with other families, whereas here it's really suburban almost. (Ashini, Mother)

The parents’ financial and/or work situation was found to influence decision-making due to considerations associated with caring arrangements and costs of ECEC services. There was also a potential financial benefit to Ashini’s family’s decision to send their son to school at the earliest opportunity, with Ashini’s revelation the family would lose government assistance for ECEC services the following year due to the planned introduction of the means-tested *Child Care Subsidy (CCS)*. Similarly, another parent, Karina believed that changes to the CCS would result in some families no longer being able to afford ECEC and may instead opt to send their children to school at the earliest opportunity. She revealed: “*I know so many parents who it literally comes down to finances as to whether or not they*

should... can afford to put their child into another year of day care” (Karina, Mother, FG2).

The change in terminology from “*should*” to “*can*” in Karina’s extract acknowledges that whilst parents may believe a delayed school entry may be in the best interests of their child, it may not be financially possible to do so. Karina referred to her own dilemma as a result of the impending changes:

Especially for kids or families who don't qualify anymore. The need to send to school. Because, at this point I don't think I qualify. So, how that's going to affect Chase, not being able to, because I won't be able to afford to keep him in. (Karina, Mother, FG2)

Some parents were not excited about the transition to school due to necessary changes to the family’s routine to accommodate school life. The transition to school often requires integration of family, school, and employment requirements into the family’s routine (Griebel & Niesel, 2009). For example, Linda indicated: “*I'd prefer that he had another year of playing at preschool... and we had an extra year of school holidays and... school hours and all that kind of stuff*” (Linda, Mother). This preference resulted from Linda’s need to consider care options during school holidays and the negotiation of school-friendly work hours with her employer if her son was to commence formal schooling. Shorter school hours often contributed to the need for parents to organise *Outside of School Hours* (OOSH) care for their children throughout the school year (Dockett & Perry, 2002) which can affect the family’s finances.

It was also apparent some parents were apprehensive about their child commencing formal schooling. Noel (2010) explained that during this important transition there was a need for parents themselves to be ready for being separated from their child. Hannah expressed complete dismay at the thought of sending “*our little baby*” to school at the earliest opportunity. She revealed:

Now looking at the second one we're like, but he's just a baby. And I think it's because he is our baby... he's our youngest. So, I think... he has slightly more of a baby role... I think we have higher expectations of the older child... He's our little baby. It's like, look at him. We're like, he can't [go to school] ... The idea of sending him to school this year was completely ludicrous. (Hannah, Mother)

A strong maternal attachment to her child was conveyed through Hannah's reference to "*the idea of sending him to school this year was completely ludicrous*". Being the youngest child in the family, her reluctance for his school journey to commence could suggest an averseness to this important transition for the whole family. Sandrine explained, parents may "*want them to play for longer and be a child for longer and I don't know if that's an attachment of the parent or the child more.... But they want them to be children, yeah, extend the childhood*" (Sandrine, Mother, FG4). Sandra believed some parents found it difficult to detach from their children. She explained: "*Some parents can't let go... somebody that I know back in England, can't let go of her little boy. She just can't do it*" (Sandra, Mother, FG2). These stories and experiences demonstrate that the transition to school can be a difficult and challenging time for some parents.

It has been shown in this sub-theme that parental readiness for children to start formal schooling varied for the parents in the study. While some parents approached this important milestone with excitement, others experienced apprehension by the impending changes. The next sub-theme explores the varying views of assessing school readiness as demonstrated by parents in this study.

7.2.2 Sub-Theme 4.2 Parents had varying views when assessing their child's readiness for school.

It was evident the majority of parents in the study showed greater consideration of social-emotional skills as opposed to academic skills, when determining their child's readiness for school. These parental views were often not in alignment with the advice provided by the school-based teachers. For example, the ability to participate in a group was considered an important skill for many parents when determining their child's school readiness. Parents often described skills associated with the social aspect of group participation such as "*letting others have a turn*" (Cindy, Mother). On the other hand, the literature revealed Foundation teachers focused more on the organisational aspects of group participation and considered skills such as: being able to work in a large group, following directions and demonstrating independence as important indicators of school readiness (Dockett & Perry, 2004, 2007). Clearly this sense of misalignment has been prevalent for some time yet is silent in the literature.

Sarah indicated a child's ability to separate from their parents was a key consideration in her own decision-making. She also referred to the importance of a child being able to use age-appropriate "*coping mechanisms*" to deal with various challenges in the school environment. Interestingly, Sarah considered learning academic skills to be the school's responsibility. She explained:

To me, it's all social-emotional. Whether they can separate from their parents, whether they can play in a group of friends, whether they can follow instructions.... to me, the academic part of it is learnt at school...it's about their social emotional intelligence and whether their coping mechanisms are, I suppose... age-related.

(Sarah, Mother)

Cindy also referred to a child's ability to separate as an important consideration in the decision-making for her son. She further emphasised the importance of him having the ability to communicate his needs and wants effectively in the school environment. She described: *Well, he's got to be able to separate all day. He's got to be able to speak audibly and people must understand him. You've got to be able to ask for help... when he needs help. And he needs to also be able to understand things like letting others have a turn.* (Cindy, Mother)

Independence in the form of self-care was another important social-emotional skill discussed by many parents in the study. These parents considered their child's ability to feed and toilet themselves appropriately as being an essential component to their school readiness. Kaitlyn revealed:

I think they should be able to listen, like listen to instructions, take instructions. I think they should be able to share. And bond relatively easily with other children. I think they should be able to sit and hold a pen. I think writing their own name is great, but I don't think they need that before they go to school... And then independence things, like opening a chip packet, bits, and pieces like that. Going to the toilet on their own. Things like that. (Kaitlyn, Mother)

Whilst most parents considered their child's social-emotional skills as more important than academic skills, the opposite was the case for Kaitlyn. Despite indicating in the previous extract *"I think writing their own name is great, but I don't think they need that before they go to school"*, later in the interview Kaitlyn expressed concern for her son's academic readiness, through the revelation: *"And whilst he's socially would be absolutely fine, I think I just didn't think that academically he would quite be ready"* (Kaitlyn, Mother). Her concern regarding her son's academic capabilities may have resulted from Kaitlyn being worried about her son being young in the cohort if he commenced school at the earliest opportunity.

Some parents believed that children who were older would have an advantage because they would likely have increased academic skills in comparison to younger children. Here the parent expresses a sense of misalignment between her views of school readiness and those of the future school, where teachers valued academic prowess and development based on chronological age. Hannah, who was quite upfront regarding her own competitive tendencies, revealed:

I also know that secretly, I think it's good for kids to be able to recognise letters and numbers and things. And I know that I always say "No, they don't need to do that because teachers teach them." But I also know that with my kids personally, I would be a little bit disappointed if they got to the age of, five and a half and six and couldn't recognise letters and numbers, recognise their own name, things like that, even though if I was telling anybody else, I'd say "No they don't need to, that's totally fine. That's what Kindy [Foundation] is for." Like, I also know that secretly for my kids, I'd be quite (pause) concerned. (Hannah, Mother)

Based on her older children's schooling experiences, Sandrine believed that parents were concerned about their child's academic readiness. She had observed the parents at her children's school wanting their child to start school with certain academic skills such as "their letters... basic reading... numbers, all that stuff" rather than acquiring these skills during the Foundation year. Sandrine revealed:

I hear a lot about academics. They need to be. I don't know if they want them to be, I guess the, the best that (laughs) they can be in Kindergarten [Foundation]. But they do... I do hear that they're not ready academically to go to school, which I find bizarre because when I started Kindergarten [Foundation] ... I didn't know my letters. That's what we did there. So, I guess they want them to know... their letters... basic reading... numbers, all that stuff before they start. (Sandrine, Mother, FG4)

Sandrine's belief that parents were concerned for their child's academic readiness was validated by Bassok et al. (2016b) who indicated children were currently entering formal schooling with higher levels of academic readiness due to stronger investment in children's early development. This was achieved through increased attendance at ECEC services prior to school entry and within the home environment (Bassok et al., 2016b). Binasis et al. (2022) reported migrant parents living in Western Sydney considered it imperative for their child to be academically ready for school and often sought high quality educational opportunities for their child prior to school entry.

Several parents in the study conveyed a belief their child was not ready to commence formal schooling. Interestingly, all of these parents had sons. Janus (2011) accessed data from Australia, Canada, and Mexico on children's readiness prior to starting school and found a higher percentage of boys had been identified as having special needs or were referred for further assessment by the teacher in comparison to girls. Karina spoke of a fear that children with a disability may become lost in the school system: "*Fear of your child getting lost in the system, being forgotten*" (Karina, Mother, FG2). The findings of this study revealed parents who suspected their child may have a disability often favoured academic redshirting. The literature supported this belief, with several studies showing parents often delayed school entry their child if they suspected the child had developmental problems (Fortner & Jenkins, 2017; Gottfried et al., 2016; Hanly et al., 2019; Jaekel et al., 2015).

Yvonne described "*feeling for a long time*" that her January-born son would not be ready to start school at the earliest opportunity. She recalled:

I've never felt that he's ready... I know he could start next year, but it's been my feeling for a long time that he wasn't ready and that he wouldn't be going in 2018. I

started thinking about it early because we've had problems in his behaviour and issues like that. And he has made improvements, but he still needs more time.

(Yvonne, Mother)

After the interview had ended, Yvonne revealed more detailed information about her son's birth, and disclosed her son had been born with a congenital heart condition. She also referred to current research which indicated some of the behavioural issues her son exhibited were potentially linked to his condition.

Samuel openly shared his son's Autism diagnosis during a focus group discussion. He believed the decision-making had been predetermined due to his son's disability. Samuel explained delaying his son's school entry would enable him to attend important early intervention services prior to starting school. A delayed school entry also allowed the school more time to put appropriate supports in place. Samuel explained:

For us, there was no real ... the decision was basically predetermined for us. My son who is Autistic, diagnosed when he was two, he [is] small in stature. There was no way that he is ready to go. If another kid comes up and pushes him or punches him, he will just go into a ball and just sit there and cry. He can't express his feelings... to the teacher. He can't ask for help. He'll just go into meltdown. So, for us it was a pretty easy decision although we are doing a transition into school. So, in about two months' time, he'll start going one day a week to the public school to prepare him for next year. (Samuel, Father, FG1)

The transition to school was confirmed to be more complex for children with a diagnosed or undiagnosed disability (Janus, 2011). There was evidence that parents of children with special needs or a disability worried more about the transition into formal education than other parents (Brandes et al., 2007) due to misalignment in the expectations of

teachers as compared to the parents of a child with a disability. However, this did not appear to be the case for Samuel who indicated *“the school’s actually really good”* in regard to working with the family to support his son’s transition. He explained: *“So, we went up and basically we have to get the school ready so that they could accommodate him next year”* (Samuel, Father, FG1). He indicated that his son was already enrolled to attend ‘transition to school’ classes at the local primary school in preparation for the following year.

While Samuel appeared confident that the school had an efficient transition to school program in place for his son, Yvonne believed her son would receive more support by staying at his current ECEC service. She felt the ECEC staff knew her son and had appropriate support in place to deal with his challenging behaviour, as described in the extract below.

Yvonne indicated:

Mainly his behaviour. And how... he deals with his emotions and things. He still has really angry outbursts and will attack his teachers and things. And he needs... a lot of a one on one to calm down and in a school environment they won't be able to give him that. (Yvonne, Mother)

Yvonne appeared to be more comfortable keeping her son in a familiar environment with ECEC teachers whom she trusted, rather than changing to an unfamiliar environment with unknown levels of support. The loss of the relationship between ECEC teachers and parents was a major change during the transition to school (Griebel & Niesel, 2009). The anticipated loss of a major support network for Yvonne appeared to significantly influence her decision-making. Yvonne also expressed doubt and feelings of misalignment in regard to the school’s ability to provide her son with the level of attention he required to self-regulate his learning and his behaviour. Similarly, Harshika questioned the ability of schools to accommodate the needs of children who may need additional support. She revealed: *“It’s*

about the school supporting, you know, supporting individuals and I just feel like they don't have the resources or the time to really do that" (Harshika, Mother, FG1)

On the other hand, Sandrine suggested that a delayed school entry could potentially have deprived her eldest son of additional help and support available in the school environment. She revealed her elder son had fine motor issues which were not picked up whilst he attended a play based ECEC service. She recalled:

I didn't pick it up as a first-time mum and we would have had another year of him not doing any writing, not doing any fine motor skills. He would have just been playing outside, which is what he wanted to do, and we would have had another year of.... I guess delays in writing. So, with my youngest obviously I picked it up quicker than what I did with my eldest and so he has been doing OT [Occupational Therapy] from the beginning of this year. (Sandrine, Mother, FG4)

The literature revealed that there were some circumstances where it was recommended not to delay school entry. Graue and DiPerna (2000) advised children with special needs and children who were learning English to commence formal schooling as soon as possible. For these children, "the gift of time could be seen as a *theft of opportunity* [emphasis added] to receive diagnostic and intervention support that could help them succeed" (Graue & DiPerna, 2000, p. 529).

It has been shown in this sub-theme that most parents considered their child's social-emotional skills to be more important than academic skills when determining school readiness. Based on the perspective of parents, this feeling is common and not aligned to the school-based definitions of readiness which adopt more of an academic focus. Some parents also indicated their belief their child was not ready to commence formal schooling due to this sense of misalignment of purpose. This was often the case for parents with boys, or whose

child had a recognised disability or developmental concern. The next sub-theme will focus on the changing expectations during the Foundation year of school.

7.2.3 Sub-Theme 4.3 Parents believed the contemporary expectations of the Foundation year have changed.

It was evident many parents in the study believed the expectations of the Foundation year have changed, resulting from a shift to an increasingly academic-focused curriculum. As a result, parents reported a preference from schools for children to be older when they commence formal schooling. This caused frustration and confusion for parents who were attempting to execute their choice to send their child to school at the earliest opportunity, as per educational policy, despite experiencing strong resistance from schools. This sense of misalignment troubled parents as they sought clarity from professional educators to facilitate their decision-making.

Many parents indicated a belief that the expectations of the Foundation year had changed. Ruthie believed the first year of formal schooling in Australia moved at a much faster pace in comparison to her own schooling experience. She also thought the type of work completed appeared to be more academic in nature, which may cause parents to favour a delayed school entry for their child. Ruthie reasoned:

I think people hold back or send later... due to Kindy [Foundation] going at a faster pace than when I was at Kindy [Foundation], so the curriculum's changed... we did colours, and a lot more of the curriculum was play-based. Now, it's sight words and letters, and it moves quickly with the curriculum. (Ruthie, Mother, FG4)

The shift towards a more academically focused curriculum can be attributed to increased competition between countries due to globalisation (Wickett, 2019). Worldwide, educational policies in many countries have become progressively focused on preparing

children to contribute to society (Wickett, 2019). The government's investment in young children is valued as the end product is more productive citizens and a potentially stronger workforce (COAG, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2013).

The literature suggested the first year of formal schooling is now the equivalent to expectations previously expected of Year One students (Bassok et al., 2016b; Minicozzi, 2016). This may help to explain the encouragement from schools to academically redshirt children, as was experienced by many parents in this study. Amelia recalled meeting with the school to discuss her second child's enrolment. She revealed:

And we didn't say anything, but at the time they say [sic] 'look, we strongly suggest' [to delay] ... and she's way [emphasis added] more advanced than my son was. They said, 'look, we strongly suggest that you really think about it because there are going to be children a year older'... and in the end, we went 'oh let's not send her.' Because ... [it's] too hard (Amelia, Mother, FG3)

It was apparent in Amelia's case; despite feeling her daughter was “*way more advanced than my son was*” and he had started at the earliest opportunity, it would be easier to follow the school's advice and delay her daughter's school entry.

Heather was frustrated that despite having the choice to decide, there was a strong resistance from teachers to send children at the earliest opportunity. She indicated: “*This is what I hate, I feel like the system is set up to make us do it later... and the ... teachers advocated that you start late*” (Heather, Mother, FG1). Sandra proposed that teachers' hesitancy to advocate sending children to school at the earliest opportunity “*may cause a parent to think 'well my child's not going to cope... very well'*” (Sandra, Mother, FG2).

In the extract below, Heath expressed frustration at a school's preference for

Foundation students to be older. Despite showing concern for specific aspects of his son's readiness, Heath did not believe this was the school's main motive for encouraging a delayed school entry. He recalled:

... I've found I got quite frustrated with our school... I don't like the fact, it's almost like they've got a conflict of interest. So, what I heard them saying with Freddie going was "Oh we're concerned about his emotional well-being and he's very young" ... But actually, I kind of had a feeling that at the root of it was, "Oh we'd rather have bigger kids because they're easier to manage. You don't have to worry about kind of emotionally and physically, and self-care so much... can you really just hold him back another year?" And they couldn't really be bothered with the hassle and... will it affect.... I don't know quite how Naplan works. Like will it affect their scoring, will they get a better result if they've got the older kids? (Heath, Father, FG3)

The literature indicated that increased accountability of results had certainly resulted in a 'push down' of curriculum, with schools now expecting children to learn basic skills prior to starting school (Bassok et al., 2016b; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Winter, 2011). A successful school transition has been associated with a positive schooling journey for the child (Wickett, 2019). This may help to explain the school's preference for Heath's son to wait an additional year before starting school. However, Kelly pointed out to Heath: *"You could send your child at six. Doesn't mean they're not going to have any emotional problems"* (Kelly, Mother, FG3) in reference to the school's concern regarding Heath's son's emotional wellbeing.

As a result of the shift to a more academic-focused curriculum in the Foundation year, there was concern as to whether ECEC services in Australia were aware of and catered to this expectation surrounding academic readiness. Chelsea questioned: *"But out of interest, if that is what they're expecting children to do before entering Kindergarten [Foundation], do the*

pre-school and day care know this and... is that what they teach?" (Chelsea, Mother, FG4).

Wickett (2019) suggested the relationship between ECEC services and schools in the UK was based on an expectation that ECEC teachers prepared children for school learning through the implementation of school practices at the ECEC service. However, the first year of school in the UK is more play-based because the children are much younger. Hannah explained:

The first year of schooling in the UK is ... because they are much younger, it's that much more play-based ... and expectations of behaviour are a bit different because they're that much younger. Whereas I tend to think that Kindy [Foundation] teachers here, because they're used to teaching five-and six-year-olds, if you send your child when they're four, there's a bit less leeway given for the fact that they are only in Kindy [Foundation]. (Hannah, Mother)

Having immigrated to Australia from the UK, Chelsea felt that the Foundation year in Australia needed to be more play-based. Her son, who had previously commenced Reception in the UK, often complained about the type of work given to him in his first year of school in Australia. Chelsea shared: *"So, he actually complains that there is no play, and he doesn't have any fun at school. That it's all like worksheets and things like that"* (Chelsea, Mother, FG4). The notion that the Foundation year in Australia was too academically focused was also raised by other parents. Karina suggested parents may delay school entry for their children so that they have more time to engage in play-based learning typically offered at ECEC services. She described:

A desire for play based learning because I think there's such a push, especially in Sydney, for kids to be able to read and write and know their numbers and all of that. Whereas, let them freaking be kids (laughs) and play in the dirt and run around.
(Karina, Mother, FG2)

Chelsea believed the lack of play-based learning offered in the current Foundation curriculum in Australian was a significant influence on parents choosing to delay school entry for their child. She suggested:

I think perhaps... people are deciding to delay them... because the curriculum that is taught in the school isn't appropriate for Kindergarten [Foundation] children. And if it became more play-based and inquiry-based, that actually people wouldn't delay their child. Because it will be... more of a continuum of preschool rather than from preschool where everything is play-based and they're still learning but, it's... not sort of explicit learning for the children. So suddenly they go into Kindergarten [Foundation] and they're treated almost like a Year Five or Six, but in Kindergarten [Foundation]. So, if it was sort of a bit more of a transient move. (Chelsea, Mother, FG4)

The opportunity for an additional year of play was viewed by Brett as a positive outcome of his decision to academically redshirt both daughters and was inextricably linked to a lack of alignment between parental aspirations and school policy. He explained: “*She gets to, you know, have an extra year of just enjoying herself and playing and having fun rather than, fun learning, rather than structured learning*” (Brett, Father). The opportunity for play is important because it is recognised as a key process in facilitating children’s learning, yet there has been a shift away from developmentally appropriate practices in schools due to an increased emphasis on academics (Winter, 2011). It was proposed that the structure of Foundation curriculum in Australia could be both academic and play based. Chelsea explained:

I think it's proven if you look in other countries that you can still teach them all these skills that they're now expected to learn according to the NSW Government in

Kindergarten [Foundation]. But it doesn't have to be done in a way that... the children feel that its structured learning. And so, it could become more like pre-school or day care, but with the underlying curriculum that you're teaching... and then perhaps these the parents... actually might not have such a big decision because they can see that their children are still enjoying playing and learning but... also academic learning at the same time. (Chelsea, Mother, FG4)

This sub-theme has revealed a perception by parents in the study that the current Foundation year in Australia had become increasingly academic focused, in comparison to the play-based curriculum they themselves had experienced. This misalignment between parental desires for their children's education and school policy was shown to have influenced parental decision-making about school entry, with many parents opting to delay school entry for their child.

The stories and experiences shared by parents as evidenced in the fourth GET have highlighted the complexities surrounding school readiness. It was shown that parents in the study displayed varying levels of parental readiness regarding their child's transition to school and this influenced decision-making. It was also revealed that parents had varying expectations of school readiness that were at odds with school expectations of children entering the Foundation year. While social-emotional readiness dominated the discussions undertaken, it emerged that academic readiness was also an important consideration for many parents. There was a belief the expectations of the Foundation year had changed drastically over time, which explained the strong resistance from schools to parents who wanted to send their child to school at the earliest opportunity. The rest of this chapter will now focus on the fifth and final group experiential theme (GET) and sub-themes which have been summarised in Table 7.2.

Table 7.2*Group Experiential Theme 5*

There was an apparent misalignment in views between various stakeholders regarding when a child should commence formal schooling.

5.1 Parents' expectations of the role of ECEC services in preparing children for formal schooling varied.

5.2 ECEC teachers often advised parents to delay school entry.

5.3 Some parents experienced strong pushback from the school to change their decision to a delayed school entry.

7.3 Group Experiential Theme 5 - There was an apparent misalignment in views among various stakeholders regarding when a child should commence formal schooling.

Variance in expectations regarding when a child should commence formal schooling revealed an apparent misalignment between various stakeholders including parents, ECEC teachers and school personnel. Parents exhibited varying expectations regarding the role of ECEC services in preparing their child for formal schooling. While it was apparent some parents valued play-based, others favoured a more academic curriculum. There was an expectation by parents that attendance at ECEC would result in their child being 'school ready'.

Many parents actively sought and valued the opinion of ECEC teachers regarding the decision-making. Whilst current education policy in Australia affords some parents the choice to decide when their child commences formal schooling, it was apparent from the stories and

experiences shared that ECEC teachers and school personnel showed a preference for delayed school entry. It was evident some parents experienced strong pushback from the school to delay school entry despite indicating a clear desire for their child to start at the earliest opportunity.

This misalignment often resulted in mixed messages to parents regarding when their child should commence formal schooling. As a result, many parents described feelings of confusion and frustration. The child's perspective on starting school was often overlooked during the decision-making. The first sub-theme will focus on the variance in parents' expectations of ECEC.

7.3.1 Sub-Theme 5.1 Parents' expectations of the role of ECEC services in preparing children for formal schooling varied.

It was evident parents had varying views and expectations regarding the role of ECEC and often utilised ECEC services for different reasons. The quality of ECEC in Australia was shown to vary and as a result the government introduced a rating system to help parents choose an appropriate service. Despite this, it was found parents often chose ECEC services based on convenience over quality.

Many parents considered their child's enrolment in an ECEC service in the year before school as essential to ensuring their child's readiness to start school. John considered "*if children have gone to day care before*" (John, Father, FG2) as being a major indicator of school readiness. Hannah shared her observations of a perceived noticeable difference in starting school experiences and readiness at her son's school, which she attributed whether a child had attended ECEC services. She described:

But you definitely notice in the playground at drop-off there were, you know some kids who just found that separation harder and... there was quite a lot of crying... the

first... term when you drop them off... Whereas that was never an issue for Wade. And that's partly because he has been in day care for years. (Hannah, Mother)

The findings indicated parents often chose ECEC services which were the most convenient for their family's situation, such as being located close to home or work, or those which offered longer hours. For example, Ashini indicated: *"I don't think we'd send it him to like a proper pre-school... because we need the long hours"* (Ashini, Mother). This finding was confirmed by Tayler et al. (2016) who found the average family attended an ECEC service located within 3km of the family home. Most parents in the current study also utilised long day care services which incorporated a preschool program, as opposed to sending their children to a formal preschool. This was attributed to a need for the longer hours due to work commitments.

Almost all the parents who were interviewed were unaware of Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority's (ACECQA) rating system of ECEC services against a National Quality Standard (NQS). Stratigos and Fenech (2018) reported a similar finding, with families often having limited or no understanding of the NQS. The rating system assesses ECEC services in seven quality areas of the NQS and was designed to assist families to make an informed decision on their child's care (ACECQA, 2021). Ratings are required to be displayed at each ECEC service in addition to being available online (Hinton et al., 2017). However, some families may have limited choice when deciding between ECEC options due to work hours, location, availability of places and cost. The local ECEC service may be more convenient for families regardless of its rating. Likewise, a long day care service may be more suitable for families with parents who work full-time due to offering longer hours in comparison to a formal preschool.

It was apparent the ACECQA rating was not a consideration when choosing an ECEC service for the majority of parents in this study. Hinton et al. (2017) revealed similar findings, describing parents as ‘uninformed consumers’ who were either not aware or did not make use of ACECQA ratings when choosing ECEC services. As a result, they believed parents often selected ECEC services which were inferior and did not provide the best opportunities for the child (Hinton et al., 2017). The families who participated in Stratigos and Fenech’s (2018) research were sceptical about the NQS ratings system and indicated an unwillingness to change ECEC services once the child had commenced, regardless of the service’s rating.

Whilst all ECEC services offer programs which have been developed using the *Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)*, the quality has been shown to vary between services. The *Effective Early Educational Experiences (E4Kids)* Research Program indicated the programs offered in preschool (also known as kindergarten in some Australian states) were of higher quality in comparison to programs offered in other ECEC services (Tayler et al., 2016). Quality was determined through a comparison of educational support for learning to improve achievement outcomes, emotional support, room organisation and instructional support (Tayler et al., 2016). Whilst the quality of preschool programs was deemed superior, it was found parents often chose convenience over quality (Tayler et al., 2016).

It was also evident parents also had varying expectations of ECEC programs. Some parents favoured programs which offered plenty of opportunities for play-based learning to occur. Brett, for example, expressed feeling content with the variety of experiences offered at his daughter’s ECEC service: “*Day care is a really fun experience for them, and they do lots of art and craft and excursions to parks and all kinds of stuff*” (Brett, Father). He believed it was important for his daughter to enjoy a variety of fun learning experiences before commencing more structured learning typically experienced at school.

Other parents indicated a stronger preference for ECEC programs which offered greater academic stimulation. John expressed concern that his daughter would have been “so bored” if she had spent an additional year at day care. He believed: “*It comes down a lot of the individual children though because if we kept our daughter back in day care for an extra year... she would have been so bored*” (John, Father, FG2). Kaitlyn also acknowledged that an additional year at the same preschool could be problematic for her son. She explained: “*He'd kind of got bored at preschool*” (Kaitlyn, Mother). Kaitlyn recognised that her son would possibly require more stimulation and would perhaps benefit from moving to a new ECEC service for the additional year before school. Unfortunately, Kaitlyn was not able to move her son due to the father’s preference for their children to remain at the same ECEC service for the family’s convenience.

The preference for greater academic stimulation during the early childhood years was supported by various literature. Dockett and Perry (2007) indicated some parents wanted a stronger academic focus in ECEC programs to ensure children were not disadvantaged at school. O’Gorman (2008) also found some parents preferred ECEC programs which incorporated teacher-directed activities to help prepare children for school. The preference for teacher-directed activities, however, contradicts the specific emphasis on child-directed, play-based learning included in the *EYLF* (Australian Government Department of Education ([AGDE], 2022) and is further evidence of the apparent misalignment in expectations between stakeholders.

Lack of stimulation during the early years may result in misbehaviour of the child which can be challenging for ECEC teachers and parents. In Heath’s case, the ECEC teachers recommended his March-born son start school at the earliest opportunity to ensure he would be challenged academically. He explained:

Freddy was at long day care. And the teachers there were saying... "setting aside the emotional bit, academically that there's nothing more we can do for him here... he needs to go on to that next level of challenge" and he'd started to misbehave a bit because he was bored. (Heath, Father, FG3)

Heath's suggestion that the ECEC teachers felt "*there's nothing more we can do from him here*" was concerning and was perhaps more indicative of the quality of the ECEC program offered at this service. Furthermore, it was from the perspective of the parent that the ECEC teachers believed starting school would alleviate Heath's son's behavioural issues, which were attributed to boredom. Donath et al. (2010) reported a misconception that misbehaviours would disappear once a child had commenced formal schooling. However, this was shown not to be the case, with the responsibility for managing challenging behaviour simply transferring to the Foundation teacher. The advice from the ECEC teachers in Heath's case contradicted the advice offered from the teachers surveyed by Donath et al. (2010) who believed providing a child with an additional year to grow and mature was the most suitable intervention to solve challenges which presented at ECEC services.

The organisational structure of some ECEC services left some parents with little option but to send their child to school at the earliest opportunity or repeat another year in the same room. This was the case for Natalya, whose daughter was enrolled in ECEC as a toddler and had already progressed through each of the rooms offered. Natalya felt her daughter would receive more stimulation at school, rather than repeating a year in the same room. She believed staying at the same ECEC service for the additional year could cause her daughter to have a negative experience: "*Doing the second year with what she perceives as smaller children I think would be a bit damaging, a bit distressful. Distressing for her. So, if I had to wait for another year, we would look for another preschool*" (Natalya, Mother).

This sub-theme has shown that parental expectations regarding the role of ECEC services varied, with parents often choosing convenience over quality. Many parents in the study were unaware of ACECQA's rating system, which was designed to provide parents with information regarding the quality of different ECEC services. This provides evidence of a clear misalignment between the expectations of parents and the role of ECEC, as most parents did not consider quality when selecting an ECEC service for their child. The stories shared also revealed that changing ECEC services was not a simple solution or the preferred option for parents. The next sub-theme will explore the advice offered to parents by ECEC teachers regarding their child commencing formal schooling.

7.3.2 Sub-Theme 5.2 ECEC teachers often advised parents to delay school entry.

Many parents pursued and valued the opinion of ECEC teachers to guide their decision-making. These parents often viewed ECEC teachers to be able to offer crucial insight into their child's readiness for school due to both their qualifications and time spent with the child. However, it was also evident that while some parents approached ECEC teachers for advice, it was not always followed.

Linda considered the advice from the ECEC teachers to be a major influence on her decision-making. As she contemplated the options available, Linda viewed the advice offered by the ECEC teachers as paramount. She explained:

I do think we in the back of our minds no matter what we would say, we still keep thinking about what his preschool says, because we keep thinking, his preschool teachers know him the best. They're in the system. They should know. So, I think that's been a major influence. (Linda, Mother)

It was clear Linda respected the opinion of her son's ECEC teachers and felt they were qualified to determine if her son's readiness. The implementation of the *National*

Quality Framework (NQF) in Australia requires ECEC teachers to have certain qualifications in order to address *Quality Area 4 – Staffing arrangements* (ACECQA, 2022a). As a result, Linda believed the ECEC teachers “*know him the best*” because they work in the early childhood industry. Sarah agreed, suggesting “*they [teachers] know your kids if they've been to day care. They know your kids probably better than you*” (Sarah, Mother).

Sarah’s response revealed a significant level of trust in the twins’ ECEC teachers to provide an honest assessment of their school readiness. However, this was not the first time Sarah had sought advice from the ECEC teachers. She referred to a previous positive experience of academically redshirting her eldest son based the advice of the same ECEC teachers. Sarah’s prior experience working as an ECEC teacher also contributed to her high level of confidence in trusting her own judgment, should it have differed from the advice offered by the ECEC teachers. She explained:

I trust them because they also said to me, they didn't think Matthew was ready. So, I trust that they've got the best interests of the kids at heart... and even if they said they were ready, but I personally didn't think they were ready, I would take my judgment.
(Sarah, Mother)

It was found parents experienced varying levels of support from ECEC teachers during the decision-making. Linda found her son’s ECEC service to be extremely supportive as she experienced confusion and mixed feelings during the decision-making. She recalled meeting with ECEC teachers on multiple occasions due to her inability to decide for her March-born son.

So, then we met with... the main teacher. [She] knew that we were still undecided, so she asked to meet with us again... And we met with her and spoke to her about it. And she again feels that he should stay back... these particular teachers who we really

trust and really respect have said he shouldn't [go to school on-time]. So, I keep coming back to what they've said. (Linda, Mother)

In Linda's case, the ECEC teachers were extremely accommodating to her need for additional support as she struggled with her decision-making. There was no evidence of misalignment in this case. However, not all parents in the study experienced the same level of support. Kaitlyn expressed feeling frustrated by the lack of information provided by her son's ECEC teachers regarding his school readiness, thus expressing a sense of misalignment between her expectations and reality. She revealed: *"I guess I wouldn't consider them the experts but at the same time I would consider that they should've given me more information than they did"* (Kaitlyn, Mother).

The parent-teacher relationship between Kaitlyn and the ECEC teachers appeared to be underdeveloped in this case, which Kaitlyn attributed to high staff turnover. Kaitlyn expressed disappointment that her son's ECEC teachers were not able to give her more specific information about his readiness to help with her decision-making. Her claim of *"I wouldn't consider them experts"* in the previous extract signalled a potential lack of trust in the ECEC teachers' ability to determine her son's readiness, despite their qualifications, which could be attributed to the high staff turnover at the service.

It was evident that while some parents listened to the advice offered from the ECEC teachers, they chose a different decision for their child. Sandra revealed *"No, it wouldn't make any difference if they thought they were ready or not, I will decide that"* (Sandra, Mother, FG2) which showed Sandra felt as the parent, she was in the best position to determine when her child would commence formal schooling. Ashini recollected the ECEC teachers being hesitant to support her family's decision to send her April-born son to school at the earliest opportunity. She recalled:

We mentioned it to kind... to our pre-school and they were pretty hesitant. They were like “[We] really don't know, but we don't at this point... think it's a great idea [to send]”. So, we were like “okay” ... to be honest, I was like “yeah, I obviously take your opinion on board and... let's see.” (Ashini, Mother)

Despite the hesitancy of the ECEC teachers to support their decision, Ashini and her husband proceeded with their intention to send their son due to school at the earliest opportunity. Cindy experienced a similar situation when she sought the opinion of the ECEC teachers for her June-born son, who she also intended to send to school at the earliest opportunity. She recalled: *“The director was very adamant that every child [would] benefit from going in later. And I would probably have listened to them because they're the experts”* (Cindy, Mother). Cindy believed that had she been making the decision for the first time, she would have delayed entry for her son based on the advice given. Winsler et al. (2012) suggested parents may choose to delay school entry for their child as a result of slight to considerable encouragement from ECEC teachers or school teachers. This was shown not to be the case in this study. Whilst Cindy respected the ECEC teachers and considered them experts, she also had previous experience to draw upon which allowed her to feel comfort in proceeding with her intention to send her second born to school at the earliest opportunity.

There was a common perception by parents in this study that ECEC teachers favoured academic redshirting when discussing school entry options. This perception was supported by literature which also indicated ECEC teachers supported a delayed school entry (Dockett & Perry, 2004). Heather believed ECEC teachers strongly advised parents to delay school entry for children, particularly if they were boys. She reflected, *“That was a big thing for us from the teachers, about him being a boy and boys... especially boys. They always say, especially boys you shouldn't do it, especially with boys”* (Heather, Mother, FG1). Carol responded: *“I hear that all the time, and it's like why?”* (Carol, Mother, FG1). The literature revealed

ECEC teachers often prioritised a child's social skills as a key component of school readiness, as opposed to academic capability (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2008; Niklas et al., 2018; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) which could help explain the advice from ECEC teachers to parents to academically redshirt boys.

Linda revealed the ECEC teachers at her son's service also strongly advised parents to delay school entry. She attributed this to their personal experiences of academically redshirting their own children or professional experience from working with children. Linda explained:

And otherwise, when you dig into it, they're like "oh we think all boys should wait till they're six" ... Two of them had... both held their kids back. The other one, who doesn't have kids yet said "... I would never send any child, boy or girl until they were turning six... I would always wait till they're older." You don't even have children yet, but she's already thought about it. (Linda, Mother)

Linda was surprised that the ECEC teachers without their own children had a strong opinion in favour of academic redshirting. Maria also indicated the ECEC teacher at her child's service recommended "*an extra year of play*" prior to commencing formal schooling. She revealed: "*I know her particular educator... feels very strongly about holding back... Often her recommendation will say to give them an extra year of play*" (Maria, Mother, FG2). The stories shared by these parents is evidence of a misalignment between the opinions of ECEC teachers and school policy on school starting age.

The ECEC teacher for Sandrine's eldest son also recommended a delayed school entry for all children, regardless of their capabilities. Sandrine wondered if this was a 'safe' option for ECEC teachers to avoid potential blame if a child started at the earliest opportunity and there were issues.

Every single person I spoke to from that centre... were told the same thing [to delay school entry] ... I think it was just the teacher... it must have been her personal preference to... hold back... that was her recommendation... So, I think it was more on her... conscience maybe, to say to hold them back. So, no one could then go and... blame her... if they sent the child and they weren't ready. (Sandrine, Mother, FG4)

It was suggested that the advice offered by ECEC teachers could be dependent on the educational philosophy of a particular ECEC service. Karina proposed individual ECEC teachers' recommendations may be influenced by the focus of preschool programs offered. Lara-Cinisomo et al. (2011) indicated ECEC teachers often favoured programs that incorporated child-directed activities as opposed to more structured and teacher-directed activities.

I think it also depends on the type of day care you go to. So, if you're in a centre that is holistic, play-based – “let's go play in the home corner and dress up for the day” versus “let's go do our numeracy and count and write and do that and learn our ABCs before you go to Kindy” [Foundation], then I think the play-based learning centre is more likely to say “another year of play is good” versus a centre that's been working on numeracy all year and says “oh your child's ready they can count”.
(Karina, Mother, FG2)

Overall, this sub-theme has shown that the opinions of ECEC teachers were highly sought after and valued by parents. Many parents conveyed a high level of trust in ECEC teachers to offer guidance which was in the best interest of their child. Whilst not all parents adhered to the advice given, the opinions of ECEC teachers were an important influence in the decision-making. The next sub-theme will explore the experiences of some parents who experienced strong pushback from the school regarding their decision.

7.3.3 Sub-Theme 5.3 Some parents experienced strong pushback from the school to change their decision to a delayed school entry.

This sub-theme revealed parents often utilised special occasions at schools as an opportunity to discuss school entry options with school personnel. It was evident, however, many parents in the study who favoured sending their child to school at the earliest opportunity felt pressured by the school to change their decision to a delay school entry. This raised the question of parental choice and input into the decision-making. The child's perspective on starting school was often overlooked during the decision-making.

Parents in the study frequently reported the value in attending school Open Days and Orientation programs as opportunities to engage in school entry discussions with principals and Foundation teachers. Kaitlyn was considering either the local public or the Catholic school for her son. She attended the Open Days at both schools and used the opportunity to discuss the decision of when to send her February-born son with each principal. Kaitlyn indicated both principals perceived the month of February as the most difficult birth month to advise on. She recalled:

They both sort of said February is a real question mark. If he was March, they would say definitely don't send. If it was January, they would say probably send. But February is that real undecided marker. So, it kind of left me in an undecided position as well. (Kaitlyn, Mother)

The hesitancy from both principals in offering school entry advice for a child with a February birth date further exacerbated Kaitlyn's own feelings of indecisiveness regarding whether to send her son. She explained:

I think, to be honest that really the key influence in the decision was the first principal that I spoke to. The first principal, that stood up in front of the group and then I spoke

to her afterwards at the Open Day, who said to me "February is questionable" was probably the key to where I started wondering whether I should or shouldn't send him... If she hadn't said that I probably wouldn't have really thought too much about it. (Kaitlyn, Mother)

Some parents thought the decision was reasonably straight forward. Natalya, for example, felt extremely confident in her decision-making, and intended to enrol her July-born daughter at a specific school at the earliest opportunity. She was, however, surprised at the school's reaction to her decision, with both the principal and Foundation teachers strongly advising her to delay school entry. Natalya recalled, "*Other people... including teachers (laugh) and headmaster [principal]... Of course, most of them are trying to talk us out of this decision and giving some of [the] downfalls*" (Natalya, Mother).

Natalya remained unconvinced by the arguments put forward by the school personnel to delay school entry. However, the pressure by the school to change her decision continued at Orientation. Natalya had brought her daughter to the school to participate in the program offered to the next year's Foundation cohort. At the end of the session, Natalya was confused by the Foundation teachers' advice to delay school entry, despite receiving feedback at the time that there were "*no red flags*". This sense of misalignment was never addressed by the teachers or the principal. Natalya revealed:

We've already discussed, and we know what we're doing and that's what we decided on... And then at the Orientation, it was the same... So basically, after the Orientation we're told, look the teacher says...um no red flags... I haven't observed anything. But please think about it. Please, you know, talk to your husband. Please do this, please do that. I'm like yeah, yeah, we already did. That's why we came to Orientation... So, like we said, we want to see. No, no, the Deputy, Vice Chancellor will contact you and set up a meeting. (Natalya, Mother)

The advice to Natalya to delay school entry for her daughter may be attributed to the Foundation teachers' expectations being influenced by the other entering children (Bassok et al., 2016b). Foundation teachers also displayed stronger beliefs regarding the importance of school preparation in comparison to ECEC teachers (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2011). This is further evidence of a misalignment between stakeholders who are serving the same community, causing uncertainty and confusion for parents.

The literature showed that parents often valued the recommendations put forward from those who were closest to them (Donath et al., 2010). In Natalya's case, she valued the opinion of her daughter's ECEC teachers and the teachers at the Russian school, who she believed knew her daughter best and were supportive of her decision. Recommendations offered from Foundation teachers were often not as valued as those offered by ECEC teachers (Donath et al., 2010). This may be due to the recency in the formation of a parent-teacher relationship with the Foundation teacher. Wickett (2019) suggested the parent-teacher relationship varied because ECEC teachers were often more readily available to share information with parents at pick up and drop off times. Various studies reported a noticeable decrease in communication between parents and teachers as children transitioned from ECEC settings to school (Kaplun et al., 2017; Murray et al., 2015).

Despite completing the enrolment forms for her daughter, Natalya was contacted by the school for additional meetings to discuss the benefits of a delayed school entry. She revealed:

I didn't expect that there will be so much pushback from the actual school. I'm not sure if it's just our school or if it's a common thing you know. But... it was quite difficult actually because... when we first enrolled or tried to enrol... in school, we're told you have to go back and think about it, you have to discuss with your family, you

have to do this...you have to do this. Think about that and think about that. And it was like yeah, yeah. (Natalya, Mother)

When it was clear that the meeting had not changed Natalya's decision to send her daughter to school on time, a subsequent meeting was scheduled. Natalya recalled: *I had to come separately to the school to speak with him. He... kept on trying to you know suggest again... to rethink it. And I said "look, I can confirm right now, that that's what we decided to do" ... Obviously we have been discussing it for the last six months at least. (Natalya, Mother)*

Natalya explained to the Vice Chancellor that she had spent a considerable amount of time discussing the decision both with the child's father and the school and that the decision was now final. The Vice Chancellor again asked Natalya to reconsider. However, Natalya indicated:

Like we still want to continue. And he goes "No, no, no, no, no, no. I can't sort of accept your confirmation now. You need to go back and talk to your husband. And talk to your family." So basically, she [sic] wouldn't accept, you know. (Natalya, Mother)

Yet another meeting was scheduled with the Vice Chancellor and there was still no change in Natalya's decision. She recalled, *"After that [meeting] I sent e-mails [to the school] confirming that this is our decision. But still, I don't really have formal confirmation, you know"* (Natalya, Mother). Despite informing the school her daughter would be commencing her schooling in the following school year, Natalya had not received formal confirmation of her daughter's enrolment at the school at the time of the interview.

Natalya's experience of what she described as "*pushback*" (Natalya, Mother) from the school was not an isolated incident. Parents across multiple focus groups shared their own

experiences of pushback from schools. Heath shared his own family's harrowing experience which he described as "*really traumatic*" concerning his March-born son. He recalled:

It was really traumatic because we had to go in and we had the Principal, the Assistant Principal, the School Counsellor, Freddie, me, and my wife... They went around and they were like, "in our professional opinion, we think you should keep your child back." And we said, "well, we would like him to go." And then they did it, "we're keeping a preschool place open. We really think, you know, we'll take you down to the preschool. And we think it's a great environment." (Heath, Father, FG3)

Despite Heath and his wife clearly stating their intention to send their son to school at the earliest opportunity, they felt heavily pressured by the school to change their decision to a delayed school entry. Heath revealed:

Between Orientation and starting ... they were really trying to put the pressure on and we're like 'look, he's desperate to come... we're not going to hold him back' and they're like 'we're still keeping a place [at the preschool] open'. And I just felt like... it wasn't actually about the child's best interest because they weren't listening to what we were saying. (Heath, Father, FG3)

The findings revealed that whilst some parents had the choice to decide when their child would commence formal schooling, schools were not always supportive of the parent's decision. In terms of level of input into the decision-making, John indicated during the focus group discussion: "*We did question whether or not as a parent you're just as valid, or just ... as worthy of making that call*" (John, Father, FG2). It was evident Carol believed the parent's input into the decision was paramount. She suggested: "*Well, that's the thing. You're the parent. You know what they can learn*" (Carol, Mother, FG1). However, Heath described feeling as though the school didn't value their input as parents and weren't listening to their

point of view. As a result, he revealed: *“I didn't feel very comfortable at how much influence the school seemed to have over my decision as a parent”* (Heath, Father, FG3).

It has been shown that the notion of parental choice was discussed by parents in multiple focus groups. Kelly explained: *“They give you the choice, but then you're not supported in what choice you made”* (Kelly, Mother, FG3). This comment is indicative of the misalignment between the government's education policy concerning school entry and what the schools' expectations. Heath explained: *“So, it's almost reached this point where... it has almost become normalised to have your child go later. To the extent that the school were now pressuring the parents who weren't”* (Heath, Father, FG3).

Nikhita questioned why Australia's education policy concerning school starting age had not been changed given a clear preference by schools for children to be older. She argued the current system affords parents (some) the choice to decide, yet the stories shared by parents in this study suggest it is the schools that want to make the decision for parents.

Nikhita explained:

If the school system feels so strongly, why doesn't Australia just change the starting date, so parents are not in this debate and this friction between the school?... I am for the delayed start... I understand why the school is saying that they wanted... the delayed start. And I agree with them. But... don't have that rule open for parents to [choose] then... because then if you're leaving it open. Then (pause) he [Heath] has a right to decide. (Nikhita, Mother, FG3)

Sandrine experienced a similar situation to what Heath had experienced. She recalled a meeting at the school for her second-born son, who she had decided to send to school at the earliest opportunity. At this meeting, the principal indicated he was concerned about her son's academic readiness for school and his young age. Sandrine recalled:

I went to enrol my son this year... and when I had the interview with... an interim principal and he...said to me oh socially and emotionally my second son was ready to go, but academically he's not ready. And he suggested that I hold him back for academic reasons. And he said he will be behind all the other kids if I sent him to school. And that's because the majority, both my boys are the youngest boys in the year and there's probably only two children that are younger than them and that they are March babies. So, everybody is pretty much holding the kids back ... kids that are born from January to July, they have all been held back because we're all going to birthdays and they're all turning six and my son's only turning five. So that was one of the reasons the principal said to me, that he will be behind compared to the other kids. (Sandrine, Mother, FG4)

The principal's concern in Sandrine's extract may be attributed to increased pressure on principals to improve results (Bassok et al., 2016b; Deming & Dynarski, 2008). The principal may prefer children who are older, in the belief they will perform more strongly due to increased age and maturity. Sandrine indicated that the principal suggested the concern was that academic redshirting practices were common at the school and her son would be extremely young in comparison to his peers.

Some of the parents in the study experienced such intense pushback from schools that they had to move locations in order to implement their desired decision to send their child to school at the earliest opportunity. When Chelsea immigrated to Australia, her son had already completed two terms of Reception in UK. She intended for her son to continue his schooling in Australia. Her family had two locations in mind. The decision on location was decided for the family because one of the public schools would not accept her son's enrolment due to his February birth date. She recalled:

When we moved to Sydney we had, were looking at two houses in... two different locations of Sydney and I spoke to both schools. And the other school told me because my son was born in February that they wouldn't take him into Kindergarten [Foundation] now. That they would only accept him for the following year. Bearing in mind he'd already been in school for two terms in the UK. And so, we actually chose the house based on the school that had the catchment that we could send him to, and he would go to Kindergarten [Foundation]. (Chelsea, FG4)

Families who choose public education for their child in Australia must attend the local school in their catchment area. Parents who are not happy with the school option provided may choose to move to a new catchment area to attend a specific school. Rowena shared her family's experience which resulted in a change of address to attend a different public school. She explained:

I'm committed to public schooling and, but I didn't like the school catchment that we were in. So, we spent this year moving house to a new catchment. That school where we were in the catchment... we went and did the Orientation... because we were going to start at four and a half. And we asked for a meeting with the principal and she... made it very clear she didn't like kids starting at four and a half. So... that (laugh) didn't encourage us. (Rowena, FG3)

Another major finding was the child's perspective on starting school was often overlooked during the decision-making. This was despite the child's perspective being a significant influence for some parents. Heath expressed disappointment that the school hadn't taken his child Freddie's enthusiasm to start school into consideration when encouraging a delayed school entry. This was despite Freddie's view playing a significant role in the parents' own decision-making.

I think one of the key things for us was actually our youngest Freddie. His like enthusiasm. He was desperate to go. Like he really wanted to go. He's got a big brother, he wanted to go to school... to not allow him to go when he's so enthusiastic to go would have crushed him. So, ... his kind of view, even though he's like 4, was a big part. (Heath, Father, FG3)

Despite the eagerness for both Freddie and his parents for the schooling journey to commence, Heath spoke of what he described as significant pressure by the school to delay school entry. He reflected: *"I think they were trying to put pressure on or say what they thought was right"* (Heath, Father, FG3). Rowena empathised with Heath's experience with his son because she felt that her daughter's experience had also been negative. Rowena was concerned children may develop feelings of inadequacy by the decision to delay school entry. She was also worried of the impact of hearing discussions regarding concerns about school entry could have on the child. She recalled: *"I found it really... awful for the kid. Like, how would your son have felt in that meeting with the.... school or the principals? And being told, you know, he's not ready. He's not going to do well"* (Rowena, Mother, FG3). Heath indicated that his son would have likely been aware the conversations were about him. He responded: *"Yeah. I know. He's sitting there playing Lego and they could see him there"* (Heath, Father, FG3). Despite Freddie's physical presence at the meeting, school personnel continued to pressure Heath and his wife to keep Freddie enrolled in preschool for an additional year.

The experiences shared by both Rowena and Heath revealed their children's preference to start school was dismissed during the decision-making by either the parents or the school, without detailed consideration of the potential impact on the child. For example, Craig indicated: *"Peter is raring to go. He's going to be really disappointed when he finds out that he's not going to school next year"* (Craig, Father). Failure to take the child's

viewpoint into consideration may result in a negative outcome. Rowena referred to “*the fallout from our decision*” which resulted after Rowena and her partner changed their decision to a delayed school entry.

I'll just share... the fallout from our decision. So, ... she had been assessed by the day care as ready to go... last term. They had a good school readiness program that they're known for... and she was best at the school readiness... we thought we would send her until we went to school and stuff. And so, I think in about November, we changed our minds and said, “no we're not going to send you.” You know, “we're going to wait another year.” And so, she realised that the kids from day care that were the same age as her, who were much worse at the school readiness [were starting school on-time] ... She really wanted to go to school... She was very aware that there was this choice that she could have gone. She could have not gone. (Rowena, Mother, FG3)

Rowena indicated her family had changed their mind regarding their decision after visiting the school. However, this change had failed to take into consideration her daughter's desire to start school. The literature showed the child's perspective was often overlooked in the decision-making (Dockett & Perry, 2007). This was despite *Article 12* in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* stipulating a child has the right to contribute to situations in which they are directly involved (United Nations, 1989). Rowena's account demonstrated that her daughter was severely impacted by the decision to delay school entry and required psychological treatment. Rowena recalled, “*And so, she had, she started regressing. Started self-harming. We had to go see a child psychologist. It's better now that's she's... got over that period*” (Rowena, Mother, FG3).

The evidence presented in this sub-theme has demonstrated that the opinions of principals and school teachers were highly sought after and extremely valued by many

parents to help guide their decision-making. Parents often valued the opportunity to attend school events such as Open Days and Orientation to meet with principals and Foundation teachers in order to discuss their child's school readiness. Whilst not all parents followed the advice offered, it was sought after to help parents make an informed decision. However, when opinions and advice provided by teachers, carers and leaders were misaligned; the challenges and ambiguities inherent in parental decision-making regarding school entry were exacerbated, leaving parents feeling frustrated and confused.

The fifth and final GET has explored the apparent misalignment in views between various stakeholders in relation to when a child should commence formal schooling. The stories and experiences shared have demonstrated that parents often access ECEC for different reasons and have varying expectations of ECEC services. It was shown parents valued the opinions of ECEC teachers to help with the decision-making.

Current education policy in Australia affords some parents the choice to decide when to send their children to school. It was apparent that many parents who had elected to send their child to school at the earliest opportunity experienced strong pushback from the school to delay school entry. This pushback is evidence of a misalignment between stakeholders regarding school entry and the result was increased confusion and frustration for parents.

7.4 Chapter Summary

The key concept of *Experiences of Misalignment* was introduced in this chapter and explored through two GETs, namely:

4. *Parents displayed varying levels of readiness for their child's transition to school; in addition to difficulty assessing their child's readiness for school.*
5. *There was an apparent misalignment in views among various stakeholders regarding when a child should commence formal schooling.*

The findings reported in this chapter revealed a misalignment of views among various stakeholders in regard to school readiness. Parents in the study assumed their child would be 'school ready' through attendance at ECEC. However, current ECEC programs in Australia are underpinned by the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) which promotes a play-based program for learning. Parents were concerned the Foundation curriculum in schools had become increasingly academic-focused. The stories and experiences shared in this chapter demonstrated schools were actively encouraging parents to academically redshirt their children so that they will commence school older.

The key findings make a significant contribution to research in this field and provide deeper insights into the centrality of the concepts of readiness and misalignment that imbue the complex and contested processes of decision-making as reported by the parents in this study. The final chapter will focus on the findings that have been elicited from this data analysis. Recommendations for practice, policy and further research will also be addressed as the culminating component of this research that focusses on the perspectives of parents regarding academic redshirting of school entry.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

To date, limited research has been undertaken in Australia in relation to parents' decision-making concerning academic redshirting. The purpose of this study was to explore the *lived* experience of parents' decision-making concerning academic redshirting and school entry. Specifically, this thesis sought to address three main research questions in regard to: the lived experience for parents of the decision-making; the main influences on parents' decision-making; and why particular experiences were valued during the academically redshirted year. A qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to explore the essence of decision-making for parents who were in the process of or who had recently decided whether to academically redshirt their child.

This final chapter of the thesis will discuss the significance of this study by highlighting the complexities surrounding parents' decision-making in relation to academic redshirting and school entry. Being a phenomenological study, reflexivity will be revisited. Key findings of the study will be theorised and articulated through the model, *Cycles of Indecision* (see Figure 8.1). The significance of the study will be discussed by highlighting the complexities surrounding parents' decision-making in relation to academic redshirting of school entry. The strengths and limitations of the study will be acknowledged. The implications of the study will be highlighted and a series of recommendations for practice, education policy and future research offered in summation of this thesis.

8.1 Revisiting Reflexivity

The study adopted a hermeneutic (interpretive) approach. As previously mentioned, Heidegger (1927, 1962) did not agree with Husserl (1982) on phenomenological reduction. He believed the researcher's interpretation was inevitable. Therefore, it was important that potential biases were conveyed at the outset (Neubauer et al., 2019).

My own experience with the decision-making potentially influenced my interpretation of the results of this study. I attempted to bracket my ideas, however, Heidegger (1927, 1962) believed bracketing can only be partially achieved. I recorded my feelings after hearing each parents' story of the decision-making. It is important to note that my view regarding academic redshirting changed through the process of undertaking this study.

I engaged with the *double hermeneutic* in this study. Therefore, my interpretation of the results is an interpretation of each participants' interpretation of their experience as shared by them (Smith, 2011). To prevent any potential bias in the presentation of results, a Prevalence Table (see Appendix P) was used to ensure all parents' voices were heard. The creation of each GET and sub-themes required more than half of the participants from each participant group to have made specific reference to the concept for it to be included.

The use of the *hermeneutic circle* is common in IPA research (Smith, 2007). The hermeneutic circle framework was initially used in the literature review and enabled the exploration of the various *parts* which contributed to the *whole* regarding the phenomenon. The hermeneutic circle was then utilised in the analysis of results, with each theme (whole), containing a series of sub-themes (parts). The inclusion of sub-themes enabled the deeper exploration of each of the key concepts identified in this study. The key findings of this study will now be discussed.

8.2 Key Findings

As a result of the data analysis presented across Chapters 5, 6 and 7, five group experiential themes (GETs) were developed to represent the unique and shared experiences of the decision-making, as told by the two groups of parents who participated in this study.

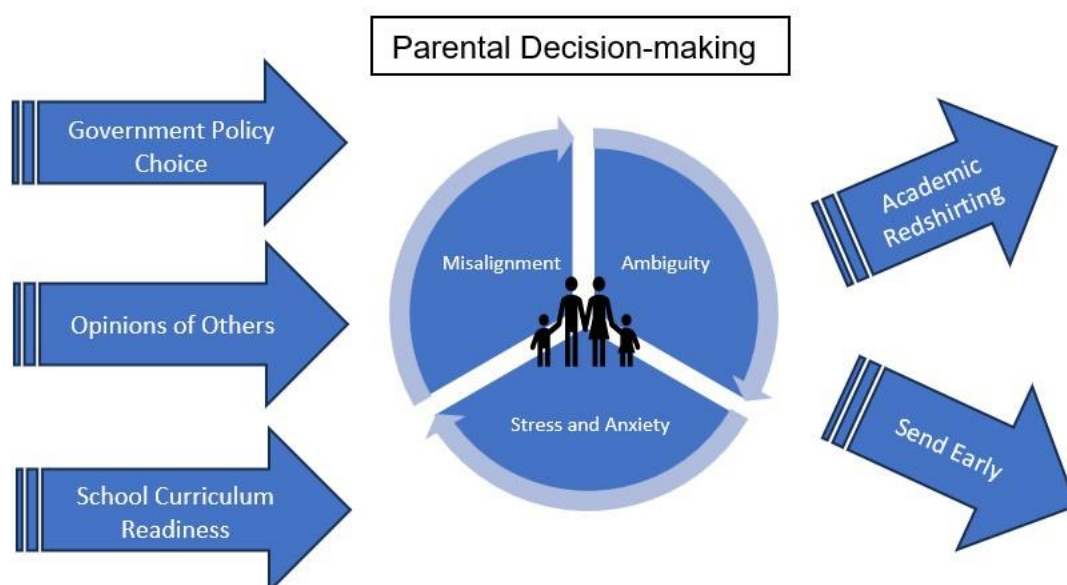
By way of summary, the key group experiential themes are:

1. *Parents were influenced by other parents as they navigated this important decision and its potential impact on their child's future; and*
2. *Parents' experiences showed that the burden of decision-making often fell upon the mother.*
3. *There was ambiguity for a number of parents as they considered the best decision for their child.*
4. *Parents displayed varying levels of parental readiness for their child's transition to school; in addition to difficulty assessing their child's readiness for school.*
5. *There was an apparent misalignment in views among various stakeholders regarding when a child should commence formal schooling.*

Figure 8.1 presents the model *Cycle of Indecision*.

Figure 8.1

Model of Cycles of Indecision



It was evident through the stories and experiences shared, that many parents in the study experienced cycles of indecision and feelings of ambiguity as they navigated the decision regarding when their child should commence formal schooling. A number of influences were identified which resulted in a misalignment of views among various stakeholders regarding when a child should commence formal schooling. This resulted in parents in the study experiencing ambiguity and increased stress and anxiety in regard to when to send their child to school. This complex, sustained confluence of indecision, ambiguity and misalignment will now be explored through the theorising of the model, *Cycles of Indecision*.

8.2.1 Misalignment

The findings showed a clear misalignment of views amongst various stakeholders, including parents, ECEC teachers, and school personnel in regard to when a child should commence formal schooling. This was attributed firstly to varying conceptualisations of school readiness. *The Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) encourages the implementation of a play-based curriculum in ECEC services in Australia (AGDE, 2022; Thomas et al., 2011). Many parents in this study considered their child's readiness in terms of their social-emotional development. However, the child's academic development also emerged as a growing concern for parents in this study. While there is a strong emphasis on 'being' in the present in the EYLF, as opposed to a focus on the future (AGDE, 2022), it was apparent this emphasis contradicted school expectations of readiness. This led to confusion for parents in the study due to conflicting expectations. This confusion has resulted in parents investing in building their child's human capital accumulation prior to school entry (Kerr, 2022). This variance in the conceptualisation of school readiness by parents, ECEC teachers and school teachers was a key finding in this study and contributed to a misalignment amongst key stakeholders about how to best prepare children for school.

Secondly, misalignment was also observed between education policy concerning school starting age and advice offered to parents by ECEC teachers. Current starting school age policy in NSW offers *some* parents the choice as to whether to send their child to school at the earliest opportunity, or delay school entry to the following year. However, most parents indicated that the ECEC teachers strongly advised them to delay school entry, contributing to a lack of clarity and a sense of no-confidence in the advice of ECEC staff regarding the policy.

The ECEC teachers were not the only professionals who advised parents to delay school entry. It was evident from the experiences shared by parents in this study that schools also actively encourage academically redshirting practices. The implementation of national testing and the ability to compare schools based on academic performance has resulted in the increased marketisation of schools (Hattie, 2017; Reid et al., 2010) and residualisation, as students travel to higher performing schools outside their local area (Hinz, 2021). This increased competition for enrolments helps to provide a rationale for schools favouring academic redshirting practices. The data also showed that the increased use of national testing has led to greater accountability for results by schools (Bassok et al., 2016b; Dockett & Perry, 2007) and hence teachers were looking for greater reassurance that the older the child, the more likely test results would improve.

Several parents in the study described being required to attend meetings with the school to discuss their impending decision, with arguments put forward to parents in favour of a delayed school entry. It was suggested that due to increased academic redshirting practices in NSW (Hanly et al., 2019), parents felt that those who sent their child to school at the earliest opportunity were now considered to be ‘sending early’ rather than on-time. The school’s encouragement to parents to delay school entry supported this suggestion. Parents recognised that this was in misalignment with school entry policy, the ECEC curriculum and

how children are prepared for primary school (Brown et al., 2021), as well as their own personal experience. The confusion, emotional upheaval and contradictory messages from stakeholders embedded within the various misalignments and inherent in the interplay of policy and practice, prolonged indecision for parents regarding school entry age for their child.

It was evident that the conflicting advice from stakeholders caused increased confusion and frustration for many parents, contributing further to the cycles of indecision that they have identified during this period of decision-making.

8.2.2 Ambiguity

This study revealed that most parents expressed positive feelings about the flexibility in choice afforded to some parents to decide their child's school entry. However, some parents, particularly those who had emigrated to Australia from overseas, experienced difficulty understanding the choices available to parents. It was evident most parents relied upon their own or others' schooling experiences to help with the decision-making. However, this approach is problematic because these prior experiences are often out of step with policy in Australia, particularly if the parent attended an overseas school or are considered outdated due to the changes to the Foundation curriculum in recent years. The literature presented in Chapter 2 revealed variance in decision-making by parents according to their country of origin, which was attributed differing values. Clustering of families according to ethnic background may help to explain the variance in academic redshirting rates across areas of NSW as reported by Hanly et al. (2019).

It was apparent that the provision of choice often resulted in increased confusion for parents. This was particularly the case for parents who were making the decision for the first-time and who were mostly unfamiliar with today's school environment. Many parents

expressed feelings of ambivalence and confusion regarding a 'right' or 'wrong' decision being made, particularly due to the potential long-term impact of the decision on their child's success at school and beyond. These feelings were validated by research which reported children who were young for a cohort were more likely to be referred to special education services or be retained (Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Dhuey & Lipscomb, 2010; Mendez et al., 2014). Norbury et al. (2016) further suggested that early school failure could lower a child's self-esteem and result in a negative attitude towards schooling in the later years.

The wording of the current school starting age policy in NSW was shown to be ambiguous, with parents in the study interpreting the meaning of the policy in different ways. It was evident from the group discussions that some parents felt others were taking advantage of a 'loop hole', enabling children whose birthday occurred during the school holidays prior to the start of the school year, to start school after they had turned six. This action has resulted in wider age differences between children in each cohort, as parents with children born in December and January increasingly take advantage of the ambiguous wording. The flexibility at the level of policy has been labelled and Australian's education system is considered *ambiguous* (Bernard & Dhuey, 2006) as opposed to countries (e.g., England, Iceland, Japan, and Norway) with *clean* education systems that provide a single, mandatory cut-off date for school entry. Rather than facilitating choice for Australian parents, it has been shown that this flexibility has contributed to increased anxiety and stress for many parents in this study.

The level of anxiety experienced by parents was exacerbated by varying levels of knowledge and experience of the Australian schooling system. The flexibility in the NSW school starting age policy resulted in some parents having multiple options to consider. Parents associated more options with increased levels of stress based on feelings of ambiguity. It was evident that mothers in this study often took upon themselves the burden of the decision-making and as a result often reported feeling stressed and anxious. Such anxiety

was based on a belief that their child may be disadvantaged if they started school at the earliest opportunity. This anxiety was validated by the literature which showed that older children outperformed their younger peers across all year levels in Australia's nationwide testing (NAPLAN) (Mavilidi et al., 2022; Whitely et al., 2020).

It was also apparent that mothers did not want their child to be different and therefore reached out to other parents for advice. Social media has enabled parents, in particular mothers, to consult with wider parent populations online. However, social media has been found to exacerbate intensive mothering ideology (Valtchechanov et al., 2016) which resulted in increased levels of stress and anxiety for mothers in this study. Some reported feeling judged by other mothers regarding their decision-making, particularly if the decision involved sending the child to school at the earliest opportunity.

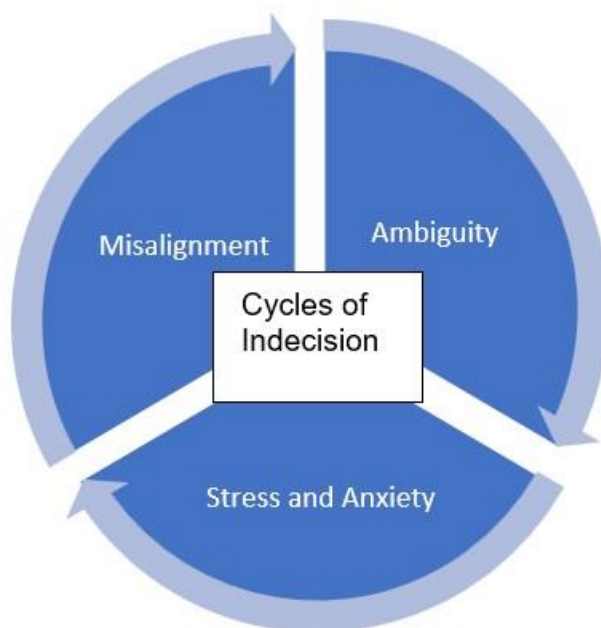
The accumulation and analysis of the evidence provided through this dissertation is that such ambivalence and experiences of misalignment found parent decision-making continually shaped by feelings of perplexity as they engaged in "searching, hunting, inquiring, to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of the perplexity" (Dewey, 1933, p. 12), ultimately resulting in cycles of indecision regarding when to start their child at school.

This complex, sustained confluence of indecision, ambiguity and misalignment was shaped by mixed messages found across educational policies provided by the government and educational providers. It was further exacerbated by dialogue amongst parents, families and social media that introduced uncertainty into the processes of decision-making due to educational, cultural, and familial values. An additional layer of contradiction was introduced when parents sought advice from educational advisors including ECEC teachers, school teachers and school leaders, all of whom offered advice contrary to one another; advice that

was not clearly aligned to the government policy. Initial ideas of flexibility and choice regarding school entry for their child was continuously reconstituted to reflect ongoing uncertainty, doubt, and indecision that failed to result, for most, in any form of clarity and confidence regarding when their child should enter formal schooling, and the plausibility of academic redshirting. This is best theorised through a model entitled *Cycles of Indecision* that for the first time portrays what has been referred to as one of the most difficult decisions parents are required to make in raising a family.

Figure 8.2

Cycles of Indecision: A Model of Parental Decision-Making Regarding When a Child Should Enter Formal Schooling in One State of Australia.



8.3 Significance of the Study

Using a phenomenological approach, this study makes a unique and substantial contribution to the field of knowledge concerning academic redshirting through an examination of the interaction of policy and practice surrounding decision-making in relation to school entry options. The choice of methodology has enabled a deep exploration of the how the decision-making was experienced by the parents in this study and the key influences on their decision-making. This study has addressed a key gap in the literature through the inclusion of both mothers' and fathers' perspectives. It has also explored the different way parents in Australia choose to prepare their children for formal schooling.

8.4 Strengths and Limitations

The study had a number of strengths and limitations. A strength was the use of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach which enabled a deep exploration of the phenomenon of parents' decision-making concerning academic redshirting. The intent was to reveal what the experiences of decision-making was like for 'this' particular group of parents. Transferability of results may therefore be limited. The analysis was also filtered through my lens as a researcher, with potential biases. To minimise the potential for these biases to influence the study, these were identified, reflected upon, and have been clearly articulated to the reader.

Another strength of the study was the use of multiple methods to collect data. The use of interviews and focus groups enabled triangulation of results and a larger group of parents to participate in the study. However, participation was voluntary and dependent on interest, which resulted in a lack of diversity in family structures. The selection of participants based on the order of completion of consent forms, as outlined in the information letters (see Appendices Y and Z).

The organisation of the focus groups was another strength. Limiting the number of people in each focus group to 4 or 5 members helped to ensure that all parents in each group had the opportunity to participate in the activities and discussions. A diversity of perspectives concerning the decision of whether to delay a child's school start provided for rich storytelling and sharing of experiences within each group. The use of an online focus group enabled parents from across NSW to participate in the study. It also enabled more equitable participation, as parents could indicate with the click of the button if they were keen to contribute to the discussion or use emojis to signal agreement with a particular comment. Whereas in face-to-face focus groups, more assertive participants tend to dominate the discussions (Shelton & Jones, 2022).

It is important to recognise that the discussions which took place in focus groups were in a controlled setting. Smithson (2000) referred to a 'collective voice' or the development of a joint perspective which often develops from focus group discussions. Parents who may have disagreed with the dominant opinion may have been ignored or may not have contributed to some discussions. I attempted to overcome this challenge by asking parents to individually compile lists prior to discussions. These were collected after each focus group.

8.5 Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study, presented through the *Cycles of Indecision* model (see Figure 8.1) have a number of important implications for educational policy and practice. These implications will be addressed in the following sub sections and recommendations will be made. Potential areas for future research will also be identified.

8.5.1 Recommendations for Education Policy

It is recommended that changes are required to the current starting school entry policies across states and territories in Australia. It has previously been shown that parents in this study were confused by the ambiguous wording of the current school starting age policy in NSW. It is proposed that changes to current wording to clarify the rules for children whose birth date falls in the school holidays prior to the school year is needed.

A national school starting age would address the levels of ambiguity experienced by parents, particularly those who have moved from overseas or interstate. It would be beneficial to streamline school starting age policies across Australia to reduce the confusion for parents and to provide a more equitable system for all.

Data from the World Bank (2022) presented in Chapter 1 (see Table 1.1) revealed Australian children typically commence formal schooling at a younger age in comparison to many other countries. Many countries have moved school entry cut-off dates to increase the starting age (Dhuey, 2016; Elder & Lubotsky, 2009; Lincove & Painter, 2006; Stipek, 2002). It was revealed in Chapter 2, that government funding for children in ECEC, preschool and school varies (see Table 2.1). It would therefore be more economical for the government for children to remain in ECEC and preschool services for longer.

The problem in Australia is that current school starting age policies enable up to an 18-month age gap between children in a cohort. It is proposed that a national school starting age policy would reduce confusion for parents but may not address variability in children's readiness to learn. The lack of clarity regarding readiness for school requires attention but has not been the focus of this study.

Hanly et al. (2019) proposed that narrowing the age gap may reduce relative age differences between children. This could be achieved through the provision of two school year intakes, for example, in January and July. In South Australia (SA), the Department of Education have recently announced that from 2024, there will be a mid-year intake into the Foundation year for the first time (South Australia [Department of Education], 2023). Parents who have a child who turns five between the 1st May and 31st October in South Australia will have the option to start their schooling in either Term 3 of the same year or wait until Term 1 of the following year. It is proposed that this type of reform is needed in NSW given the high prevalence of academic redshirting rates in comparison to the national average.

Another way to narrow the age gap between children in a cohort would be to base year group allocations on the year of birth. This way, there would be no more than a 12-month age gap between children in a cohort. This would also remove the need for parents to decide when their child should commence formal schooling as there would be a clear guideline for the majority of children. Children with specific learning needs could apply to delay school entry as required.

8.5.2 Recommendations for Practice

The current school starting age policy in NSW offers some parents flexibility to decide when to send their child to school. The findings of this study have revealed that many parents who favoured sending their child to school at the earliest opportunity experienced strong resistance from a range of stakeholders.

Due to the current flexibility in starting date offered, there is a need for schools to be prepared for and willing to accept a diverse range of children in the Foundation year. This could involve strategic grouping of children such reducing class sizes (Dhuey, 2019) but also requires a shift in educational purposes away from a testing regime to developing children's

potential to grow and learn through responsive and inclusive education, particularly in the Foundation year. Further, greater attention to the transition of students from ECEC services to formal schooling is required urgently.

The misalignment of views between various stakeholders in regard to school readiness must be addressed through greater collaboration between ECEC services and schools during this important transition. A targeted professional development program to better align the sectors would be beneficial to ensure collegial expectations concerning school readiness. Parents who are making school entry decisions for their child would benefit from a collaborative approach between the ECEC and school sectors to ensure a more positive, streamlined transition to school for the family, and most importantly, the child.

8.5.3 Further Research

This study focused on a deep exploration of the phenomenon for a particular group of parents. It is recommended that future research is designed to be inclusive of a broader range of parent groups to enable the generation of more comprehensive insight into parents' decision-making concerning academic redshirting. It would also be beneficial to explore a more diverse range of family types to understand the unique experiences of the decision-making for these families. Specific studies on particular ethnic groups would also be highly beneficial because it was evident from the parents who participated in this study that education is valued in different ways according to one's cultural background and this influences their decision-making.

It was apparent that the view of the child was often overlooked by various stakeholders in the experiences shared in this study. This was despite the significance of the decision being made at an important transition in the child's life. Research incorporating the child's view in the decision-making is highly recommended in future research.

It would also be beneficial for quantitative research to be undertaken which correlates decision-making with other variables, not limited to socio-economic status, ethnicity, parents' social media use, and fathers' investments in child raising.

8.6 Conclusion

The ambiguities, contradictions and dilemmas associated with current school starting age policies and the misalignment between various stakeholders regarding school readiness have contributed to many parents experiencing cycles of indecision, as demonstrated in this research and articulated in this final chapter. The findings of this study have made a strong case for changes to educational policy and practice in order to reduce the stress and anxiety experienced by many parents regarding the decision of when their child should commence formal schooling. Given the high incidence of academic redshirting in NSW (Hanly et al., 2019), urgent action is required, not only to bring greater alignment between policy and quality educational practices, but to strengthen partnerships between educational stakeholders particularly parents and educational institutions. After all, if the adage "it takes a village to raise a child" holds truth, the various stakeholders need to engage positively as a community to place the needs of the child as central to continuous learning and development. In doing so each child will enter educational environments such as early childhood centres and schools, to learn and grow in a safe and rich environment that is contingent on their unique capabilities, and not simply their age or their socio-economic status. If this could be achieved across the educational sectors in Australia, perhaps the need to discuss academic redshirting may become unnecessary.

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Appendices

Appendix A Candidature Offer Letter



29 February 2016

Kirsten MacKINNON
 42 Yallambee Road
 BEROWRA NSW 2081
kirsten_mack@bigpond.com

Dear Kirsten,

Offer: Doctor of Education

Congratulations! Your application for admission to the Doctor of Education program at ACU has been successful and you are being offered a Commonwealth supported (RTS) place.

Student ID: ID# S00124511
Course load: Part-time
Commencement date: 29 February 2016
Thesis submission date: 28 February 2022
Candidature expiry date: 28 February 2024
Enrolled in: **School / Research Institute:** School of Education
Faculty: Faculty of Education
Campus: Strathfield
Research Advisor: Doctor Valerie Margrain valerie.margrain@acu.edu.edu
Research topic: Delaying school starting age has a detrimental effect on student achievement in the early years of schooling.

Additional information:

Candidates are eligible for 20 days annual leave per year. Leave arrangements must be discussed and organised with your Principal Supervisor and recorded.

It is a condition of candidature that you participate in the annual Academic Progress Report process.

A copy of the Research and Professional Doctorate Degree Regulations can be found on the ACU website: http://www.acu.edu.au/policy/student_policies/research_and_professional_doctorate_degree_regulations

Graduate Research

Australian Catholic University Limited ABN 15 050 192 660

PO Box 968
 North Sydney New South Wales 2059
 Tel: 02 9739 2588
 E: res.cand@acu.edu.au
www.acu.edu.au

If you wish to accept this offer, please:

Complete the following enclosed forms:

- *Reply to an Offer of Admission*
- *HDR Candidate Declaration of Prior Enrolment in a Research Program*
- *HDR Enrolment Form*

and return them **within seven days** of receipt of your letter of offer to:

Graduate Research
Australian Catholic University
PO Box 968
North Sydney NSW 2059
E: res.cand@acu.edu.au

If you decide to decline the offer, please indicate a reason on the Reply to an Offer of Admission to Research Higher Degree Candidature form and return it to the above address as soon as possible.

After your enrolment forms have been processed, you will be sent confirmation of your enrolment.

Finally, I should like to take this opportunity to wish you every success in your course of study.

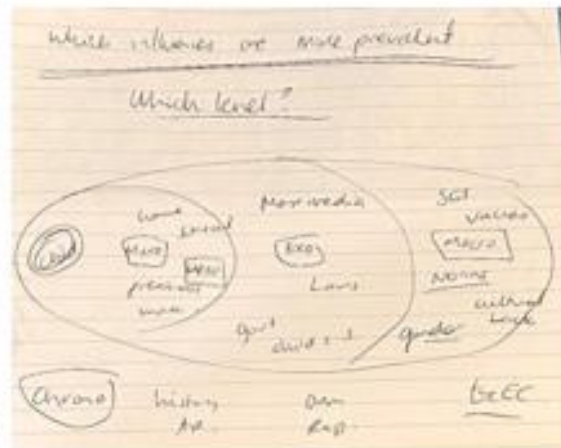
Yours sincerely,



Stefania Riccardi
Graduate Research

- c.c. National Head of School: christopher.branson@acu.edu.au
Associate Dean (Research): jan.seruga@acu.edu.au
Principal Supervisor: valerie.margrain@acu.edu.au
HDR Coordinator: lyn.carter@acu.edu.au
Director, HDR: janeen.lamb@acu.edu.au
Faculty HDR: FEA.HDR@acu.edu.au

Appendix B Mind Maps and Evolving Research Questions



Evolving Research Questions

From

1. *Who* is adopting the practice of delaying a child's school entry by a year (academic redshirting)?
2. *Why* are parents adopting the practice of delayed school entry (academic redshirting)?
3. What are the *implications* of delayed school entry for the school systems in Australia (particularly NSW)?

To

1. *Who* is adopting the practice of delaying a child's school entry by a year (academic redshirting)?
2. *Why* are parents adopting the practice of delayed school entry (academic redshirting)?
3. *What* do parents have planned for children during the academically redshirted year?

Then

1. *How* do parents who are choosing whether to academically redshirted their child make sense of their lived experience of the decision-making process?
2. *What* influences the decision-making process?

And now

1. *What* factors influence parents' decision-making concerning whether a child is academically redshirted?
2. *What* is the lived experience for parents of decision-making concerning academic redshirting of their children?
3. *Why* are particular experiences for the academic redshirted year valued?

Appendix C Ethics Approval Letter



Australian Catholic University
Human Research Ethics Committee

Project Approval Certificate

Chief Investigator(s)/Supervisor(s):	Professor Tania Aspland
Co-Investigator(s):	Dr Valerie Margrain, Dr Ingrid Willenberg & Dr Sarah Heinrich
Student Researcher(s):	Kirsten MacKinnon
Project title:	Academic Redshirting of School Entry: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Parents' Decision Making
Project approval date:	31/10/2017
Project approval end date:	31/12/2020
Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) Register Number:	2017-183H

This is to certify that the above application has been reviewed by the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee (ACU HREC). The application has been approved for the period given above.

Continued approval of this research project is contingent upon the submission of an annual progress report which is due on/before each anniversary of the project approval. A final report is due upon completion of the project. A report proforma can be downloaded from the website (link below). Researchers are responsible for ensuring that all conditions of approval are adhered to and that any modifications to the protocol, including changes to personnel, are approved prior to implementation. In addition, the ACU HREC must be notified of any reportable matters including, but not limited to, incidents, complaints and unexpected issues.

Researchers are also responsible for ensuring that they adhere to the requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*, the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* and the University's *Research Code of Conduct*. Any queries relating to this application should be directed to the Research Ethics and Integrity Office (Res.Ethics@acu.edu.au).

Leanne Stirling

Research Ethics & Integrity Officer

On behalf of the ACU HREC Chair, Associate Professor Michael Baker
Research Ethics and Integrity | Research Services, Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research)
Australian Catholic University

T: +61 2 9739 2646

E: Res.Ethics@acu.edu.au

W: [ACU Research Ethics and Integrity](#)

Appendix D Pilot Interview A

... And to make sure they give me the type of information I require. I'm investigating parents' decision-making around when is the right time for their child to start school. I know that your son started school this year and just wanted to talk to you about your experience when deciding when was the right time for him to start. Just to let you know that the information shared by you today will not be included in the study. I require ethics approval before I can officially start to collect data. So, what you tell me today will say between you and me and my supervisors, if that's okay. Would you give permission to audiotape the interview purely for the purpose of having the opportunity to have a go at transcribing it?

A - Yes

If not, that is okay too. I would though ask permission to write some notes. Of course, names will be changed to protect your identity. If you do not wish to answer a question, that is also fine. You can simply ask for the next question. If you do not understand a question, please indicate to me to help me construct better questions for the real study. Thank you so much for helping me today. [PAUSE] So, I know that your son started school this year and I just wanted to ask, the very first question, if you could just tell me about your experience in deciding when was the right time to send him to school.

A - Well, with the boys, you usually hold back. His birthday's in May, end of May. And with the boys, you usually hold back. And we just spoke to his preschool teachers and went with their advice, which was to wait.

Did they give you a particular reason?

A - Just because boys usually, emotionally, and... well mainly emotionally, I think, take a bit longer, so it's better to hold them back.

And did you have any types of thoughts or feelings during the decision-making process?

A - No (laughs). We just um, he was a little bit shy. So, we figured he would be better off just being that bit older, so we waited.

Excellent. [Pause]. So, we will move on now to Question 2. So, what do you think were the main influences which affected your decision-making?

A - Um, just what stage he was at and also what his preschool teachers advised.
He's the first born, isn't he?

A - Yes, he is.

Are you aware of the government policies, like the legal requirements, about when to send children to school in NSW?

A - Is it just before they're six? As long as they're at school by six? Or is that England?

So, they can start, they can start the year...

A - From five?

From five, as long as they turn five by July 31st.

A - Okay.

Or they must be enrolled to start by their 6th birthday.

A - Okay.

That's probably a little bit of a grey area, because you can start, like...

A - 4 and a half

Technically, you could hold back children who were born mid-December.

A - Yeah.

Yeah. Interesting. [Pause]. Do you know much about when other children in the area start school?

A - One of Jesse's school friends has only just turned five. But well, that's July, isn't it? That's by the end of July.

Hmm hmm.

A - So that's alright. And most of his

Is that a boy or girl?

A - Girl. Most of his group have birthdays around the same time – May, June.

Right.

A- Yeah. So, they're all about the same time.

[Pause].

So, my next question is for parents who have decided to delay school entry... So, I just wanted to ask you, what type of thing you had planned for your son during that, I'll call it an additional year... that held back... no, stop, during that [pause] year.

A – Ah, he just kept going to preschool. I would have.

How many days was he at preschool?

A- He was three days. And I would have done four days, but we just couldn't afford it. But I would have increased his day at preschool if we could've. But that's the only difference. It would have been.

Can I ask what other types of, I will call it extracurricular activities, what other types of experiences?

A- He only did swimming, swimming lessons. And that was it. [Pause] Because we didn't really have the time to.

So, moving on to my 4th question. There's two parts to this question. The first one is, did anyone influence your decision?

A - ***** (name of preschool).

Yep.

A - Preschool teachers.

And what did you think about the recommendations given?

A - We just followed their recommendations because they're the best people to advise us. So, based on their professional judgment.

Yeah. Did you think about? Did any parents question your decision?

A – No. Mum was, well mum has worked in a pre-school for 30 odd years. And her advice was to hold him back too, so between mum and the preschool teachers, we just went with that.

And did any of your friends, with kids the same age, say anything?

A - No, no. Because they've all got girls, so it's different (laughs).

Excellent.

A - And they've all got birthdays at the, the very end of the year, or the very beginning, so they didn't have to worry, make that decision.

So, this next question is, can you describe your decision making has affected your relationship with other people?

A - It didn't (Laughs).

And so, my probe is how did others such as friends and family react to your decision? So, you've said like your mother was supportive.

A – Family was for it. Yeah. And friends just support us whatever we decide anyway, so.

Okay, Question 5, so some opportunities for reflection. So, what do you think have been the positive or negative aspects of the decision-making?

A – Um (pause), it was all positive (pause) because he's done a lot better because we held him back. Sorry, what was the question again?

So, what do you think have been the positive or negative aspect of the decision-making experience?

A - I don't think we had any negatives. It was all, yeah positive.

And then the last question is, do you have any advice you would offer other parents are deciding when to send their child to school?

A - Listen to your pre-school teachers and, it just depends on the kid's birthdays and how the kids are really at the time, like at the end of the year before. How social and how they cope in different situations, I would say.

Excellent.

A - I told you I would have the most boring answers.

No, no, no, you actually gave me lots of things to consider.

Reflections

I forgot to start the recording when I first began speaking.

I found it quite difficult to draw out more information from the participant. I tried to use probing questions to gain more insight.

I need to try to not interrupt the participant when they are in the middle of speaking. I need to try and become more familiar with my interview questions. I also need to be mindful of terminology used e.g., held back.

The sound of children playing was quite loud during this interview and was quite distracting.

I need to find quieter places to conduct interviews in the future. It was difficult to extrapolate information from this participant. I am going to conduct another pilot interview to see if I can draw more data from my proposed questions.

Appendix E Pilot Interview B

Hello and thank you for agreeing to be a pilot interview for my study. The aim for today is for me to test out my interview questions, to ensure that they make sense and that they will give me the information I require. I am investigating 'parents' decision making around when their child should start school.' I know that your son is starting school next year... maybe. I just wanted to talk to you about your experience in deciding when the right time for him to start school is. Just so that you know, the information shared today by you will not be included in my study. I require ethics approval before I can officially start to collect data. So, what you tell me today will say between you, me and my supervisors, if that's okay with you?

B - That's okay with me.

Would you give me permission to audiotape the interview purely for the purposes of having the opportunity to have a go at transcribing the data?

B - Yes.

There is a stop button just there or a pause button, if you feel at any time that you would like what's been said not to be taped.

B - Okay.

If you do not wish to answer a question that is also fine, you can simply ask for the next question. If you don't understand a question, indicate this to me as this will help me to construct a better question for the real study. Thank you so much for helping me today.

B - You're welcome.

So, can you please tell me about your experience in deciding when to send your child to school?

B – Initially, I probably had decided that my son would go to school at the scheduled time for his age. However, due to different circumstances and also different changes in what's happening with other children, I've had to have a rethink about whether it is wise to send my child to school at the prescribed time.

Right, so what options do you think that you have?

B - Because my son is born in January, it's okay for me to hold him until the next year.

So, you were talking about the different options that you thought were available and you mention that your son is born in January?

B - Yes, and my son also has a couple of development difficulties and is requiring some speech therapy and OT (Occupational Therapy) to help him. So, I also feel that an extra year at home allowing us to progress, to help us progress his ability, because I feel that he would be lost in the system the way he is at the moment.

Right, and so you said that he was born in January?

B- Yes.

And, is he the first born?

B- Yes.

Right. And can I ask, as you were thinking about this decision, what thoughts were going through your mind?

B - Well one of the main things is, is if you're working, it's an extra burden on you financially. So, I guess the easy option may be send them to school and save the financial. But then when you step back and see what the advantages are for the child and how the child would cope in a situation where they're not up to speed, with speech, they're, they're in amongst other children who've been, we don't like the expression held back, but that's the expression I would use. So, therefore your five-year-old can be 16 months younger and then if your child already has some special needs, he's really way behind the eight ball. It just wouldn't be an option. It would be impossible.

Right, I can see you have really thought about this long and hard. So, thinking back to this decision, can I ask what do you think are the main influences affecting the decision about when you're going to send your son to school?

B - Gender is a major one. I do think girls in my experience, that I have seen, tend to cope better socially and they just fit in better. Boys tend to be more wanting to run around and, and do certain things. A long time ago, I listened to a professor talking and he said give me boys when they're six and girls when they're five. So, this is, this is a while ago. So, this is not that new, that people have been thinking about this.

Right. So, do you know, when other children in the area tend to start school?

B – In our local school, we actually have vast differences. We have one child who will be five and a half when he starts school and then we have another little girl who will be four and a half. Ah, the little girl is very very advanced, but socially I would be looking at that now, even though she's a girl, I would be thinking four and a half, a June or July birthday, wouldn't even be a question for me, wouldn't even be a thought, regardless of gender.

And you talked a little bit, it was either about your employment or your financial situation. Can you tell me a little bit more about that and how that affected your decision?

B - Well, when you're sending them to preschool, you've got the government assistance. Which helps to pay for day care. [child talking]. You can also leave them in for long times, so you can drop a child off at 730pm, pick them up at 6.30pm. When they go to school, unfortunately they finish school at 3.30, or quarter to 4. So, you then have to start thinking again for this child who is maybe not as mature as the other ones. He's going to have to either be at school or in a separate day-care centre and that's another stress, that's another totally different stress for a, for a younger child.

Right, I see. So, the next question is for parents who have decided to delay school entry. Can I ask what are your plans for your child during this next year if they are not starting school?

B – Extensive working on his social skills. Continuing with his speech therapy and his occupational therapy, to try and get him up to a standard where I feel he's as typical as he possibly can be. I think there's so many challenges in life, but if you do go in with anything less than what's considered normal, the teachers don't have the time to help you catch up. So, I say it's my job to help him be at a level. So, I would hope that by the time he goes to school, he can do what the other children can do. That is, writing his name. At the moment he finds it hard to hold the pencil and he hasn't chosen which hand he would like to use.

Right, I see. And, so you've mentioned therapy and that type of thing. Is there any type of like extracurricular activity he'd be involved in?

B - Yes, ideally, I'd like to get him into a school that um he'd go to for a few hours a day. He's registered for that and if he could get into that, they work quite extensively in getting them up to speed up to where they should be. I just feel that as a boy, if he starts school too early and he can't settle in, he will be lost in the system and if they don't get it at the beginning, if they miss building blocks, you then can't possibly build on it, because there's nothing to build on.

Excellent. So, moving along. Can I ask, did anyone influence your decision?

B - No. Um, well, no and yes. The doctors and his therapists all say don't, don't send him. So, so that's a big help. And also, financially, I'd rather sacrifice the finances to make sure that he's got a start in life, because this is his education is, as I say, if he can't get through education, then he can't be anything. And I worry about his future. I worry about how he then copes going into high school because he's also smaller. This way he'll be older going into high school and also be older at the end of the school, the school time. So, he would be more able to think about university or whatever he wants to do.

Right. And, did anyone else offer an opinion, like for example, you mentioned that he's at a pre-school?

B - People at the pre-school I have found if they don't have the choice and when I say don't have a choice, in NSW they have a starting time where you have got up until the 31st July to start your child. You can hold them back till January and before, anything before January has to be with a special concession from the Education Department. People whose children are born in November and December, I have found tend to resent the fact that you have a choice, and they don't. They actually see disadvantage. They see it as a disadvantage, regardless of the child. Everybody wants their child to be the biggest the best the fastest and the smartest. And obviously a seven-year-old is more smart than a five-year-old. It stands to reason.

So, you definitely say that your decision making has influence your relationship with other people?

B – Yes, yes. There's there's a fair amount of resentment. People tend to want to tell you that your child is ready even though they hardly know your child, because their child has to go in. And even though their child is much bigger, and they don't actually know that your child has special needs, so they will tend to give their opinion as to whether the child should go or not.

And before I had to make this decision, I actually felt the same way. I felt that they should go in at the required time. This is only been a new thing for me, seeing things from a different light.

But in New South Wales, when you say required time, so some parents are offered two options. So, the child either has to start school by the time they turn five by July 31st, as you mentioned earlier, but also, they must be enrolled by their six birthday. So, parents, some parents do have a choice.

B - Yes, some parents do have a choice, but some parents don't have the same choice. For example, if your child was born in August or September, you would not have that choice.

Correct.

B - So therefore, they tend to feel, when you tell somebody. My son was born in January and I have a friend whose son was born in September. And she's almost angry with the fact that I can hold my child back. She sees that I'm giving my child an advantage over hers. So, it's it's very competitive. I find it very competitive, would be the word I use. And. It's. It's yeah it is quite, it's quite daunting. But yet, people don't allow you to make your own decisions. And and I have also met people with children who are very advanced who are held back. The only reason that can be is to give the child an advantage. My reasons are my child has a learning, a learning disability, so he requires a little bit of extra time. But some people do it just to make their child the eldest, the best. And I have actually neighbours who have held their child back from December and he will now tell you that he is the top of his class. He's at the top. He can be 18 months older than the youngest child in that class. So, I don't know how you can possibly say I'm the best in the class, I'm the cleverest. Of course, you are.

Well done. Thank you for that. Very insightful.

B - You're welcome.

So, if you think about the experience, what do you think have been the positive and or negative aspects of the decision-making experience?

B - I would say there is more negatives than positives. Once you actually make the decision. You almost get to the point where you don't want to tell people because you feel that people want to give you their opinion and you're a bit scared would be the word I'd use, because they then want to know and they want to "what do you mean you're not sending them" you know, there's all these things. And it's quite confronting. And people are confrontational when you make this decision because when it comes to your child, everybody wants their child to be the best. Everybody wants their child to be smarter. A child who is 18 months older than another child maturity, ability to listen. Boys find it hard to sit in one spot to learn. And it's just, it's just an entirely different thing but it's, to each person has to choose for their individual child. And maybe the system shouldn't allow you to choose and that would solve the problem.

Right. Thank you. And how do you feel now if you have made a decision? Like, how does it sit with you now?

B - It sits very well with me because I know it's the right decision or I feel it's the right decision for, for my child. So, I've now gotten to a point where I don't really care what other people think, feel or what their opinions are. Um, you just have to do it right for your child and give him the best that you can do. And I feel that the therapies he is having will give him the ability to compete on an even playing field. At the moment he wouldn't be on an even playing field. And I think that would be detrimental to him because he has a defeatist attitude. If he can't do it, he will then step back and not try, not do it. Where a year later, being six, he'll be better at doing things, he'll have more confidence. And I think this, this is the best decision for my child. This is the only decision for my child.

That's great. And can I ask one final question. Do you have any advice that you would offer to other parents who are deciding when to send their child to school?

B - Yes, I would. I'd say you have to base it on your own child's needs, your own child's abilities, not let other people say "oh well I'm sending mine so you should send yours" because everybody has their own reasons. And if your child is neurotypical or smart and you still decide to hold them back. That's all good. I tend to feel that maybe down the line at the other side when you get 19-year-olds at school, there could be other problems that will happen. Maybe they will, maybe they won't. So, I don't know if my child didn't have the difficulties, if I'd be making this decision. So, it's yeah that. I'm happy with my decision and I would say to other people once you've had a look at the schools, talk to other people, look at the children around that your child is with, mostly boys. If he's not up to standard with it, then just hold him back. Don't, don't do it. It's just not worth it. Because you can't repeat again and you can't undo it. You see, this is a lifetime decision. This is for the rest of his life; you make this decision now. This is his life. This is his building blocks, as I see. You either build strength where you can build on. Or he misses completely. And then once they do that, they're lost. Lost in the system.

Well thank you so much for your time today. If at any time you think you think of questions that you would like to ask or something extra that you would like to share, please drop me an email and I'll be more than happy to contact you for more information. There is a possibility in the future that, an opportunity for a follow up interview which would be approximately half an hour and it would occur after the school term that your child has started school. Would you be, do you think you would be interested in?

B - Definitely. Yeah, I think it would be great.

Just as a follow up to see how things pan out.

B - And it would be good for me to

I hope it all goes well for your son.

B – Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you very much for your time.

B- You're welcome.

Thank you.

Reflections

This participant was far more talkative which helped.

I used the term 'right' frequently at the start of my questioning. I feel more familiar with my interview questions.

I feel the interview schedule questions will enable me to get the data I need.

Excited to get started with my real interviews.

Appendix F Pilot Interview Schedule (30 minutes)

		<p>Introductory Statement</p> <p>Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview for my study. As per the information letter you received, I am investigating parents’ decision making concerning when their child should start school. I want to talk to you today about your experience so far on this journey. This study has received ethics approval.</p> <p>Do you give me permission to audio record this interview? If yes, I will record our conversation on my phone. If at any stage you do not wish for something to be recorded, you can simply press the stop or pause button. If not, that is okay too. I would though ask permission to write some notes. For your information, any names of people or places will be changed during the transcription for privacy. If you do not wish to answer a question that is fine – you can simply ask for the next question. If you don’t understand a question, please indicate this and I will rephrase. If during or at the end of the session you feel anxious or stressed by the content of the interview, I can provide you with details about counselling services which are available.</p> <p>Thank you so much for helping me today!</p>	
Research Aims		Questions	Prompts (and probes)
	1	<i>“Can you please tell me a little bit about your family background?”</i>	Family structure (nuclear, single parent, other) Number of children Gender Ages, months born Employment situation (number of hours, location to home) Preschool? Type? Number of days, hours? Type of school (public, religious, private) Type of area live (affluent?)
Background Information –	2	<i>“Can you please tell me about your experience in deciding when to send your child to school?”</i>	<i>“Can you tell me a bit more about that?”</i> <i>“What options did you have?”</i> <i>“How did you feel?”</i>

to elicit the participant's story			<p><i>“What kinds of thoughts were going through your mind?”</i></p> <p>Month child born Options Feelings Previous children Own experience</p>
Exploration of influences on decision-making	3	<i>“What do you think have been the main influences affecting the decision about WHEN to send your child to school?”</i>	<p><i>“What do you mean when you say ‘xxxx?’”</i></p> <p>Number of children Ages of children involved; month born Competition? Culture or ethnicity? Gender of child? Disability, development Readiness – what does this mean? Financial situation Employment situation Own personal experience starting school Geographical location – when do other children in the area start school?</p>
	4	<i>“What types of skills do you think your child should have before they start school?”</i>	<p>Readiness – what does this mean? Play versus academic? Social, emotional</p>
	5	<i>“Are you aware of what the government policy is surrounding starting school age in NSW?”</i>	<p>Knowledge – government policy, laws Options</p>
Plans for the academically redshirted year	6	For parents who are deciding to delay school entry:	<i>“What types of experiences would you like to expose your child to during this year?”</i>

		<i>“What are your plans for your child next year if they are not attending school?”</i>	Childcare arrangements? Planned activities or experiences? Parent employment situation
Social influences / Societal expectations	7a	<i>“Do you think anyone has influenced your decision?”</i>	<i>“Did you seek anyone’s opinion? Who?” “What did you think about the recommendations given?”</i> Child care recommendation? School recommendation? Other parents? Government policy? Family or friends? <i>“How did others (such as friends and family) react to your decision?”</i> Pressure?
	7b	<i>“Can you describe how your decision-making has affected your relationship with other people?”</i>	Judgment? Jealousy?
Opportunity for Reflection	8	<i>“What do you think have been the positive and/or negative aspects of the decision-making experience?”</i>	Positive? Negative? Thoughts and feelings <i>“How do you feel now that you have made a decision?”</i>
Opportunity for Reflection	9	<i>“Do you have any advice you would offer other parents who are deciding when to send their child to school?”</i>	<i>“What advice would you recommend to someone who is in a similar situation?”</i>
Follow up Interview		Thank you so much for your time today! I appreciate you sharing your experience with me. There is an opportunity for a follow up interview – after the first school term for your child, if you would be interested in sharing your child’s experience after starting school. If you didn’t tick this box on the original consent form and would like to share this experience, if you could send me an email and I can resend the consent form. Thank you!	

Appendix G Interview Schedule – (45 minutes)

	<p>Introductory Statement</p> <p>Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview for my study. As per the information letter you received, I am a doctoral research student at the Australian Catholic University. I am investigating parents’ decision making concerning when their child should start school. I want to talk to you today about your experience so far on this journey. This study has received ethics approval.</p> <p>Do you give me permission to audio record this interview? If yes, I will record our conversation on my phone. If at any stage you do not wish for something to be recorded, you can simply say so, and I will remove it from the transcript. Of course, any names of people or places will be changed during the transcription for privacy. If you do not wish to answer a question that is fine – you can simply ask for the next question. If you don’t understand a question, please indicate this and I will rephrase. If during or at the end of the session you feel anxious or stressed by the content of the interview, I can provide you with details about specific counselling services which are available. Thank you so much for helping me today!</p>	
<p>Research Aims</p>	<p>Questions</p>	<p>Prompts (and probes)</p>
	<p>1 “Can you please tell me a little bit about your family background?”</p>	<p>Family structure (nuclear, single parent, other) Number of children Gender Ages, months born Employment situation (number of hours, location to home Preschool? Type? Number of days, hours? Type of school (public, religious, private) Type of area live (affluent?)</p>

Background Information – to elicit the participant’s story	2	<p><i>“Can you please tell me about your experience in deciding when to send your child to school?”</i></p>	<p><i>“Can you tell me a bit more about that?”</i> <i>“What options did you have?”</i> <i>“How did you feel?”</i> <i>“What kinds of thoughts were going through your mind?”</i></p> <p>Month child born Options Feelings Previous children Own experience</p>
Exploration of influences on decision-making	3	<p><i>“What do you think have been the main influences affecting the decision about WHEN to send your child to school?”</i></p>	<p><i>“What do you mean when you say ‘xxx?’”</i></p> <p>Number of children Ages of children involved; month born Competition? Culture or ethnicity? Gender of child? Disability, development Readiness – what does this mean? Financial situation Employment situation Own personal experience starting school</p>

			Geographical location – when do other children in the area start school?
	4	<i>“What types of skills do you think your child should have before they start school?”</i>	Readiness – what does this mean? Play versus academic? Social, emotional
	5	<i>“Are you aware of what the government policy is surrounding starting school age in NSW?”</i>	Knowledge – government policy, laws Options
Plans for the academically redshirted year	6	For parents who are deciding to delay school entry: <i>“What are your plans for your child next year if they are not attending school?”</i>	<i>“What types of experiences would you like to expose your child to during this year?”</i> Childcare arrangements? Planned activities or experiences? Parent employment situation
Social influences / Societal expectations	7a	<i>“Do you think anyone has influenced your decision?”</i>	<i>“Did you seek anyone’s opinion? Who?”</i> <i>“What did you think about the recommendations given?”</i> Child care recommendation? School recommendation? Other parents? Government policy? Family or friends?
	7b	<i>“Can you describe how your decision-making has affected your relationship with other people?”</i>	<i>“How did others (such as friends and family) react to your decision?”</i> Pressure? Judgment?

			Jealousy?
Opportunity for Reflection	8	<i>“What do you think have been the positive and/or negative aspects of the decision-making experience?”</i>	<i>“Tell me any challenges you have encountered during the decision-making experience”</i> Positive? Negative? Thoughts and feelings <i>“How do you feel now that you have made a decision?”</i>
Opportunity for Reflection	9	<i>“Do you have any advice you would offer other parents who are deciding when to send their child to school?”</i>	<i>“What advice would you recommend to someone who is in a similar situation?”</i>
Follow up Interview		Thank you so much for your time today! I appreciate you sharing your experience with me. There is an opportunity for a follow up interview – after the first school term for your child, if you would be interested in sharing your child’s experience after starting school. If you didn’t tick this box on the original consent form and you decide later that you would like to share this experience, please send me an email and I can resend the consent form. Thank you so much for your time. I have really enjoyed hearing your story!	

Appendix H Focus Group Slides

Starting School

FOCUS GROUP 4:
ONLINE PARENTING GROUP DISCUSSION

Group Rules

- ▶ There are no right or wrong answers. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said.
- ▶ Please be respectful to others in the group even if their opinion differs to your own.
- ▶ I would ask your permission to tape record this session. Any names of people or places will be changed during transcript to protect your identity.
- ▶ Because I am tape-recording, please stick to only one person speaking at a time.
- ▶ I also request that any information shared in this room today is kept confidential – that is, please do not discuss the information shared with any third party.

Consent forms

- ▶ Information Letter – Ethics Approval
- ▶ If during or at the end of the session you feel anxious or stressed by the content of the interview, I can provide you with details about specific counselling services which are available.

Introductions

- ▶ Tell the group a bit about yourself
 - name (optional)
 - brief details about your child (gender, month born, when they started or are starting school)

Activity – Free Listing

Individually

- ▶ Create a list which includes reasons why parents may delay school entry for a child

Share

- ▶ Some ideas with the group

List of reasons

- Reasons
- Individual needs of the child - eg speech delay, social reasons
- Changes to kindergarten -
- Looking into the future - drinking age
- Influence of preschool or daycare
- Stigma - hard to delay? Eg mother's group
- Lack of interest in academic activities eg, not wanting to learn letters
- Difficulty communicating with others, social with peers
- Difficulty following structure or instructions
- Social emotional reasons - not ready
- Extended childhood - parents attachment?
- Other countries - delaying entry until 7. Should we be doing the same?
- Childcare costs
- School holiday considerations - working parents
- Choice

Discussion

- ▶ Reasons for delaying school entry

Activity – Ranking

Looking at the list created,

- ▶ **Rank** the top five reasons why parents may delay school entry for a child
- ▶ This is completed individually and then shared with the group.

Kaitlyn

- ▶ Kaitlyn is married with three boys and lives in the Hills District of Sydney. The area she lives in is affluent (high socioeconomic status). She is struggling with the decision about when her eldest son, who is born late February, should start school. She was really disappointed that the day care centre didn't really provide an opinion to guide her decision-making despite having looked after her son since he was an infant. Kaitlyn is considering the local Catholic school as she went to one. She attended two open days at schools in April last year. Both principals at these schools mentioned that February is the month where children either start on time or are delayed. Her husband seems relaxed and happy to support whatever decision she makes. Kaitlyn herself started school at a young age and attended university when she was 17. She was still undecided about the decision and was feeling quite anxious and stressed. She was leaning towards delaying school entry but didn't want to disadvantage her son.

Cindy

- ▶ Cindy is from Malaysia, her husband is from the Philippines and they have three children. They live in an affluent area of the North Shore, Sydney. Cindy seemed very knowledgeable about school entry ages across Australia. Cindy has an extremely high expectation for her children regarding education. The eldest has been identified as extremely gifted (possibly Aspergers) and attends a public selective school. The current child (boy) is displaying signs of giftedness, however, he has a June birthday and is considered small for his age. Cindy feels he is ready to go to big school despite a belief that society mandates boys be held back. She doesn't want him to be bored if he delays entry and misbehaves as a result (like the eldest child, who commenced school on time). Cindy mentioned that if the current child was her first child, she would have delayed his school entry because of his birth month. However, because of the experience with the eldest (bored, gifted) she did not want to repeat past mistakes. She did mention that she had previously sought OT assessment for the current child as she was concerned about his fine and gross motor development. However, the assessment revealed that the child was above average, suggesting perhaps her expectations were extremely high.

Brett

- ▶ Brett is married, with two daughters and lives in the Inner West, Sydney. His first daughter (June birthday) delayed school entry. He plans to do the same for his current child (born in July). Whilst he believes his current daughter is ready for school, he would prefer she wait a year and start school older, more mature and confident. He discussed the opportunity for Isla to be a leader at her daycare centre because she will be older. He did consider his daughter to be small for her age. Brett was really happy with his daughter's daycare arrangements and spoke of the benefits of fun experiences offered at the daycare centre. He also spoke of the value of allowing children to be children for longer, whilst also keeping them away from the wider range of influences at school. Brett also mentioned his own schooling experience. He started school older and was one of the first in his year to get his license. When he started university he could also drink in the bar.

Thank you!

- ▶ For your time!
- ▶ For being willing to share your ideas with the group!

Appendix I Focus Group Schedule (90 minutes)

Research Aims	Time	Activity	Prompts (and probes)
	10 min	Pre-mingle	
Introduction	5 min	<p>Welcome to this focus group session. My name is Kirsten, and I am a doctoral research student at the Australian Catholic University. Thank you for taking the time today to join us to talk about parents' decision-making regarding school entry. Some of you may be favouring delaying school entry for your child, others may be considering sending your child to school as soon as possible. Some of you may still be undecided. It is important today to set some guidelines to ensure everyone feels comfortable with contributing to the group.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Please turn off your mobile phones or switch to silent. 2. There are no right or wrong answers. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. 3. Please be respectful to others in the group even if their opinion differs to your own. 4. I would ask your permission to tape record this session. Any names of people or places will be changed during transcript to protect your identity. 5. Because I am tape-recording, please stick to only one person speaking at a time. 6. I also request that any information shared in this room today is kept confidential – that is, please do not discuss the information shared with any third party. 	Consent forms
Group Rules			
Icebreaker	5 min		

		<p>If during or at the end of the session you feel anxious or stressed by the content of the interview, I can provide you with details about specific counselling services which are available. Thank you so much for helping me today!</p> <p>Well, let's begin. Let's find out some more about each other by going around the table. Tell us your name and some brief details about your child (gender, month born, current position - sending, delaying or unsure).</p> <p>Each participant to introduce themselves to the group and share some information about their family or decision.</p>	
Brainstorm – Reasons for delaying school entry	5 min	<p>Activity - <i>Free Listing</i></p> <p>Participants will be asked to “<i>Create a list which includes all the reasons why parents may delay school entry for a child.</i>”</p> <p>Participants complete this individually initially and then are invited to share their ideas with the group.</p> <p><i>Researcher to act as scribe.</i></p>	<p>Number of children</p> <p>Ages of children involved; month born</p> <p>Knowledge – government policy, options Competition?</p> <p>Culture or ethnicity</p> <p>Gender of child</p> <p>Disability, development</p> <p>Readiness – what does this mean?</p> <p>Financial situation</p> <p>Employment situation</p> <p>Own personal experience starting school</p> <p>Advice of preschool</p> <p>Geographical location – when do other children in the area start school?</p>

To gain rich data	10 min	<i>Discussion</i> – Reasons for delaying school entry	Number of children Ages of children involved; month born Knowledge – government policy, options Competition? Culture or ethnicity Gender of child Disability, development Readiness – what does this mean? Financial situation Employment situation Own personal experience starting school Advice of preschool Geographical location – when do other children in the area start school?
Main influences affecting decision-making	5 min	<i>Activity – Ranking</i> Participants will be asked to <i>rank</i> the reasons to show the main reasons first. This is completed individually and then shared with the group.	Display for comparison? Tally main reasons – consensus?
To gain rich data	10 min	Discussion – Main influences <i>Researcher to act as scribe</i>	
Personal experiences - lived experience	10 min	<i>Activity – Opportunities for Storytelling – own experience</i> Different perspectives	Delaying school entry Sending ‘on time’ Undecided Other children? First child?

			Gender of child and month born Influences?
To gain rich data	10 min	Discussion / Food break	
Personal experiences - lived experience	10 min	Activity – <i>Case Study</i> Incorporating a <i>case study</i> (based on interview data)	What do you think are the influences in this case study? Is this common experience for parents? Why or why not?
To gain rich data	10 min	Final Discussion Any issues to raise? Any final thoughts or concerns?	
	5 min	Thank you	

Appendix J Examples of Individual Responses

Academic readiness
Social skills / readiness
Child's enthusiasm / interest
Physical / Coordination etc. size
Friend group not going
Ability of family to look after child or pay for pre-school
Financial constraints (need to work)
Didn't realize it was a choice.

Child emotional / academic "readiness"
Cost of child care
Advice of other parents / teachers at daycare / preschool / teachers at primary school
International studies re benefits of older age school entry
Family situations re where living
Their own schooling experience
Sport teams

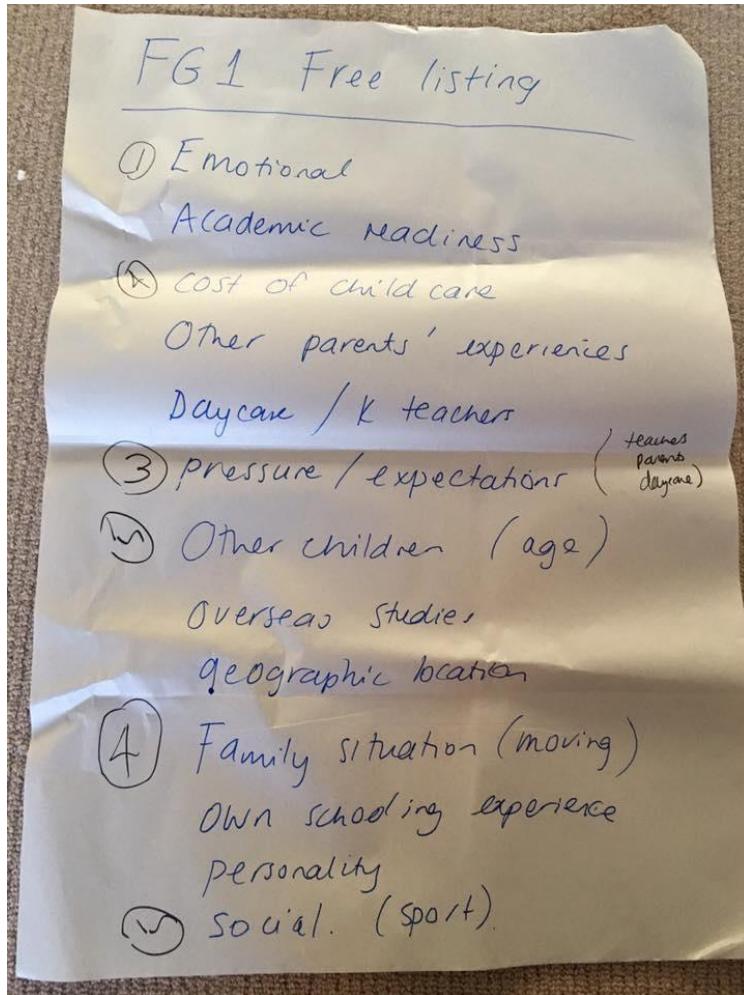
• Slow absorption of ~~cognitive~~ learning
• NOT understanding of basic things
• Not being toilet trained
• No participation skills
• Not ready in their communication skills

① Not emotionally ready
② Not confident enough
③ Would prefer the child to be older when they sit their HSC or Uni exams
④ might not feel schooling is the only way to prepare a child for adult life and so might not feel the urgency to start school life.

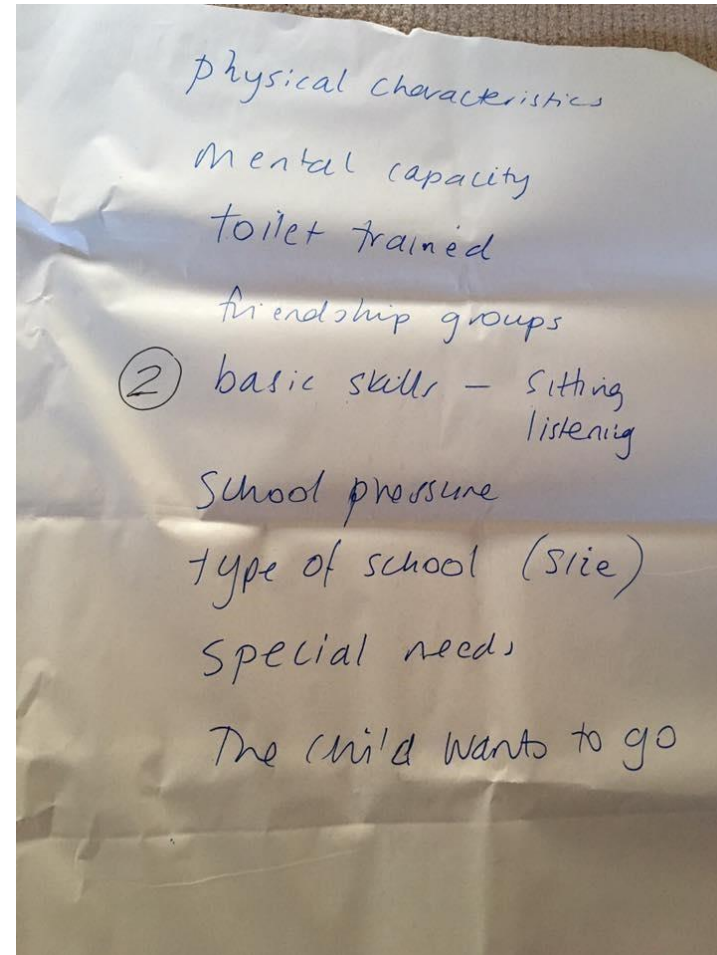
- Child's emotional needs.
- Child's physically not ready, e.g. - not being able to hold pencils, scissors.
- Other parent pressure / expectations of "oh, your child will be youngest". They will miss out later (high school) socially - drinking, drinking.
- School pressure - teachers not wanting young students.
- school considerations e.g. size.

Appendix K Focus Group Final Rankings

Focus Group 1



Focus Group 2



FGZNS Reasons

Unsettled child - new changes

✓ Friends of children

① ✓ Social / emotional development

✓ Limited school places

New location

Unsure

① ✓ Readiness of child

✓ confidence

Age compared to others

Sensitive child

Individual child personality

2

geographical location
— country

Sport

Parents' experience

WORK pressure

3 ✓ SES (\$\$)

✓ Educators
(EC teachers)

(School) staff turnover

type of daycare

Size of child

⑤ ✓ Siblings / family structure

Size of school

Readiness of parent

✓ Maturity

4 ✓ Disability / learning issues

✓ Desire for play based learning

Other parents

professionals - books 'Outliers'

✓ extra year of childhood

Child being 'lost'

advantage - oldest, smartest

✓ Leadership role

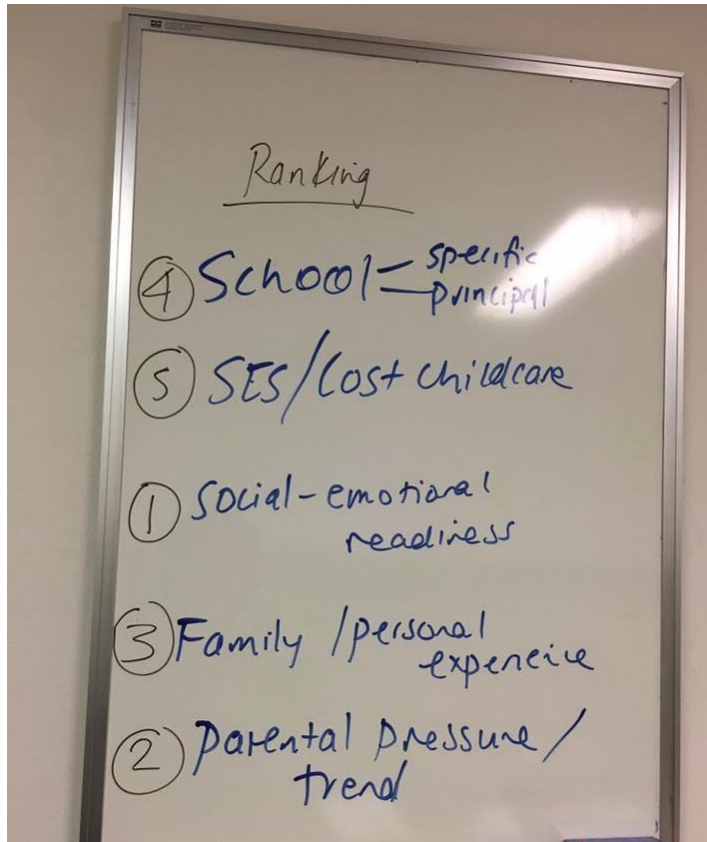
Further ahead - high school

Boys

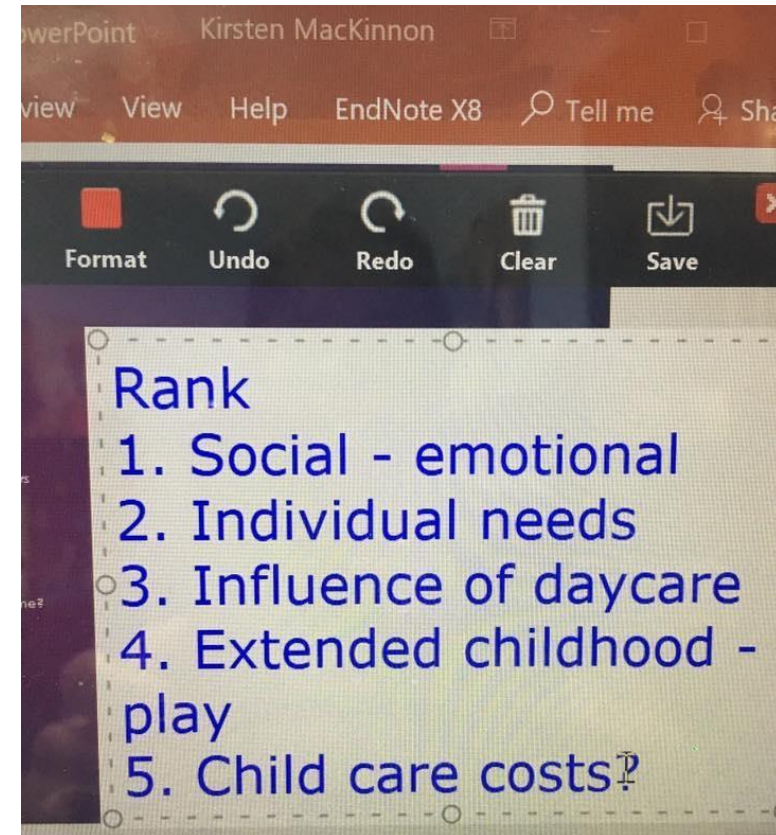
Facebook forums

Drinking culture. age at uni.

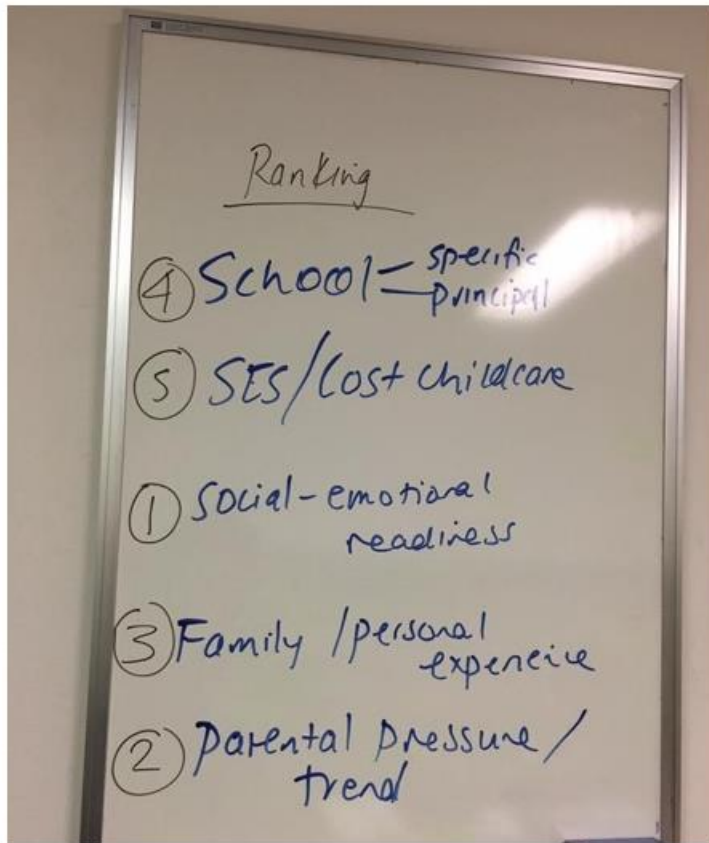
Focus Group 3



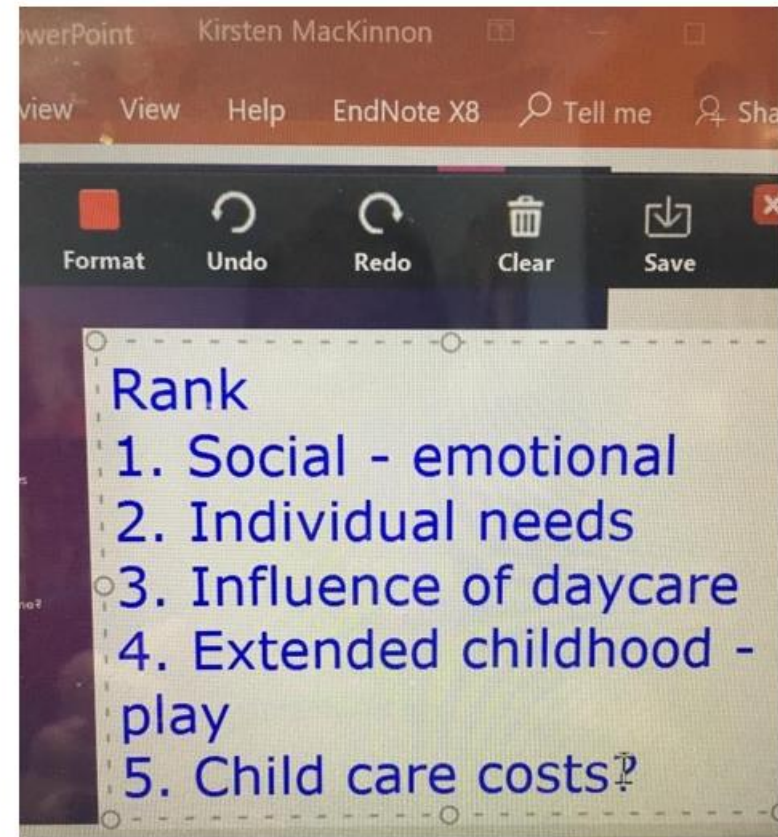
Focus Group 4



Focus Group 3



Focus Group 4



Appendix L Case Study Scenarios

Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn is married with three boys and lives in the Hills District of Sydney. The area she lives in is affluent (high socioeconomic status). She is struggling with the decision about when her eldest son, who is born late February, should start school. She was really disappointed that the day care centre didn't really provide an opinion to guide her decision-making despite having looked after her son since he was an infant. Kaitlyn is considering the local Catholic school as she went to one. She attended two open days at schools in April last year. Both principals at these schools mentioned that February is the month where children either start on time or are delayed. Her husband seems relaxed and happy to support whatever decision she makes. Kaitlyn herself started school at a young age and attended university when she was 17. She was still undecided about the decision and was feeling quite anxious and stressed. She was leaning towards delaying school entry but didn't want to disadvantage her son.

Cindy

Cindy is from Malaysia; her husband is from the Philippines, and they have three children. They live in an affluent area of the North Shore, Sydney. Cindy seemed very knowledgeable about school entry ages across Australia. Cindy has an extremely high expectation for her children regarding education. The eldest has been identified as extremely gifted (possibly Aspergers) and attends a public selective school. The current child (boy) is displaying signs of giftedness; however, he has a June birthday and is considered small for his age. Cindy feels he is ready to go to big school despite a belief that society mandates boys be held back. She doesn't want him to be bored if he delays entry and misbehaves as a result (like the eldest child, who commenced school on time). Cindy mentioned that if the current child was her first child, she would have delayed his school entry because of his birth month. However, because of the experience with the eldest (bored, gifted) she did not want to repeat past mistakes. She did mention that she had previously sought OT assessment for the current child as she was concerned about his fine and gross motor development. However, the assessment revealed that the child was above average, suggesting perhaps her expectations were extremely high.

Brett

Brett is married, with two daughters and lives in the Inner West, Sydney. His first daughter (June birthday) delayed school entry. He plans to do the same for his current child (born in July). Whilst he believes his current daughter is ready for school, he would prefer she wait a year and start school older, more mature and confident. He discussed the opportunity for Isla to be a leader at her day-care centre because she will be older. He did consider his daughter to be small for her age. Brett was really happy with his daughter's day care arrangements and spoke of the benefits of fun experiences offered at the day-care centre. He also spoke of the value of allowing children to be children for longer, whilst also keeping them away from the wider range of influences at school. Brett also mentioned his own schooling experience. He started school older and was one of the first in his year to get his license. When he started university, he could also drink in the bar.

Appendix M Full Transcript - Linda

Experiential Statements.

Initial / descriptive Linguistic Conceptual

Linda.m4a

K: So, thank you for agreeing to...

Linda: That's okay.

K: Participate in my interview today. So, as per the information letter and the forms you've received...

Linda: Hmm hmm.

K: I am investigating parents' decision making (participant sighs loudly) concerning starting school age for children. So, I'm really excited today to hear your story. If you could just share your experience and if at any point is like something that you really want to expand on. Please just take me in that direction.

cheerful.

Sighs at mention of decision-making.

Linda: Okay.

K: Okay. I have asked for your permission to record this interview so if you could just simply say yes for the tape purposes.

Linda: Yep. Yes, that's fine.

K: Yep. So, if there's a question that you don't want to answer that's fine.

Linda: Yep.

K: So, you don't have to. And if there's something you don't understand I'm happy to rephrase...

Linda: Okay.

K: And just so that you know for privacy I will change the names of any person or school...

Linda: Sure.

K: Or anything that you mention that could identify, okay. So that will all happen as soon as I transcribe.

Linda: Okay. Sure.

K: If you're feeling anxious or stressed any time during the interview

Linda: No. (Laughs). (Laughs again).

K: Or at the end, I do have some counselling services that I can recommend. All right so thanks for your help today. And I just wanted to start by just asking you a broad question if you could tell me about your family background.

Linda: Family background, so me personally this is the house I was brought up in. So, I've lived in XXXXX (Upper North Shore) for, well I grew up in XXXXX since I was about two, I think. I've got a older sister who is 18 months older and younger brother who is five years younger. We went to the local (public primary) school and then I went on to XXXXXX (Private All Girls High School), my brother went to YYYYYY (Private All Boys High School). Um, my husband's English. My husband's English so he was born and brought up in England and then I went over to England after I finished uni and lived over there 10 years and we've been back here since 2011 [hesitated]. I think. So, hence (we've) got slightly different that's where our different views I guess on schooling come from because in England you start school at four. It's kind of a no brainer Everyone goes to school at four. That's just what happens. And here obviously it's different. I'm a July birthday. I was old for my year. Not that I really thought about that too much and we've been thinking about Oscar, I don't think. Yeah. That's us. Is that what you need?

K: Awesome. Yes. And if you could just maybe share with me the age and gender of your children.

Linda: So, March 30, so turning five next year and another March birthday turning

lots of laughing. Nervous?

Affluent family who could afford an A.R. year.

Brought up in an affluent area. Upper North Shore. Private school for H.S. Husband is English. Shift between 'I' and 'we'.

Different views on schooling. Start at 4 in England. Linda was A.R. Everyone. Same decision just what happens. No choice.

2 Boys. March for both. Eldest - first born. First-time making the decision. 2

Linda and her husband share different views on schooling due to him growing up in the UK.

three next year. Both boys.

K: Yeah. And can I just ask like what your employment situation is like? Like, are you working?

Linda: Yeah yeah, so I'm working four days a week and my husband works five days a week. I'm in the city three days and I'm home one day. So, at the moment the boys um are with me Mondays my mum Tuesdays and then they're both in daycare three days a week.

K: Okay. And what type of day care is it long day care or preschool?

Linda: Long day care but it's one in XXXX, it's got two campuses and so it's got like an early year campus that's 0-4, I think. It depends when they're starting school. And then they've got a pre-school campus so Oscar's at the pre-school campus this year. And if he doesn't go to school, Oscar don't draw in your book. If he doesn't go to school, he'll stay there again next year. And then Bradley's still at the early years campus and he'll be there for next year and he'll move up the year after.

K: Excellent.

Linda: So, it's kind of long day care pre-school.

K: And can I just ask for purposes of the recording what type of school you're intending to send?

Linda: So, they're going to the local public school until, um for all of primary and then Oscar is down for YYYYY (Private Boys High School) for Year Seven which has also influenced our decision because we know that they're cut off in April, and he is March 30. Oscar - Mum, where did you put your bag? Ah, in the kitchen.

K: That's excellent, I have a friend who is a math teacher at the senior campus.

Linda: Oh really?

Considering a private school education and the school has an earlier cut-off date.

Boys.

Children in day care
Three days a week.
Grandma looks after
kids one day a week

ECEC arranged according
to school starting age.
Different campus for
preschool.

move up.
if @ doesn't go to
school he will repeat
year in same room.
long day care preschool

Children on list for
private for h.s.
Private school has
an earlier cut off
date in April.

3

K: Yeah.

Linda: That's where my brother went. They're down there. It's kind of that will we ever be able to afford it? Then it's like well if we can afford their current day-care, we should be able to afford school cause they are a bit on par. So, um yeah, we will just see. That's where they are put that down for.

K: Excellent and sorry just to explore your employment a little bit further. Can you give me an idea of the type of occupation.

Linda: So, I'm an Occupational Therapist.

K: Oh, excellent okay.

Linda: I work for an insurance company (that's beautiful - to child) that. I work for an insurance company at the moment. Kind of more work life balance than anything else supposedly. So, I manage. I'm kind of like middle management. I manage a team of about, sev, I just got a new one, seven people. Um, we're in a rehab team so we do work for a CTP insurer so we're like a rehab team that do all the rehab work for people that have had car accidents, I think. It's a weird job (laughs). It's like one of those jobs you have to be a health professional to be able to do it. But you don't necessarily feel that you're working as the health professional every day because of the role. Lots of investigating and reading GP clinic notes and all that kind of stuff. I've just employed a psychologist actually. So that's who I'm working with at the moment.

K: Oh okay, interesting.

Linda: We've got lots of psych claims. So, you know people that either have a family...

K: Like post-traumatic stress?

Linda's brother attended
the same Boys Private
School.
Day care fees are of
similar cost as private
school fees?
Must not receive a
rebate - eg, C.E.S.
Questions if they can
afford private.

Current OT role suits
work-life balance.

4

Linda: Yes well, we've got two sorts of claims. One where people's direct relatives have died in a car accident and so they can have a claim for any psychological treatment they need related to that or any anything they need related to that and then yes, people who say that they've got PTSD or anxiety or depression as a result of the car accident. Um.

K: Tough job.

Linda: Yeah, and then kind of secondary to that there's now this, the insurance word is secondary psych injury. So those who actually only have a physical injury but because of the claims process or because of their solicitors talking to them they develop these secondary psych claims where you know like a year or two years down the track, you're getting requests for them to start seeing a psychologist because of their anxiety or their depression or whatever.

K: Oooh, sounds interesting.

Linda: But yeh it's kind of a bit, it's not OT. It's not kind of passionate hands-on clinical OT but it's, you know; it works with these guys. So. (Laughs).

K: That's yeah you have to think about that during these younger years.

Linda: Yeah exactly. And then my husband's um, oh his current title's um Asset manager, no Portfolio manager. So, he was a he's a surveyor, a chartered surveyor by background and he kind of manages big buildings in the city.

K: Sounds, it sounds good.

Linda: (Laughs). I pretend to understand. I'm like a building, you manage it okay I get that.

K: So, I know that you said just before I started recording that you've enrolled Oscar re-enrolled him back in pre-school next year but there is a possibility he could be going to school so.

worse situation could be better but it works for current situation.

re-enrolled child in preschool.

5

Parents change their mind about the decision every other day.

Linda: Yes, we change our mind every other day.

K: So, I'm really excited. I'm really excited for this one because it sounds like you're still a little bit undecided.

Linda: Very much.

K: I was hoping that you could maybe just tell me about your experience and like how you've been feeling.

Linda: Oh God it's been horrible. I kind of didn't really appreciate what a huge decision it would be. And so many people that like before he got to the age where we had to think about it say oh you just know, you just know if they're ready to go. And lots of people are very much like oh boys they don't sit still for more than 10 or 15 minutes. And so, you like, you'll just know because they won't be able to sit still. There's no way they'd be ready to pay attention or anything. You just know that he's not ready. He loves to read. He loves to draw. He loves to sit. He'll sit there and do all sorts of things for ages. It's like oh we don't have that issue. He will sit and do stuff you know. Yes, he'll sit and play Lego for two hours or something but he'll sit and do it and you're like oh okay. Um and I went to. So, when we kind of had to start thinking about it I went to an Orientation day at the school and spoke to the Kindy teachers that were there at the moment and they were like oh yeah, we've got a huge gap because I said oh you know do you have a kind or an older year of a younger year in this area? Do you feel people are sending them at 5 or are they waiting until they're six and the Kindy teacher was like oh, we've got an 18-month age gap or something in our class this year and I was like great, that doesn't help. And then I spoke to the headmistress and she literally said um, is he going to stand and cling on to you at the front gate and cry when you go to do drop off? And I was like no, no he's not that kind of kid. I don't think he'll do that. She said oh he'll be fine. Then you should just send him. It's like okay, is that the only thing you look for?

K: Gosh, is that the only criteria?

Change mind every other day.

Very much undecided.

would - not happen, yet you just know if ready to go

Horrible.

Huge decision.

Lots of people

Boys.

Her eldest likes to sit and read and draw etc.

went to Orientation Day.

Spoke to kindy teach

Huge age gap - 18 months.

Headmistress said he will be fine. Just send. Fine.

Her son has the skills that suggest he may be ready.

I, we, you're. Huge age gap seems to be a concern. 6

Has found the decision-making experience horrible and feels it is a huge decision.

kindy son appears to display reader skills including reading, drawing, and able to sit still.

Principal suggested if the child has no anxiety issues, it should be fine to send.

The ECEC teacher advised her to definitely not send.

ECEC teachers believe all children benefit from delaying school entry.

A friend's negative experience of having to repeat was influential.

Husband is from UK and believes son will be fine going next year.

The negative impact of repeating was something to be avoided.

Delaying school entry would result in an additional year of not having to suggest school/work.

Linda: And she said oh well you know if they don't have anxiety issues, if they're not a clinger then you know he'll be fine. Oh okay. And then where he is at the moment, we met with them and they were like oh no you should definitely not send him like okay why? And it was one of those meetings where we were speaking to his teacher and both of us were like are we talking about the same child? Like she was telling us how oh he's only got one friend and he's not very social and we're like this is the child that we drop off, there's a group of them that all play together, there's like eight of them they play together on weekends they play together all the time we're like no I don't think we're speaking about the same person. So, then we met with, they kind of, the main teacher knew that we were still undecided so she asked to meet with us again and she did. And we met with her and spoke to her about it. And she again feels that he should stay back. But when you kind of dig into it all of them have that thought that all boys should be held back. So, it was kind of they had a few reasons, like you know um when he gets worked up. Like if someone else's, there's one boy in his class in particular that he's good friends with who's got lots of behavioural issues and he'll have mad moments where he runs around and goes crazy and Oscar thinks it's hilarious to run around copy. So, he kind of doesn't have that switch or that maturity where he goes oh, that's really not a good idea which I can totally see. So, they're like another year and he should be mature enough to know that he shouldn't follow. I was like okay. But that's kind of their one reason.

K: Main reason.

Linda: And otherwise, when you dig into it they're like oh we think all boys should wait till they're six. They all, the two of them had kids both held their kids back. The other one who doesn't have kids yet said oh I would never send any child boy or girl until they were turning six, like no matter what with my child, I would always wait till they're older. You don't even have children yet (laughs) but she's already thought about it. Um.

K: Well, there you go. I mean some people do start thinking about it.

Linda: Yes.

K: As soon as they know their due date.

Linda: Exactly and I have one girlfriend whose little boy's birthday is the same day as Oscar but he's three years older and she was always young for her year and ended up repeating. And she said she was scarred for life. She said as soon as she knew when her little boy's birthday was. She was adamant that he wasn't going until he was turning 6. She was like I didn't care what anyone told me about how ready he was he wasn't going because she said I wouldn't want him repeating and I hated being the youngest. And it's like, okay and that's the thing, so many people that we've met have really strong arguments either way. Either they're very forward to sending them and and throwing them in the deep end and seeing how they go or they're very much like oh no. You know they're much better to be older. I definitely wouldn't send. I would definitely you know give them another year of pre-school. And we're just (laughs) totally in the middle. And my husband's very much of the you know everyone in England goes to school from when they're four. Yep, he'll be fine like everyone. Everyone is fine. He'll be fine. And I'm more I don't know... So many people that we speak to said oh just repeat him like just send him and if he's not okay repeat him. I was like I think that's a horrible thought. If I was conscious that like if that was my thinking, I'd prefer that he had another year of playing at pre-school and repeated there (emphasis added) than repeated at school and we had an extra year of school holidays and you know school hours and all that kind of stuff. So hence why we're.

K: Well, that has to be a consideration as well particularly if you live in the city.

Linda: Yeah. Working in the city. I mean I said to my husband I don't know how we work school hours out. Obviously, lots of people do it. So, it'll be fine. But equally it's kind of like another year where we've got eight till six covered. And yeah.

K: Yeah.

Linda: So, we're very much still on the fence.

K: And so, when when do you think you started to think okay, we need to start making the decision?

If they don't have anxiety, if they're not a clinger. He'll be fine. Sounded surprised. ECEC said definitely do not send. Conflicting advice. ECEC spoke of social concerns. Main teacher - more negatively connoted. Stay back. Held back. ECEC believe all boys should be held back. Boy. Oscar lacks maturity. Contradictory - few reasons -> one reason. Another year - more time.

Repeated use of 'dig into it' - trying to uncover reason for suggesting her son delay? ECEC teachers have their own children. All boys should wait.

Her friend who was young had to repeat. Scarred. Her friend hated being the youngest. Extremely negative experience. ongoing. Send and throw in deep end. Sink or swim? Totally in the middle. Everyone is fine. He will be fine. So many people said just send him or repeat if needed. The literature suggests it is extremely difficult to repeat particularly in the public system. of avoiding? She mentions difficulty with school hours later. Still on the fence. could go either way? 8

Put off making a decision because didn't want to think about it too much.

Linda: Um, I think we probably put it off a lot because we just didn't want to think about it too much. So probably only. Well, definitely this year.

K: Because you mentioned you went to an Orientation.

Linda: Yeah, well like an Open Day.

K: Oh, an Open Day. Yep.

Linda: But for example, we they have to do their re-enrolments for where they are now in like July - August time and the lady that was doing all the re-enrolments suddenly turned to us one day and said well you have to tell me whether Oscar's going to school in 2018 or 19 because if he's going if he's definitely going in 19, then she didn't want to send him to the pre-school for this year. She would have held him, there's kind of another room that they can stay back at.

K: Oh, I see what you mean.

Linda: In the younger years centre and she said but if he is definitely going to school in 18, then he has to go to pre-school. And we're like what what do you mean we have to decide whether he's going to school or not? And she said I need to know what he's doing so we had this. She's like you need to tell me by Friday. So, we had this week.

K: With a deadline (laughs).

Linda: In like August last year where we're like oh my God we have to make a decision about whether he's going to school or not. And we just stressed and stressed and stressed about it and then it got to the end of the week and we called her up and we said we can't possibly make this decision like we just haven't given it enough thought. We don't have enough time. We're not, we just can't. And she said oh that's okay. If you are undecided then he goes to pre-school because then you've got the option.

The organisation of ECEC service required a decision to be made earlier than anticipated.

Felt extremely stressed having to make the decision and felt they didn't have enough time.

Put off thinking about it. Didn't want to think too much about decision.

ECEC needed to know parents plans for room allocations.

Deadline

stressed. repeated.

9

K: Then you've got both options.

Linda: And as it happens the preschools much better than the early years centre. So, we've already gone oh with Bradley, we'll say that you know. Oh well you know.

K: Oh well the same thing, you are very undecided. Yes, different child (laughs).

Linda: Second child you know we've learnt from Oscar.

K: So, it was interesting you said that though because I looked at some research and people were talking in other states and some of them were saying that they had to make the decision when they were three because of something to do with the government funding in other states. And they're like we don't get two years of funding for the pre-school.

Linda: Yep.

K: So, they were like so if they sent for the year say the younger year that Oscar has been then next year if they decide to stay back, they had to pay full fees and I was like oh I don't think that's the case in NSW. I haven't heard anything like that but yeah, I thought that was interesting. That was someone in South Australia saying hey we had to decide. Back then.

Linda: Well, there you go. Yeah. So that was that's when we had actually, we realised that we had to make a decision about like you know it wasn't just so many of our friends are in November or October birthdays and there is no decision it's like well they have to go. And so, my oldest friend has got two boys who were both November birthdays. So, four months older than these two and they're best buddies like they play together all the time. And so, when she made a comment about Oscar going to school next year and we said oh no actually we don't know he's going to she was like what do you mean, of course he's going. He and Tom do everything together. Yeah. But we don't actually have to send him and so we don't know whether we should or not. And she just hadn't given any thought because she didn't have to there's no decision to make. He has to go. And I guess that hasn't helped us either because he does have so

Friends don't have the choice and therefore hadn't given the decision much thought.

would prefer children had two years in the preschool before school.

will have an expertise to draw on.

Peer pressure. We don't have to send him. Friend pressure to send Oscar on-time.

10

Husband wanted to send him because he would be Rio but wife wants to consider the long term impact of the decision.

If Linda's son went to school next year, he would be "the" youngest.

many friends who are October November birthdays. And we look at him playing with them. We think they're all totally on par if in fact there are a few of the kids that socially are not there at all. And that you kind of go ohhh he's going to struggle when he goes to school like you know he likes to sit in the corner and not socialise with anyone who doesn't initiate anything. But he's a November birthday. He's got a choice. So that's when we kind of look at him and go oh he'll be fine. So, I've said to my husband the last few days because he's been very much like we're going to send him, we're just going to send him. I've said I think we need to start thinking about not the now because I think he'll be fine if we send him next year, he'd be fine. But more about the Year Seven or Year 12 which seems ridiculous because we've got no idea what's going to happen then. But like I was just saying to him the other day if he does go to YYYYY (Private Boys School), he'll have been at a tiny primary school where he'll have been the youngest, but there's lots of composite classes so it probably, he'd be okay. But he'll still be in with people similar ages no matter which year he's in.

K: Yep.

Linda: But then we'd send him to YYY in year seven his his class. So, he'd be going from, he'd be going to a year the same size as his primary school.

K: Yeah like 300, isn't it?

Linda: Yeah. And he would most definitely be "the" [emphasis added] youngest.

K: Yes, because they have the April cutoff.

Linda: Because they have the April cutoff.

K: Or is it March 31st? Or its April...

Linda: It's April. I'm not sure what date.

K: It is one or the other. Yeah.

Fine.

Husband was saying we're just going to send him.

Linda is more concerned about future year.

Composite classes in school. Similar ages.

THE youngest.

Youngest due to early cut off date at private school.

||

Linda: Yeah. But he is March so it's like he'd be going to a year the same size as this school and he would be the youngest. It's like. He was like oh yeah. I hadn't really thought about that. I don't know.

K: I think the school years go really really quick. Like everyone I talk to once they start school it's like you know next minute, they're graduating

Linda: Yeah.

K: Like time just speeds up when they're having fun.

Linda: Yeah.

K: No. So, it will be upon you quicker than you think.

Linda: So, we've really thought about it an awful lot. And our other thought is that whatever we do for Oscar, we will probably end up doing for Bradley.

K: Yes probably.

Linda: So, it's kind of like ohhhh the two-year age gaps nice. I wouldn't want them to only be a year apart at school if everything else is. I don't know. I don't know why that's important but and equally you kind of don't want it to be a three-year gap if we send him and then decide that we shouldn't. Not that there you have what you do for one you have to do for the other. But I think we've just always thought they'd be two years apart. (Laughs). Hiding in the corner. So yeah, that kind of I think that's a very long answer to whatever your question was.

K: Can I just ask though, in terms of like you give me so much information, like how are you feeling?

Linda: Oh, I'm still really. Um. I think there's been a period where it made us feel really stressed. Um, yeah. I don't think like my husband and I aren't particularly stress people at all. We don't, like we're not anxious. We don't I don't know there's not that

March birthday.

Contradictory mentioned earlier - didn't want to think about it? Awful - negative, unpleasant. Emphasising.

Two year age gap between children. Make sense to have a two year gap at school. Will need to make same decision for younger son.

Really stressed. Very.

Has spent a lot of time thinking about the decision.

It makes sense to make the same decision for the youngest child due to the age gap.

12

Parents are not the type who get smothered easily, but his decision is ridiculously huge.
Parent wishes there was no choice and there was a specific starting date.

much stuff that will phase us but this just seems to be like a ridiculously huge decision and I just keep thinking I just wish there was a date. I just wish there was a cutoff date and we had no choice and we just had to send him whereas pre-school attitude was like isn't it wonderful [emphasis added] that you have the choice? Isn't that lovely like lots of people would like to have the choice that they don't? You do. It's great, it's like... hmmm.

K: I actually heard the education minister say something along that lines like it's fantastic in New South Wales you can start at four and half or you can start at six and that's just brilliant.

Linda: Yeah. No, it's not. No, it's really not brilliant.

K: For some.

Linda: (Laughs). Yeah.

K: Because for others it's not really a decision because as you said before the October November, they have to go so my daughter is October.

Linda: Oh, is she? Yes. It's like we didn't plan that very well.

K: Yeah, I only have to struggle with this once (Linda laughs). I actually have heard though of people planning their children like for certain date...

Linda: I wish it was that easy.

K: Like month I know months of the year thinking with school in mind and I'm like oh that didn't cross my mind.

Linda: No not at all.

K: Lucky people. But yes, this question actually kind of follows on from what you that whole experience you've just shared. So, what do you think were the main

Emphasises the enormity of the decision.
I just keep thinking I just wish there was a date.
Wish - repeated.
Wish there was no choice.
Would prefer to be told when to send him.
ECEC teachers thought it was wonderful!
Some parents have choice to decide.

To plan children around cut-off dates.

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influences thinking about all of those factors that you've talked about. What do you think have been the most influential?

Linda: Oh gosh. I do think we in the back of our minds no matter what we would say we still keep thinking about what his pre-school say because we keep thinking his pre-school teachers know him the best, they're in the system. They should know. So, I think that's been a major influence. I think no matter whenever we keep thinking oh yeh we will just send him to school there's a nigggle in the back of my head. But you know these particular teachers who we really trust and really respect have said he shouldn't. So, I keep coming back to what they've said. Um, I think when we were thinking about whether he should go to school one of the big things was cost of like cost of day-care versus cost of school because where they are at, it is astronomically expensive.

K: I think everywhere in Sydney is (laughs).

Linda: I know it's crazy. And then it's that whole the juggle if you know if everyone's well not if everyone if lots of people are saying he shouldn't go to school next year. Then actually it's another year of no school holidays and you know just kind of keeping things like it works for us at the moment. So, kind of why put ourselves through a year of, an extra year of, well earlier on and school and school holidays and all the rest of it if you don't have to. Yeah, I don't know. I don't know what's influencing us the most really. I'd say what his teachers have said is probably the biggest. And then I'll say that just that constant thought about if he is the youngest what does that mean? But equally if he is the eldest what does that mean? Which is better? Is there a better? Yeah. And then what he wants as well. That was the other big thing is that I've sat down with him numerous times and said these are the choices. You can go back to where you are next year and these are the friends that you'll have to play with because there's other kids that didn't move up that will next year. That he was good friends with. Or you can go to school and these are your friends that will be there from that you know now. But there will obviously be new friends to make. And he's been absolutely adamant this whole time that he wants to go back to pre-school. Every conversation we've had there's been one time only when he's had a meltdown about it and he wanted school and that was when we were talking about school.

The opinion of the ECEC teachers was the most influential.

The cost of ECEC is astronomically expensive.

An additional year of not having to balance work and school holidays.

Is it better for her son to be younger or older?

Son was adamant he wanted to go back to pre-school.

In the back of our minds.

What the ECEC teachers say is important. ECEC know him best.

Nigggle in the back of my head

Nigggle - something that causes you to worry over a long period.

Really trust, really respect ECEC teachers. Keep coming back to what they have said.

Astronomically expensive. Extremely large amount of money.

School holidays. What he wants.

Doesn't know what is the most influential offered choice to son.

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The ECEC end of year activities contribute a lot her son ~~was~~ changing his mind and wanting to go to school.

The school has a mixture of children who have started early and delayed entry.

The principal suggested sending her son to Orientation and her making a decision based on how he went.

Child was adamant he didn't want to go to school despite all of his friends were going.

uniforms and there's a school uniform parade coming up. And he didn't want to miss out. He wanted to be in school uniform parade so he wants to go to school. And then all of a sudden, this week it's like so you go back to pre-school next year and he's like uuhhh no I think I want to go to school. So that's been, that's influenced me a lot. He's, I kind of thought well if he doesn't want to go to school. And he's been adamant about it then I'm not going to push it.

K: Do you know um at the school that you've enrolled him in, do you know what the trends are because it does differ across?

Linda: Well so they, this year had an 18-month age difference.

K: So, there's people doing both.

Linda: There's people doing both big time. And when I've spoken to them at this Orientation day, they kind of had no idea about enrolments for this year. Bradley, don't climb up there please. No climbing. Um, yes, so, they seem to have (pause) both.

K: Hmm.

Linda: Hence, made it even harder.

K: (Laughs). I was going to say.

Linda: I kind of thought. Well, if I've got an answer from daycare, I'll move on to the school because surely, they'll have a better idea and that was the headmistress that was like ohhhh if he doesn't have anxiety issues, just send him. And then then her response was um oh well just send him to Orientation and see how he goes. And if you've then if you don't feel he does well at that, then don't send him. I don't want to put him through Orientation and he will think that he's going and then... (Both children yelling Mum. Mum. Mum repeatedly).

K: I was going to ask if you were

Oscar: Mum, I need some sticky tape. Mum, I need some sticky tape and some stickers.

K: Unsure, yeah, why you didn't put him into Orientation, just.

Linda: Just thought... well I will have to find you some in a minute. I'm just doing this talking. Okay? I will find you some in a minute. Why don't you look in the drawer at the desk and you will find something.

Bradley: Mum. Mum. Mum. I want a cuddle.

Linda: In the toy room, have a look in the desk.

K: Yeah, no right or wrong. I was just interested.

Linda: Because he was so adamant that he didn't want to go. I kind of thought well he's been pretty clear that he didn't want to go and he knew that all of his friends were going off to do Orientation. And he kind of never said oh I want to go and do that. So, I thought well... And we had like we have talked about it loads but you know and because we drive past the school quite often to go home and so I've often said oh that would be that'll be your big school when you go to school, he's like oh but I'm not going there next year. Okay. And so yeah, I kind of just didn't put him down. I thought well if he's that adamant. And it was yeah that thought of oh well if we enrol him before school starts his little friend Sally will show him around everywhere. She's a gorgeous girl that you know likes to take control.

K: Confident.

Linda: Who will happily yeh show him everything so it's like oh well that'll be fine.

K: I'm really happy with how much information you've given me.

Linda: Oh good, sorry. I'm just on transmit.

ECEC have a school uniform parade. Didn't want to miss out. Child doesn't want to be different? Repeated use of adamant - made up his mind. Fear of mixing out? 18 month age difference.

School had no idea of enrolments and starting age. Hmm? Really?

Why would the school have a better idea? Headmistress - more authority? Simple decision? Parent's choice - feeling. Didn't want to put him through Orientation if he wasn't going. 15

Child interrupts interview.

Doesn't want to be different. Adamant - mild reference. Child didn't want to go. Repeated "he didn't want to go." Thought - thinking. Was the child anxious about going to big school? Didn't enrol for Orientation - suggests delay. possibility of changing mind at last minute and sending him to school.

An early influence was her sole difficulty with sleep.

The child is sleeping well at the moment so maybe he should start school.

When child is not sleeping well, the decision is a no brainer and the choice is not to send.

Parents are hoping an extra year will result in an extra year of maturity to help son make better decisions.

K: No, you've been fantastic. Can I ask what type of skills you think Oscar needs before he starts school? And again, no right or wrong just what you think.

Linda: The other thing I didn't say that had had influenced our decision very early on was that he's been a dreadful sleeper. And one one sleep doctor we went to some you know sleep guru doctor because he literally he's awake he's got a very active imagination and he has gone through years where he'll be awake for three or four hours a night literally talking and telling stories.

K: Cheeky.

Linda: And just wide awake and this sleep doctor's like oh yeh he's got insomnia. He might grow out of it. He highly not. Yeh.

K: Oh, my goodness.

Linda: Okay. Well, what do we do about that? He's like ah nothing. I'm like it's not normal for a 3-year-old to be awake for four or five hours every night and he hasn't day slept since he was three.

K: Oh gosh, he would be very tired.

Linda: Yes. So, he would get to the end of the day and cope amazingly given how little sleep he had. But there would be days that if he hadn't slept that he'd just want to sleep in and you know we'd wake him up to go to swimming or wherever we were going. And he would be really grumpy and so I said to my husband, I will have a look in a minute. So, I said to my husband numerous times he's sleeping well at the moment which is probably why we're back on that oh maybe we should. But when he doesn't sleep then it's kind of a no brainer that he's just too shattered to go to school. (Child talking). Equally other people have then said oh but school will exhaust him so, he'll sleep. But we do lots that exhaust him and it's still amazing that he can have been awake for hours and hours every night.

K: I'm sure it will change when he's a teenager (laughs).

Linda: I know.

K: Don't they say you can't get them out of bed?

Linda: Yes exactly. Well. No doubt. But always just happy and awake. But that kind of went on for ages (Child babbling) so that probably influenced the decision to not send him. And then he does have um you know where he will follow kids that are just being crazy and out of control and kind of his off switch is very delayed on that. So, I think he needs to develop those skills where he knows who to who and when to follow and when not to. But then I kind of think all four-year-olds are like that aren't they? Like lots of boys are kind of wild and hyperactive.

K: I've got one of those (laughs).

Linda: I would like to say he's not the ringleader but sometimes he probably is actually. But he, I guess in that respect yeah, he's a bit of a follower [when people are doing crazy, naughty things. And he'll know] that it is crazy and naughty but he will happily follow. And I kind of just think maybe an extra year of maturity and age maybe he'll make better decisions. I don't know. Bradley. See, I think they're the main things. That he is sleeping much better which he has been doing the last kind of few months. And then I don't know that level of maturity where he just follows the naughty kids.

K: You were saying before he likes to read and like.

Linda: Yeah. Like he'll, loves to.

K: Can he write his name?

Linda: Ah, yes, loves to write his name. He's a lefty. So, he does tend to write backwards. I should get the letters right.

K: They say that that. Yeah. That's part of development.

Dreadful sleeper.

Insomnia.

Not normal. Wants child to be the same as Oscar. Not normal to be awake for hours every night. Impact of lack of sleep on school performance.

sleeping well at moment maybe we should... could this change mind or the send.

If they didn't have the choice, the child would simply go to school and be very tired.

Sleep issues influenced decision to not send. Follower. Would rather he was a leader?

Boys. Wild. hyperactive. Like to read early. Skills mentioned earlier.

Contradictory statement. Sometimes leads, sometimes follows. Happily follow. Sleeping better. Follows the naughty kids.

loves to read. can write his name. Left-handed.

Linda: But yes. He's always been very into drawing and painting. And reading. Um he can like he's always kind of sat and read books for ages and... (pause)

reading skills?

K: Where do you find these children?

Linda: Well, his brother's not the same let me tell you. Definitely not the same. Hey boys boys boys boys that's the roof below. Stand up. Don't get on there please. You'll put a hole in the ceiling. Don't do that please. Put the cover back on. Listen to me. Would you like something to eat? Yeah. A biscuit. Yeah, I thought so. (kids noisy on way to the kitchen). Okay, you go find it. Another follower (laughs).

children interrupt.

K: That's cute though, very cute. Are you aware of what the government policy is surrounding school entry in New South Wales?

Linda: Oh, in that they have to, they have, yes. So, they have to be at school that they're turning six and they can go to school any time is it after their four no five after July 31st.

K: Yeah, 5 by July 31st. So that's why the October.

Linda: Yes.

K: And all that have to go. Yeah. Excellent. And then this next question is but I know you're undecided but for those who are considering not sending next year.

leaning towards a delayed school entry.

Linda: Yep, which is probably more us. Yep.

Probably more us. Likely to delay.

K: Yes. What type of experiences would you be providing for your son?

Linda: The same (laughs) as what he's getting now.

If son was A.R. he would be doing the same experiences he is now. could he get bored?

K: So, he's at preschool three days?

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Linda: So, he's at preschool three days a week and then he's with me Mondays. And my mum Tuesdays.

Preschool - 3 days. Family - 2 days.

K: And you do swimming?

Linda: We do swimming. And then depending well we used to do both of them first thing in the morning so we could go off and do things all day. So, you know we could go to the zoo.

Swimming. Zoo.

K: It never goes to plan.

The child is able to go on day trips with Grandparents which provides him with a range of educational experiences.

Linda: So, Bradley's gone up a swimming class and they didn't have the space so now he's at like 11. So, we've got to go back so it's a pain. And then Tuesday they're with my mum but my thinking is for next year they'll still be with my mum but my dad is around and I'd probably ask him to take Oscar off on day trips just the two of them because there's stuff that he would love to do that's, Bradley's a bit little to do like going off. So, like he really wants to go to the Maritime Museum and see all the big ships and so I think Dad would probably take him off to do more educational things that Bradley's a bit too little for. I mean at the moment my mum takes them to story reading every Tuesday morning down at XXXXX Bookshop which they love and then they usually go to the park and you know do stuff and she'll she loves taking them to plays and you know they go to all those Julia Donaldson things.

with Grandpa/grandpa. Day trips - educational. Museum. More educational things. Bookshop. Plays. Park.

K: So cultural, yeh no, very nice.

Linda: She loves doing all that stuff with them. So yeah, and then pre-school three days and then weekends just you know crazy.

Preschool 3 days.

K: I was going to say it's quite busy. I watch sometimes online and people are enrolling their kids in like all this stuff and I'm like oh my goodness.

Linda: I know, it's like we've got friends who put all their kids in. Kids yelling. What's in there darling? I don't know what's in there. sport with their kids at 8 o'clock on a Sunday morning.

Friends enroll their kids in Saturday morning sport on weekend. Private schools have a similar expectation. 20

K: 8 o'clock.

Linda: And I'm like you've got a lifetime of school to do Saturday to do weekend sport. Why would you infect weekend sport on yourself?

K: Particularly if he goes to YYYYY (Private All Boys School), I think sports compulsory, isn't it?

Linda: Yes, yes. You know you'll have a life time. Why would you make? Why would you book in for soccer at 8 o'clock on a Sunday morning? Or even swimming. We got friends who do swimming lessons at 8:00 a.m. on Saturday morning. And Sunday morning. And I'm like.

K: I think we're as a society we like to be busy and we like to do what everybody else is doing.

Linda: Just one Bradley, just one.

K: Okay, this next one you touched on it a little bit in some of your stories but yeah do you think anyone who has influenced your decision?

Linda: Certainly pre-school.

K: Yeah.

Linda: And I think just looking at all his friends that he has at the moment and kind of thinking about how old they are and then when their birthdays are has yeh made us question whether he would be fine to go to school because he seems to fit in with them all so well. Yeah, they're probably the two biggest. And then my husband well like our experiences with school, I guess. So, my husband going to school from four and thinking it's fine. And then I've got I was speaking to.

K: And then you went.

Age of friends
was made
parents question
his decision. &
delay.
husband's experience
of starting school
at four, and thinking
his fine.

infect - unpleasant
- suffer?
wait until it is
compulsory (private)?

life time. Repeated.
baldies.
Questions why friends
would voluntarily
end in early
morning sport on
weekends.

Preschool influenced
decision.
Certain.
Birthdays are generation
important reiteration
comparison to current
friends.
Fine.
own experiences at
school.
Husband going at 4.
Education systems
are very different.
First year in UK !!
more use preschool
here. 2.

Linda: I went I was older.

K: So, you were in July? And then back then a July birthday was like a no brainer.

Linda: Yeah. Yeah. And then I got like I caught up with uni friends a few weeks ago and they're interestingly like we never none of us ever really thought about if we've all got kids that are kind of getting to that school age now. So, we were talking about it the other week and lots of my uni girlfriends are February birthdays like February March and they were saying that they. So, they were young for their year. And they said although they never all of them it was hilarious, like three of them who said and they'd never talked about it together but all had the same feeling where they never felt behind academically. They never felt that they you know couldn't keep up with everyone. But all three of them said that they all wished that they were in the year below. I was like well why? And they're like oh we just hated being the youngest. Really? Yeah. Like you know we never we didn't feel like we couldn't keep up but we just I just wish I'd been older rather than younger.

K: Yes, see I was an August birthday and I was always an older one.

Linda: Yes.

K: Cause only the July, and you know, a couple in June and maybe the occasional May back then.

Linda: Yeah. And so, its stuff I never.

K: I never really thought about it.

Linda: Me either.

K: Cause I was always an old one.

Linda: Cause they're like you know everyone could get their license before we could and I was like that's so funny because I could I was one of the oldest. So, I could

Her uni friends
all hated
being one of
the youngest
at school
and wished
they were in
the year
below.

Linda was ~~older~~
older. July birthday
So A.R.

Uni friends were
relecting on being
young.

Friends experience.
would have preferred
to be older and not
younger.

Hated being youngest.

Older kids can get
license first.

obviously get it first. I had no interest in it.

K: Yeah. No. Neither did I.

Linda: I didn't get it until I finished school.

K: My best friend drove me around. And it worked.

Linda: Whereas I do remember the younger ones were like you know. They were the ones that were the day it was their birthday they were at the RTA getting their Ls and I was like really, was like why? Why? But the older ones who could do it just didn't bother you so much.

K: Maybe it's back to that thing even like with alcohol and drinking and stuff like you know you really want it. And then when it's available and you're allowed to have it it's kind of it all wears off.

Linda: Yeah, I think so.

K: So maybe they because they can't have it, they feel disadvantaged. Or. Yeah.

Linda: Maybe that's what it is. I don't know. There's a girl that a lady that I play netball with and she was hilarious. So, lots of them have sent their kids younger and there's one lady whose son is like in high school. And she said from the get go she always in her mind no matter what she said he. She was not having him be 18 for Year 12. She said he's the naughtiest boy in the world. He doesn't listen to a word I say. He never has. He's so rebellious and so disobedient she said there's no way that I want him to be able to drink and drive for his HSC. He would never finish. He would never go to school. He'd never do anything. She's like I was adamant that he was going to be 17 for that Year 12. So, she said I know that there's fake I.D. and all the rest of it. By the time he gets there you know no one it would be so difficult to get. No one to be able to get it. She said at least then he can't go to the pub and he can't drive and he can't do all these things so she said there's a chance [emphasis added] that he might finish school. Okay, I've never thought about that.

Her netball friend was adamant her naughty son had to start early because if he was 18 during the HSC year, he probably wouldn't finish school.

Younger ones get license as soon as could.

Friend at netball sent son early. Naughty child. Doubt think he would finish school..

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K: I am actually a high school teacher trained. I'm working in primary school at the moment but that was part of my initial interest is having a look like for Year 12 because this trend is starting to take off. And you know in the next 10 years I'd love to track what's happening to follow you know to follow.

Linda: Yep.

K: These children even in the future.

Linda: Yep.

K: To see.

Linda: What happens.

K: What the outcome is because you know 13 14 years will be quick.

Linda: Yeah. Very true.

K: Yeah, so that was my initial interest came from a high school background and then this year due to my family situation I ended up getting a job at a primary school which is complete, still not completely happy there. But you know I'm learning but yeah, it's just a big cultural change after 15 years in high school. Yeah. At least I know what's coming now.

Linda: Teaching or psychology?

K: Yeah teaching. So yeah, it's interesting. But I look now like because I teach K through to (Year) Six I teach every class.

Linda: Wow, okay.

K: For sport. And yeah so, I've I feel like I'm actually a better prepared parent in terms

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of like looking at what the kids can do.

Linda: Yeah. Yeah.

K: Because I can see it across all the stages and I'm like okay. So, I feel a little bit more informed than I did last year which is good. Do you think your decision-making has affected your relationship with other people?

Linda: No, not really. I don't think so. Like this the oldest friend of mine who's got the November boy is [very opinionated]. And the first time it came up in conversation she was like What do you mean you're not sending them? She was very you know of course he has to go when she was very and like I you know I've known her. She and I started in kindergarten together and then she went to off to XXXXX College (Private Girls School) actually for year one. And she's a June birthday and I'm a July birthday. So, we started off at Kindy together and then for some reason she started at XXXXX and halfway through the year they went ah you can move up a year. So, we actually always ended up a year apart. Even though we've been you know best friends since we were five kind of thing. And so, I pointed that out to her she was like you know the boys can't be in different years and I was like we were in different years. Has it affected our friendship at all? (Child yelling) And so, she actually sent me a message after we'd had this conversation apologising going oh you know I'm really sorry I realise that I was really pushing my thoughts on you. It didn't affect our relationship at all but it was just interesting that she was kind of so opinionated about it. And then obviously reflected on what she'd said. But otherwise no not really. Um, I don't think so (laughs).

Very opinionated friends.

So opinionated. Because she doesn't have the choice?

Had one opinionated friend who thought he boys should be in the same year at school.

K: We're almost there.

Linda: Maybe if I did send him to school, it would affect my relationship with my mother. Cause she thinks I shouldn't send him (laughs).

K: Oh, shouldn't? Oh, I'm interested because a lot of the people I've been talking to like old school are saying.

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Linda: She's the same. She's like she thinks that all boys should be older.

K: Oh Okay. That's...

Linda: She's just like that blanket no I think that all boys.

K: Oh, that's interesting.

Linda: Yes.

K: Because for me when I went to school you know March wasn't even a consideration.

Linda: Hmm.

K: Like it was more June, July. Maybe a couple of May. You know if there was a problem. Or Yeah. So, it's like March and then yeah. Hmmm, interesting.

Linda: But she's very much doesn't want to push her opinions on us. You see she doesn't talk about it at all. But it's just if you ask her, she'll say oh no I she said I don't want to influence but I think all boys should. Which is funny because it means that...

K: Does she have a teaching background?

Linda: No. No, not at all.

Linda: And you know it would potentially mean that she has two handfuls for a whole another year.

K: Oh, I was going to... extra extra extra care duty.

Linda: You know you really want both of them for another year? Well, they are running me ragged but I love it. So, that's okay.

Boys - delay.

Mother thinks all boys should delay entry.

Grandmother thinks all boys should start later.

Additional year of grandparents helping to look after.

notes loading after grand kids.

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K: That's good.

Linda: Yeah.

K: So, what do you think have been the positive and or negative aspects of the whole decision-making experience?

Linda: I don't know (laughs). That's a hard one. Of the actual decision-making process.

K: Yes, or the decision-making experience.

Linda: I don't know that there are many positives. It's made us talk about it an awful lot. At least it makes us communicate about something, my husband and I, which we do anyway.

Linda: The negatives are that it has been really stressful. And I just don't feel like there is a right answer necessarily. I think it's one of those things. We could send him to school next year and he would be fine. And equally we could send him to pre-school next year and he'll be equally fine. So, you know it's kind of hard. And of course, which ever one you do I you don't know how the other one would have turned out. So, I think the biggest negative is the stress.

K: Yeah.

Linda: And any positives? (Pause). No not really. This is their favourite. They just.

K: And then do you have any advice that you would offer other parents who are faced with this difficult decision?

Linda: I don't feel like I'm in a position to offer advice at the moment. I think I'd take any advice I could possibly get. So no, not really.

K: But maybe in like a year or two you'd probably think oh.

Did not see any positives of the d-m experience.

The d-m has been extremely stressful trying to decide which path to take and not knowing the outcome of two alternate paths.

Spent a lot of time talking about the decision.

Communication between parents, right answer.

Really stressful emphasis.

Hard. Equally fine whether he goes to school or preschool.

So why is it so stressful?

Make one decision and not sure how it would have turned out if the other was made.

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Linda: Yes. And I keep thinking to myself it's going to be one of those things when we have to make the decision with Bradley it will be like oh why did we stress about this so much?

K: We have done this before. That was one of the people I interviewed on Saturday night she said to me the first time stressful. Second time we knew what we were doing.

Linda: Yeah, exactly. I mean it's like everything not everything but with so much parenting you stressed about it so much the first time and then the second time around you're like, oh why? Why were we so worried about that? Because it's, yeh well you're just so much more informed aren't you and you know. And so, we have spoken to lots of people who, so like one of the kids that he will be with if he goes back to pre-school next year, her brother was at the same pre-school and a similar birthday to Oscar. And so, their mum kept him in for two years at the pre-school. So, we met up with her to say you know was it good? Was it bad? Did he get bored? And she was like certainly halfway through the second year she said, she could tell he was ready to go to school then. She's like half like June July, that's like he was really ready for school then. And she said it took that six months for her to go oh I made the right decision in that she; her thought was that she he either would have drowned at school for the first six months and then halfway through the year started to get it. Or now that she's held him back, he'll just, although he was bored for the last six months of pre-school it just meant he started school getting it straight away. So, she said she now appreciates that now that he's been at school for almost a year that she thinks he really would have struggled in the first six months and what that would have done to his confidence who knows. So, she now looks back and goes it was definitely the right thing to have done. Even though they had a six-month period where he was bored and she really had to like try and do lots of extra stuff with him and stuff like that. So. Yeah. It's so hard.

K: It is hard. I just wanted to thank you so much for your time today. I can see on the form that you've indicated that you know you potentially would be interested in that follow up interview.

Doesn't think it will be as stressful making the decision for younger son.

First time - stressed.

Story of friend who delayed.

Son was bored for last 6 months but was ready for school when he started.

Held him back. Negative connotation. Right thing.

Parenting can be stressful, particularly when making decisions the first time.

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Linda: Oh yeah sure.

K: I think it would be really good just to hear. And again, you know if I asked you that advice question.

Linda: Yeah, I might have some (laughs).

K: You might be a pro and say do this or do that or. Yeah, I think yeah. It'd be interesting just to see like how it all went. I think.

Linda: So, is this the decision you're making with your little one?

K: Yes. I'll press stop (Linda laughs) and then I will have a chat to you.

Linda: Cause especially if you are a teacher, you will have lots of insights.

Appendix N Grouping of Experiential Statements

Example of Initial Grouping of ES for Linda

PETs	Experiential Statements
A time-consuming, horrible experience.	<p>Parents are not the type who get stressed easily, but this decision is ridiculously huge.</p> <p>Has found the decision-making experience horrible and feels it is a huge decision.</p> <p>The decision-making has been extremely stressful, trying to decide which path to take, and not knowing the outcome of the alternate path.</p> <p>Is it better for her son to be younger or older?</p> <p>If Linda's son went to school next year, he would be "the" youngest.</p> <p>Put off making the decision because they didn't want to think too much about it.</p> <p>Has spent an awful lot of time thinking about the decision.</p> <p>Parents change their mind about the decision every other day.</p> <p>Leaning towards a delayed school entry.</p>
The parent doesn't know what to do.	<p>Age of friends has made parents question their decision to delay.</p> <p>Parent did not see any positives of the decision-making experience.</p> <p>Parent wishes there was no choice and there was a specific starting date.</p> <p>Delaying school entry would result in an additional year of not having to juggle school and work.</p> <p>An additional year of not having to balance work and family holidays.</p> <p>The organisation of ECEC service required a decision to be made earlier than anticipated.</p> <p>Felt extremely stressed by having to make the decision and felt they didn't have enough time.</p> <p>Parenting can be stressful, particularly when making decisions for the first time.</p> <p>It makes sense to make the same decision for the subsequent child due to the age gap.</p>

<p>The son experienced difficulties with sleep.</p>	<p>An early influence was her son's difficulty with sleep. The child is sleeping well at the moment, so maybe he should start school. When child is not sleeping the decision is a no brainer and the choice is not to send.</p>
<p>The son appears to be ready but could do with an additional year to gain maturity.</p>	<p>Linda's son appears to display readiness skills for school including reading, drawing and the ability to sit still. Parents are hoping an extra year will result in an extra year of maturity to help son make better decisions. The child is able to go on day trips with the grandparents which provide him with a range of educational experiences.</p>
<p>The child was adamant he wanted to go and then changed his mind.</p>	<p>Son was adamant he wanted to go back to preschool. Child was adamant he didn't want to go to school despite all of his friends were going. The ECEC end of year activities contributed to her son changing his mind and wanting to go to school.</p>
<p>The private school principal suggested the child would be fine to send if there were no anxiety issues.</p>	<p>Considering a private school education and the school has an earlier cut-off date. Principal suggested that if the child has no anxiety issues, it should be fine to send. The principal suggested sending her son to Orientation and then making a decision based on how he went. The school has a mixture of children who have started early and delayed entry.</p>
<p>The opinion of the ECEC teachers was highly valued and they advised not to send.</p>	<p>The opinion of ECEC teachers was the most influential. ECEC teachers believe all children benefit from delaying school entry. The ECEC teachers advised Linda to definitely not send.</p>
<p>The husband is from the UK and thinks the son would be fine to start</p>	<p>Linda and her husband share different views on schooling due to him growing up in the UK. Husband is from the UK and believes son will be fine going to school next year. Husband's experience of starting school at four and think its fine.</p>

<p>school as he would go if they were still in the UK.</p>	<p>Husband wanted to send him because he would be fine, but wife wants to consider the long-term impact of the decision.</p>
<p>The experiences of friends were valued and helped the parent to see the pros and cons of both school entry options.</p>	<p>Friends don't have the choice and therefore haven't given the decision much thought. Had one opinionated friend who thought their boys should be in the same year at school. Her netball friend was adamant her naughty son had to go start school early because if he was 18 during the HSC year, he probably wouldn't finish school. Her uni friends all hated being one of the youngest at school and wished they were in the year below. A friend's negative experience of having to repeat a year was influential. The negative impact of repeating was something to be avoided.</p>
<p>The grandparent thinks all boys should be academically redshirted.</p>	<p>Grandmother thinks all boys should start later.</p>
<p>Child care is astronomically expensive.</p>	<p>The cost of ECEC is astronomically expensive.</p>

Summary of Reflections and Thinking

There were too many experiential statements (ES) in each cluster. Needed to reduce the number by regrouping the ES and creating sub-themes.

I needed to move some ES to form a family situation grouping.

I chose to divide the stressed grouping into two.

Created a new group based on time.

Moved ES around in the opinions section. Changed focus to send/delay.

Need to expand the PETs to convey more meaning about the experience for this participant.

Revised Table of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) for Linda

PETs	Sub-Theme	Experiential Statements
<p>The parent considered the child's desire to return to preschool and hopes he will be more mature when he starts school.</p>	<p>The child was experiencing sleeping difficulties.</p>	<p>An early influence was her son's difficulty with sleep.</p> <p>The child is sleeping well at the moment, so maybe he should start school.</p> <p>When child is not sleeping the decision is a no brainer and the choice is not to send.</p>
	<p>The child changed his mind at the end of the year.</p>	<p>Son was adamant he wanted to go back to preschool.</p> <p>Child was adamant he didn't want to go to school despite all his friends were going.</p> <p>The ECEC end of year activities contributed to her son changing his mind and wanting to go to school.</p>
	<p>Although the child appears to be 'ready' the parent hopes the extra year will help the child to make better decisions.</p>	<p>Linda's son appears to display readiness skills for school including reading, drawing and the ability to sit still.</p> <p>Parents are hoping an extra year before school will result in an additional year of maturity to help son make better decisions.</p>

	<p>The age of the child's friends was considered as the parent did not want her child to be young in the cohort.</p>	<p>Age of friends has made parents question their decision to delay.</p> <p>If Linda's son went to school next year, he would be "the" youngest.</p> <p>Is it better for her son to be younger or older?</p>
<p>The parent has spent a considerable amount of time thinking about this ridiculous huge decision and feels extremely stressed by it.</p>	<p>The parent found this decision to be huge and horrible.</p>	<p>Parents are not the type who get stressed easily, but this decision is ridiculously huge. Has found the decision-making experience horrible and feels it is a huge decision. The decision-making has been extremely stressful, trying to decide which path to take, and not knowing the outcome of the alternate path. Parent did not see any positives of the decision-making experience. Parent wishes there was no choice and there was a specific starting date.</p> <p>Parenting can be stressful, particularly when making decisions for the first time.</p>
	<p>Indecision</p>	<p>Put off making the decision because they didn't want to think too much about it.</p> <p>Has spent an awful lot of time thinking about the decision.</p> <p>The organisation of ECEC service required a decision to be made earlier than anticipated. Felt extremely stressed by having to make the decision and felt they didn't have enough time. Parents change their mind about the decision every other day.</p> <p>Leaning towards a delayed school entry.</p>

<p>There were conflicting opinions from the ECEC teachers,</p>	<p>The most influential opinion was from the ECEC teachers whose advice was to delay school entry.</p>	<p>The opinion of ECEC teachers was the most influential.</p> <p>ECEC teachers believe all children benefit from delaying school entry.</p> <p>The ECEC teachers advised Linda to definitely not send.</p> <p>Grandmother thinks all boys should start later.</p>
<p>school principal and friends regarding when her son should commence formal schooling.</p>	<p>The principal of the desired school indicated it should be fine to send the child if there were no anxiety issues.</p>	<p>Principal suggested that if the child has no anxiety issues, it should be fine to send. The principal suggested sending her son to Orientation and then making a decision based on how he went.</p> <p>Had one opinionated friend who thought their boys should be in the same year at school.</p>
	<p>The experiences of friends were varied; however, the parent was keen to avoid the need to repeat a year.</p>	<p>Friends don't have the choice and therefore haven't given the decision much thought. Her uni friends all hated being one of the youngest at school and wished they were in the year below.</p> <p>Her netball friend was adamant her naughty son had to go start school early because if he was 18 during the HSC year, he probably wouldn't finish school.</p> <p>A friend's negative experience of having to repeat a year was influential.</p> <p>The negative impact of repeating was something to be avoided.</p>

<p>The husband is from the UK and thinks his son would be fine to start school and the family could avoid the cost of ECEC fees and the need to juggle school and work hours.</p>	<p>The husband comes from the UK and thinks the son will be fine if he starts school as his own schooling experience was positive.</p>	<p>Linda and her husband share different views on schooling due to him growing up in the UK.</p> <p>Husband is from the UK and believes son will be fine going to school next year.</p> <p>Husband experienced starting school at four and think its fine.</p> <p>Husband wanted to send him because he would be fine, but wife wants to consider the long-term impact of the decision.</p>
	<p>Despite the cost of ECEC being astronomically expensive, a delayed entry would negate the need to juggle work and school for another year.</p>	<p>The cost of ECEC is astronomically expensive.</p> <p>Delaying school entry would result in an additional year of not having to juggle school and work.</p> <p>An additional year of not having to balance work and family holidays.</p> <p>The child is able to go on day trips with the grandparents which provide him with a range of educational experiences.</p> <p>It makes sense to make the same decision for the subsequent child due to the age gap.</p>
	<p>The parent wants her son to attend a private school and they have their own cut-off date which is close to the child's birthday.</p>	<p>Considering a private school education and the school has an earlier cut-off date.</p> <p>The school has a mixture of children who have started early and delayed entry.</p>

Appendix O Example Reflexivity

Pre – Analysis

Teacher – Priming
- seen the struggles of young students. child crying because she wants to go home. The child who used to physically capture is spot on her older peers. Debra who is frustrated because he can't sleep.

High school
Marilyn
interested to see if markers are affected by age difference.

Parent
wanted how my ^{son} child would go. Fred's child (10) been - holding back comparing my child to her son. Tell friend to delay because they're doing it.

Own experience
Older son
August birthday
top groups.
Children in my year group A & B were May → July.
Jas. birthday would have gone to school.
my parents were surprised I was even questioning it.

During Analysis

As I listened to Sarah's story, I couldn't help but feel her boy twin could benefit from a delayed entry. He was starting at the earliest opportunity because Sarah felt the twin sister needed to go.

I noticed that as I was listening to Ashini's story, I felt sad for her little boy because Ashini mentioned he had had some issues in his early years. It sounded like he could benefit from an additional year.

Both of these examples reveal that I was finding it difficult not to add my personal judgement to each parent's story. It was difficult to try not to think about what I would do if I was the child's mother, based on the information provided during the interview.

After Analysis

It was really difficult to bracket the ideas which emerged from each participant's story. I found myself naturally finding connections between the experiences shared.

I tried hard to approach each interview with an open mind.

I needed to be careful not to pre-empt what participants were going to say. This happened frequently during the focus group, where participants jumped in and tried to fill in the rest of the sentence whilst people were speaking. I wonder what impact this had on the stories shared?

I also hope that I did not lead the group, such as when I asked a gender question in Focus Group 1.

Appendix P Prevalence Table

Theme	Sub-Theme	Interviewees	Focus Group participants
<i>1. Parents were influenced by other parents as they navigated this important decision and its potential impact on their child's future.</i>	1.1	Yvonne, Ashini, Kaitlyn, Cindy, Natalya	Carol (FG1), Kelly (FG3), Harshika (FG1), Heath (FG3), Amelia (FG3), Nikhita (FG3), Sandrine (FG4), John (FG2), Heather (FG1)
	1.2	Kaitlyn, Linda, Hannah	Ruthie (FG4), Maria (FG2), Heath (FG3), Heather (FG1)
	1.3	Craig, Sarah, Cindy, Linda, Ashini, Kaitlyn, Brett	Heather (FG1), Maria (FG2), Sandrine (FG4), Karina (FG2)
<i>2. Parents' experiences showed that the burden of decision-making often fell upon the mother.</i>	2.1	Brett, Ashini, Linda, Cindy	John (FG2), Harshika (FG1), Sandra (FG2), Reshima (FG2), Sabina (FG4), Sandrine (FG4), Kelly (FG3), Karina (FG2)
	2.2	Kaitlyn, Ashini, Hannah	Amelia (FG3), Chelsea (FG4)

	2.3	Linda, Kaitlyn	Heather (FG1), Amelia (FG3), Maria (FG2), Heath (FG3)
3. <i>There was ambiguity for a number of parents as they considered/the best decision for their child.</i>	3.1	Linda, Cindy, Sarah, Kaitlyn, Ashini	Reshima (FG2) Sabina (FG4), Rowena (FG3), Heath (FG3), Amelia (FG3), Sandra (FG2)
	3.2	Ashini, Sarah, Hannah, Craig	Reshima (FG2), Harshika (FG1), Sandra (FG2), Amelia (FG3)
	3.3	Ashini, Brett, Natalya, Sarah	Maria (FG2), Sandrine (FG4), Harshika (FG1), Heather (FG1), Rowena (FG3), Kelly (FG3)
	3.4		Sandra (FG2)
4. <i>Parents often found it difficult to determine if their child was ready.</i>	4.1	Natalya, Ashini, Linda, Hannah,	Karina (FG2), Sandra (FG2), Sandrine (FG4)
	4.2	Sarah, Cindy, Kaitlyn, Hannah, Yvonne, Natalya	Sandrine (FG4), Karina (FG2), Samuel (FG1), Harshika (FG1)

	4.3	Cindy, Hannah, Brett	Ruthie (FG4), Amelia (FG3), Heather (FG1), Sandra (FG2), Heath (FG3), Kelly (FG3), Chelsea (FG4), Karina (FG2)
5. <i>There was an apparent misalignment in views among various stakeholders regarding when a child should commence formal schooling</i>	5.1	Hannah, Ashini, Brett, Kaitlyn, Natalya	John (FG2), Heath (FG3)
	5.2	Linda, Sarah, Kaitlyn, Ashini, Cindy	Sandra (FG2), Maria (FG2), Heather (FG1), Carol (FG1), Sandrine (FG4), Karina (FG2)
	5.3	Kaitlyn, Natalya, Craig	Heath (FG3), John (FG2), Carol (FG1), Kelly (FG3), Nikhita (FG3), Sandrine (FG4), Chelsea (FG4) Rowena (FG3)

Appendix Q Table of GETs

Research Question	Group Experiential Theme	Sub-Themes	Example Quotes
1. <i>What influences parental decision-making regarding whether a child is academically redshirted?</i>	1. Parents were influenced by other parents as they navigated this important decision and its potential impact on their child's future.	1.1 Parents were influenced by the opinions and decisions of other parents.	<i>I would probably have held him back a year just because everyone would have told me to... that's probably the biggest influence. (Cindy, Mother)</i>
		1.2 Mothers often reached out to other parents online to help with the decision-making.	<i>I think I must have had 60 or something responses and they were all you know very much about no, don't send. Don't send. Don't send. Which... made me feel better at the time cause [sic] I thought okay, well if the general response is don't send then I don't have question. I'm just not going to send. (Kaitlyn, Mother)</i>
2. <i>What is the lived experience for parents of decision-making concerning academic redshirting of their children?</i>		1.3 Parents were concerned about the long-term impact of the decision for their child beyond school.	<i>It's about maturity and stamina and then also thinking about it, how it will be just ongoing. Like we feel like Adam, each year, is going to be struggling with maturity just because all the other ones are just a bit older than him. (Craig, Father)</i>

Research Questions	Group Experiential Theme	Sub-Themes	Example Quote
1. <i>What influences parental decision-making regarding whether a child is academically redshirted?</i>	2. Parents' experiences showed that the burden of decision-making often fell upon the mother.	2.1 The reported level of input from husbands in the decision-making varied.	<i>"Harriet and I have discussed it... we...both agree that it's nicer to let them be older when they start"</i> (Brett, Father). <i>He's in Dublin this week. He's away a lot ... That's his job. He does that kind of stuff and then I've given up my career in IT... He's interested to hear all about it but he's kind of like ... you know what you're doing.</i> (Sandra, Mother, FG2)
2. <i>What is the lived experience for parents of decision-making concerning academic redshirting of their children?</i>		2.2 Mothers' decision-making was often influenced by intensive mothering ideology.	<i>This whole concept of our generation making everything perfect for our children. Never have to struggle... Their shoes are tied up, and their lunches in their bags... Whereas when my generation... we didn't 'molly coddle' our children so much.</i> (Amelia, Mother, FG3)
		2.3 Mothers often shared intense feelings concerning the decision and its potential impact on their child.	<i>That's what I constantly beat myself up about... The bashing around the head of it. That's how I feel. I feel like, okay we sent him... I feel like we made a mistake... not for him really, he's doing okay. He's okay at school. But just, I feel like if I get beat around the head with it one more time, if I read one more Facebook post about, especially boys, like especially boys, hold boys back... you constantly feel like the biggest failure.</i> (Amelia, Mother, FG3)

Research Question	Group Experiential Theme	Sub-Themes	Example Quote
2. <i>What is the lived experience for parents of decision-making concerning academic redshirting of their children?</i>	3. There was ambiguity for a number of parents as they considered the best decision for their child.	3.1 Parents expressed a mixture of feelings regarding the choice to decide, with the majority viewing the choice positively.	<p><i>"I think that's a good thing because that just allows parents to assess their own child and it's just an individual thing... instead of just like being forced to do something, it can be on an individual basis"</i> (Sabina, Mother, FG4).</p> <p><i>...I just wish there was a cut-off date, and we had no choice and we just had to send him, whereas [the] preschool's attitude was like "isn't it wonderful that you have the choice? Isn't that lovely? Like lots of people would like to have the choice... they don't. You do. It's great". It's like... "Hmm. No, it's not. No, it's really not brilliant."</i> (Linda, Mother)</p>
		3.2 There were varying levels of uncertainty surrounding the right or wrong decision being made.	<p><i>I'm having doubts after Term One, whether that was a good decision or not... the feelings of failure that I'm starting to hear, her language has shifted... And so, I'm hearing language coming from her about "I can't do it", "I don't know how", "I don't understand that", "I don't want to do it because I don't know how to do it", as opposed to just keep giving it a try...</i> (Reshima, Mother, FG2)</p> <p><i>"About two to three weeks ago we were like yep, we made the right decision for her. She's happy. She's confident. She's never cried going to school. She's been able to manage you know, her routines and everything"</i> (Harshika, Mother, FG1).</p>
3. <i>Why are particular experiences for the academic redshirted year valued?</i>			

3.3 Parents often relied upon their own or others' schooling experiences which were often outdated to navigate the decision-making for their child.

I'm a June baby, so I went to school when I... was four and a half. I was one of the youngest of my friends. I had no issues socially, emotionally. I went to a selective high school. I had... no issues academically. So, for me... I think also my background did obviously influence my children... going so. (Sandrine, Mother, FG4)

"And you know my brother went when he was July baby and he ended up repeating when he was younger" (Sarah, Mother).

3.4 Some parents experienced feelings of ambiguity and disappointment post-decision making despite feeling confident at the time.

"I think I made the wrong decision... we just shouldn't have put her in" (Sandra, Mother, FG2).

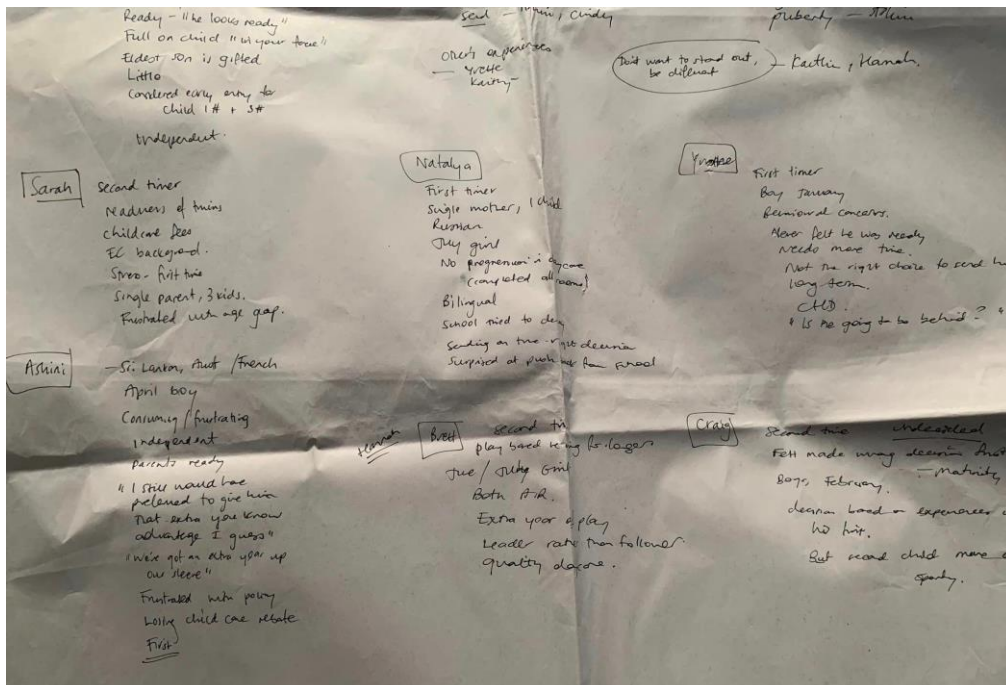
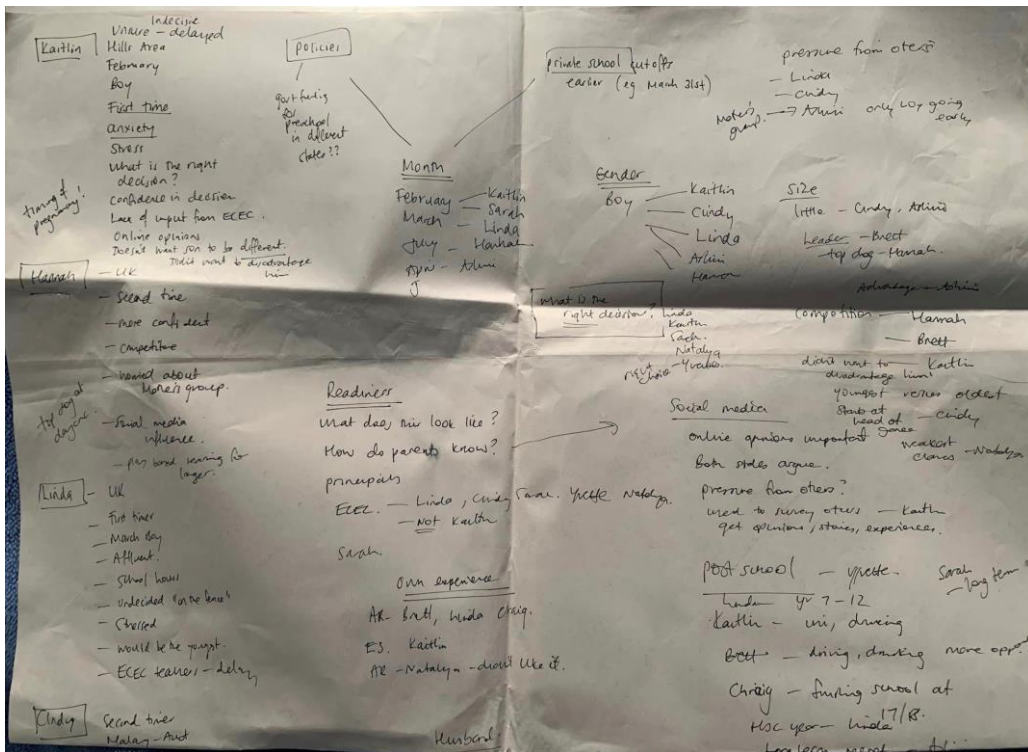
Appendix R Initial Reactions and Reflections

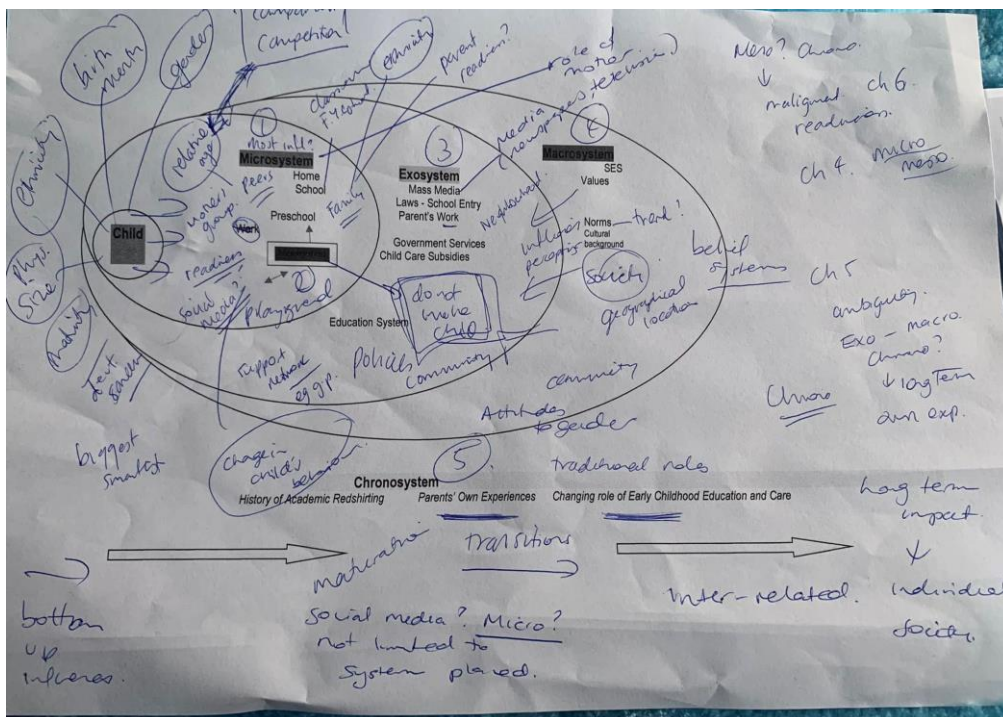
Examples of Reflections from the Interviews

	Reflection of Interviews
Linda	<p>Met at her mother's house in an affluent suburb on the Upper North Shore. Her kids were playing in the room. They interrupted the interview a few times which affected the flow of the interview at times. Linda was very chatty and had lots to share on her experience. I recorded 45 minutes of data. Informally chatted at the end for about 15 minutes.</p> <p>She mentioned being quite undecided, but appeared to favour a delayed school entry. The child in question is her eldest, a boy born in March. Linda still seems completely undecided about what she is doing next year. On one hand, she has re enrolled him at preschool, however, she flippantly mentioned that she could send him to big school on day one and a friend's child could show him around. Her son didn't attend any orientations for big school, which makes me believe she is leaning towards AR. Her intention is to send the child to a local private school (\$\$\$\$) and they have an earlier cut off in April.</p> <p>Linda really valued the advice of the preschool. They advised her not to send. However, the boy has friends who are Oct/Nov and therefore have to go. Her husband thinks they should send the boy. Convenience of child care hours (versus school holidays emerged). Very affluent area.</p> <p>Overall, I think this interview went well as Linda was quite detailed in her story-sharing.</p>

Cindy	<p>A large cafe, but a bit too noisy. On main road. Loud with noises from the kitchen and other patrons. We had privacy though, so it worked. I found this interview harder to transcribe as a result of the background noise.</p> <p>Cindy was generous with her storytelling. This was interesting an interesting interview as cultural differences emerged. Cindy is from Malaysia, her husband Philippines. They have extremely high expectations for their children regarding education. Three children. Her eldest child has been diagnosed as gifted. His schooling experience has been a battle due to poor behaviour which she attributed to boredom.</p> <p>The current child (boy) is displaying signs of giftedness. However, he is a June birthday and small for his age. His mother feels he is ready to go to big school. Feels society mandates that boys be held back. She doesn't want him to be bored if he delays entry and misbehaves as a result (like the eldest). Public schools. Can't afford private (but live in an affluent area). Even suggested applying for early entry for her youngest (girl) born 31st Dec. Cindy seemed very knowledgeable about school entry ages across Australia. Fascinated by what happens at the end (e.g., HSC year).</p> <p>Cindy made lots of comparisons between her second son and her eldest son. She seemed to be making her decision based on the younger brother being the same as the older one.</p>
	<p>She did mention that if the child in question was her first child, she would not send. However, because of the experience with the eldest (bored, gifted) she did not want to repeat mistakes. She did mention earlier that she had sought OT assessment for the child in question as she was concerned about his fine/gross motor development. Assessment was that he was above average. Perhaps her expectations were extremely high?</p> <p>Reflection: Both participants today mentioned that their husbands simply said to send the child to school on time. Perhaps this 'stressful' decision is really only felt by the mother? Could it be purely financial from the father's perspective? Traditional roles? Female, nurturer.</p> <p>I found conducting two interviews in one day exhausting. Note to self - spread them out. I am wary that in the next few weeks people will be busy with Christmas/holiday season.</p> <p>Glad I have some data ready for my NVivo workshop on Saturday.</p>

Examples of Mapping Interview Data





Sample Focus Group Reflection

Focus Group 1 CC 24th March 2018

Pseudonym	Gender	Suburb	Postcode	Family	Cultural	# Child	Decision	First time	Child Gender	Birth Month
Harriett	Female	Caves Beach	2281	Nuclear	UK	3	AR	Yes	Boy	May
Sam	Male	Kariong	2250	Nuclear	Australian	2	AR	Yes	Boy	April
Carol	Female	San Remo	2262	Nuclear	Australian	1	OT	Yes	Girl	May
Harshika	Female	Lisarow	2250	Nuclear	NZ/Indian	1	OT	Yes	Girl	May

Introductions

I briefed the group about who I was, what I was doing and spoke a little bit about phase one of my study. I then let the group briefly introduce themselves and state the gender and birth month of the child and whether they had commenced kindergarten this year or had delayed start.

Activity 1 Free Listing

Individually, members of the group had to think about all the reasons people decide to delay school entry. Heather wrote an extensive list. Samuel wrote down 3-4 ideas and then stopped. Harshika and Carol both had quite a good list of ideas.

Activity 2 Sharing

Each member of the group then shared their ideas with the group. I acted as the scribe to record the suggestions on butcher's paper. Heather volunteered to go first and listed about 12 different ideas. Members of the group were nodding in agreement as she shared her ideas. Samuel went after her and added a few new insights. Then Harshika added a few. By the time it got to Carol, most of the ideas were covered.

Activity 3 Ranking

We then looked at the extensive list and tried as a group to rank the five most important reasons. The group were very cooperative and shared their ideas before coming to a decision.

Activity 4 Story telling

Each member of the group was invited to share their individual story about deciding when to send their child to school. Each member of the group was very respectful during each story. I tape recorded these. Carol mentioned ‘held back.’ Later Samuel also mentioned ‘holding back.’ I discussed with the group that some people find this term offensive. Heather proceeded to say that she didn’t feel like she was holding her son Byron back. Rather she was enjoying the extra year she gets to spend with him. We also had a discussion about the term being sent ‘early.’ Both Carol and Harshika didn’t feel like they sent their daughters early. Rather, they felt they had sent them to school ‘on time.’ During this discussion Heather mentioned that she felt the government really needs to stipulate that children cannot attend school until the year they turn six. She also mentioned NZ (where Harshika actually comes from). K intercepted that this change would mean her daughter A would not commence school to the following year which she felt was too long. The group discussed child care costs. I also asked each participant if they knew what their ECEC centre’s rating was (ACECQA) and most had no idea.

Activity 5 Case Studies

I showed the group three case studies (short stories) to sum up Kaitlyn, Cindy and Brett’s experiences from Phase 1. Immediately Heather related to Kaitlyn’s story. H and K both thought that Cindy was placing too much pressure on her kids, and they could potentially rebel later during schooling. They thought Brett’s story was interesting as he said he thought his daughter was ready to go this year, but was not sending her so she would start next year bigger, more confident and mature. They thought this was the issue. They did question where this phenomenon came from. What was the incidence Australia wide? Were other states affected? Were particular parts of NSW affected more so than others. They did agree that AR seems common on the Central Coast. Especially for Boys. Carol thought it was ridiculous that gender should play into it and that it should be determined by the individual child. Thought the drinking part of Brett’s story was interesting. Harshika agreed, saying that she was too young to drink at her graduation (in NZ, 20). They agreed that this was a long time away and could be dealt with at a later stage.

Main ideas

Government to relay to schools to relay **to parents**, information about starting school.

Felt pressure from teachers not to start children young

Change the starting age to year they turn 6

Heather mentioned during the discussion that she was second guessing her decision to AR her son. It was interesting that Carol and Harshika both spent time trying to convince her to see if she could enrol her child in kindergarten now.

Terminology

Carol mentioned 'held back.' Later Samuel also mentioned 'holding back.' I discussed with the group that some people find this term offensive. Harriett proceeded to say that she didn't feel like she was holding her son B back. Rather she was enjoying the extra year she gets to spend with him. We also had a discussion about the term being sent 'early.' Both Carol and Harshika didn't feel like they sent their daughters early. Rather, they felt they had sent them to school 'on time.' During this discussion Harriett mentioned that she felt the government really needs to stipulate that children cannot attend school until the year they turn six. She also mentioned NZ (where Harshika actually comes from). Carol intercepted that this change would mean her daughter A would not commence school to the following year which she felt was too long. The group discussed child care costs.

Harriett mentioned during the discussion that she was second guessing her decision to AR her son. It was interesting that Carol and Harshika both spent time trying to convince her to see if she could enrol her child in kindergarten now.

ACECQA rating

I also asked each participant if they knew what their ECEC centre's rating was (ACECQA) and most had no idea. Carol spoke about moving her daughter up – from long day care to preschool – signifies a difference in quality?

Reflection

The timing was excellent. I think the participants really engaged and enjoyed the activities. The group were respectful of the varying opinions within the group and all members were able to input their ideas. Interestingly (and coincidentally) I had two parents who were AR their boys and two parents who were sending their girls OT. This time I tape recorded the storytelling section. Next time, I will tape record the entire session. Reflection - Teacher – my own ideas influenced some of the group's discussions. I need to be more mindful of that when conducting further groups.

When did parents decide?

Reflection on Transcription of the Discussion Carol

– no thought of holding her back....

Spoke about moving her up – from long day care to preschool – signifies a difference in quality?

Heather – preschool teacher says – not individual child.

Heather - Competition? Better than? Average? Could be ready

Pressure from other parents to delay entry? Felt she was doing a disservice to own son - Quote Heather 5.00.02

Harshika – 12.22 both parents involved in decision-making. Both her and husband were young for year. Thought daughter was ready. Talked about pressure from other parents. E.g., in mother's group. Cope versus thrive.

Samuel - hold back

Heather – emotional readiness, competition Quote Heather 25.98 BIG POND

Appendix S Examples of Reflections and Difficulties

Example Extracts from the Research Diary

1 st November	<p>Contacted admin on several online parenting group pages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - RC - North Shore Mums (26,000 members) - AH and KP - Suburban Collective (1300 members) EYLF group
9 th November	<p>Permission received to advertise on the huge parenting website (26000 members). Fingers crossed!</p> <p>Uploaded advertisement tonight. Success! T, H, A, R, Ashini, L, L, Linda, Cindy, A and R have all contacted me to express interest within the first hour of the post. I have emailed them the information letter and consent forms. Fingers crossed.</p> <p>Hannah works at a university so seems happy to help.</p> <p>Yvonne is available next Tuesday at midday to skype our interview. Excited!</p> <p>Feels like I am out fishing, and I am starting to get bites. Just having difficulty keeping the fish hooked on the bait.... People seem keen to participate but it is proving difficult to find time to actually participate. This time of year, is difficult!</p> <p>M contacted me but her daughter is only turning 4 in January, so doesn't meet the requirements for the first phase of my study. Am thinking V (supervisor), for the second phase (where I ultimately want say 60 people) am I better to widen the age range in order to find participants – e.g., people will be starting to think about this decision if they have little ones....</p>

	Just food for thought?
21 st November	<p>Interview - Yvonne Found this interview difficult and shorter than the others. Yvonne revealed she lives on the mid north coast (eventually mentioned Port - as in Port Macquarie). Yvonne was quite guarded with her responses, and it was difficult to try and draw out her responses further. She said she has a partner and one son. Didn't elaborate more on partner except to say both she and they are unemployed. She answered the first three questions in approximately 8 minutes. She did start to expand a bit by the middle and towards the end of the interview. It took her ages to disclose that her son was born with CHD. Yvonne believes the main influence on her decision making was her son's behaviour (which she thinks is a result of him being born premature? CHD?)</p> <p>Spent some time today trying to coordinate interview sessions with potential participants next week. Unfortunately, it looks like most will be undertaken by Skype. I actually prefer face to face.</p>
3rd January	<p>I have been busy this week transcribing the four interviews I have completed so far. I have managed to transcribe the first two and have just started the third. Background noise is quite noticeable in the third interview. Note to self - cafe is not the best place. However, I can still hear the conversation.</p> <p>Transcribing has enabled me to start noticing interesting themes emerging from the data. It has also enabled me to see some areas which I need to improve on with my interviewing technique. For example, I use the word excellent quite a lot when I am responding to a person's story. I also have interrupted people on occasions so need to be more mindful that it is THEIR story and that I should be a better listener.</p> <p>I am enjoying the transcribing as I am able to listen to each interview quite extensively so feel like I am getting closer to my data. I am also excited to get some data to put into NVIVO so I can start using some of its features to explore the data further.</p> <p>If I get all of these, I will have 11. I have five other people interested, but they can be invited to do phase 2 next year. Or if I feel like I haven't reached saturation, I may possibly try and squeeze in an interview and have say 15.</p>

	<p>Another ECEC centre contacted me granting permission to advertise. However, I feel the online advertisements on various Facebook groups have by far been more effective and timelier. It will be interesting to see if any participants contact me from the ECEC centres. Hannah is a director at one and I am keen to hear her story if we can find a mutual time (proving difficult).</p>
21st January	<p>Spent some time tonight re-reading and starting to allocate nodes for Ashini's interview. I found that I was creating some new nodes tonight including 'Mother's group' and 'Private school' because Ashini mentioned these throughout her discussion. Interestingly, her husband was completely opposed to the idea of AR. She gave in despite her son having some issues (delays). She did mention the new childcare subsidy changes coming into effect in July and said that her family would no longer receive a rebate. She mentioned \$10k to send to childcare. Yet both children are enrolled for elite private schools from 2025.</p>
11 th February	<p>Watching my son wake up excited to go to school each day has confirmed that I made the right decision to delay his school start. He has started the school year so confident and happy. Had I sent him last year, I believe it would have been a different story. The extra year of therapy and readiness preparation has worked, and he is enjoying his first year at school. For our family, this was the best decision. He doesn't look too big or tall compared to his peers. There are other children in the class who are turning six in the early part of the year. In fact, the young ones stand out as they are crying at drop off and still very clingy to parents.</p> <p>He has been selected to speak at the Liturgy about what he enjoys about his learning in kindergarten. He chose to speak about his enjoyment of learning about numbers and counting.</p>

5 th March	<p>Today I started to transcribe Focus Group 1. The audio was difficult to transcribe and some of the speakers were muffled. One speaker talked very fast, with a British accent which was difficult to transcribe. I needed to slow down the audio and revisit certain aspects of the audio many times in order to ensure the transcription is an accurate account.</p> <p>For the first focus group, I only recorded the actual ‘storytelling’ section of the session. Whereas, for the remaining focus groups, I decided to record the entire session. I think it was beneficial to record the entire session as it is difficult to remember everything that was shared in the first focus group.</p>
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1 st April	<p>Tonight, was the first night of coaching my son’s U6 soccer team. At the end of the session, the U7s turned up to train. I observed several kids my son’s age (January born boys) playing up a grade in the U7s – so that they can play with their school peers, rather than age group.</p>

20 th May	<p>I arrived with plenty of time as Sydney traffic is unpredictable, even on weekends. The room I had booked was in a shopping centre and it took a while to find a way into the centre as the shops weren't open.</p> <p>Luckily, the room I booked was located next to the security and Centre Management because the key I had received did not open the door to the room. I definitely had the correct room as it looked exactly like the images on the website. The room itself could have been tidier. There was rubbish on the sink.</p> <p>My participants arrived on time. One was late, but she just was in the room before the introductions were finished. One participant had to bring a small child. But she was well behaved and was happy to eat the food I had supplied.</p> <p>This group was interesting. I had two dominant voices in the group. I had to step in several times to ensure that all members felt like they had an opportunity to tell their story. Three were AR. Two were OT. One of the AR had changed her mind and delayed entry at the last minute. Another of the AR had previously sent a child to school OT and still regretted it.</p> <p>The Indian woman in this group chose to AR her child (after originally deciding to send her OT). She gave some insights into why Indian families typically send their children to school OT and why she went against the grain.</p> <p>I worked harder to keep the group to task and the focus group finished within the specified time.</p>
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Appendix T Focus Group Transcript with Codes

Example of Focus Group 3 coding with NVIVO.

Note: F1A refers to Amelia, M1 is Heath, F2K is Kelly, F4N is Nikhita

that because of this.

Amelia Well my daughter, the younger one who's... we held back. We have. I'm not joking when I say this. We have only held her back.

Nikhita Because of the experiences....

Amelia Because of my son.

Nikhita Yeah.

Amelia She is ten times, head and shoulders....

Kelly Ready. Yeah.

Amelia Ready, above my son, where my son was. She's bossy, assertive, she's the ringleader of all her friends. She's way (emphasis) too old I believe now to go into Kindergarten. She's with it. She's number three. So, she is so with it. But, where they're going, well do we want to do the same thing we did with him? So, we've held her back.

Kelly Yeah. And they don't know... Yeah

The screenshot shows a coding sidebar on the right with the following categories and sub-categories:

- ADVANTAGES
- ADVANTAGES
- MAKING THE DECISION
- MAKING THE DECISION
- SCHOOL READINESS
- SCHOOL READINESS

Heath Because he is that, it's you know, even six months makes a huge difference in like the games they play. But academically, he's kind of in the m... average, you know. It's like.

Amelia Yeah.

Heath He's keeping pace mentally. But it was just the amount of pressure school were putting on.

Amelia Yeah.

Heath And the fact that it had almost gone from like, oh don't worry what the Department for Education says about the start date.

Amelia Yes

The screenshot shows a coding sidebar on the right with the following categories and sub-categories:

- F4N
- Kirsten (3)
- M1
- SCHOOL SYSTEM IN AUSTRALIA
- SCHOOL SYSTEM IN AUSTRALIA
- F2K
- F1A

Appendix U Initial Codes

Kirsten's NVivo Project - Initial Codes

The focus group data was initially coded using the codes generated for the interview data set. When I met with Dr Jarek Kriukow, he indicated a need to recode the Focus Group data from scratch, which I did.

Name
Academically Redshirted Year
Extra year of play
Holding back
Changes
Characteristics of the child
Age
Boy
Disability
Maturity
Month
Personality
Physical size
Sibling
Sleeping troubles
Choice
Comparing to other children
Competition
Academic advantage
Leader or Follower
Cultural differences
Early Entry
Developmental Concern
Different

Difficult to repeat

Name

ECEC

Cost of childcare

Child care rebate changes

Emotional development

Ethnicity and culture

Extra year

Family

Sibling

Gap year at end of school

Geographical location

Holding back

International Trends

Interstate move

Long term impact

Making everything perfect

Moved to a new area

Nature of school

Location

Play based learning

Private school

School hours

School Principal

Security of school

Size of the school

Other family's decision

Other's opinions

Husband

Mother's group

Online groups
Other's experience
Overseas
Name
Own experience
Parent Ready
Studies
Unaware
Parental Pressure
Readiness
Skills
Relative age
Repeating
Right decision
Decision
First child
Negative Feelings
Same decision again
School
Sent early
Socioeconomic reasons
Sport
Timing of pregnancy
Trend to hold back

Appendix V Refined Codes

Kirsten NVivo Project – FG - Thematic Framework Final

Whilst recoding the Focus Group data was a time-consuming process, I feel like I really got to know the data on the second review. The following table presents the thematic framework for the Focus Group codes. These were compared to the Interview PETs prior to the creation of the GETs for this study.

Name
ADVANTAGES
Advantage of being older
Extend the childhood
Leadership
No real advantage as they get older
right age
Settled in well
Spent time with parent before day care
Sport
Stronger
Successful
Wanting to play with older kids
CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIVIDUAL CHILD
Age
Behaviour
Birth month
Boys
Breakdown
Can't do things
Child unsettled
Child wants to go
Children that are younger have to fight harder
Confidence

Name
Disability
Gender
Physical
COMPARED TO PEERS
Comparison
Competitive
Friends of children, number two.
Physically smaller
What other children at day care are doing
Where they fit in with peer group
COPING VERSUS THRIVING
Cope
DISADVANTAGES
Academically not ready
Disadvantaged
Fallout
Not ready
Stigma
Unfair
you don't know
You ignore what's good for the child.
Young
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE
ECEC ACEQA ratings
ECEC and school relationship
ECEC program
Graduation
Moved to new day care change
Transition to school sessions

Type of ECEC
FAMILY SITUATION
Name
Child Care Subsidy
Family structure
Financially - cost of day care
He wants to go
Husband
lifestyle
second child
Sibling - wanted to go to school
Work situation
INFLUENCE OF OTHERS
Advice from others
Advice of teacher friends
Ante natal group
Day care recommend delaying
Did we let others influence the decision
different
ECEC recommendation ready
Holding back
Judged
Mother's group
Norm
Online forums
Terminology
Trend
MAKING THE DECISION
Big decision
Caught up

Changing schools (to repeat)
Confident child was ready early
Easy decision

Name
Game the system.
Gap year
Gut
I'm not sure what I should do
Laid back approach
Long term impact
Mistake
No choice
Own experience
Parent can't let go
Parent feelings
Parent knows child
Past parent's experiences
Personality
Pressure from other parents
Pressure on mothers to make decision
Previous experience
Questioning decision
Read an article
Regret sending early
So that's their mindset and this feels so strongly and passionately because of their own conditioning.
Whether it was the right decision or wrong
MALALIGNMENT ACROSS STAKEHOLDERS
Academics priority

Alignment across stakeholders
Challenge
SCHOOL READINESS
Enrolment in ECEC
Individual
Lack of interest in academics

Name
Maturity
Readiness
Resilient
Self-care skills
Sensitive
Skills
Social-emotional
Stand up for herself
SCHOOL SYSTEM IN AUSTRALIA
Age cut-off
Choice
Education system structure
Kindergarten curriculum focused
Move to NZ
Moved to NSW
Other states
Play based learning
Private schools
Push back from school to delay
Repeat
School
School support
Selective schools

System encourages AR
WHAT IS HAPPENING OVERSEAS
Delay overseas
Mid-year intakes
Overseas
redshirting
UK starts younger.
WHERE YOU LIVE
Name
Cultural
Geographical location
New area
PARTICULAR SCHOOL
Extracurricular activities
Familiarity with the school.
Teacher

Appendix W Ranking Activity – Focus Group

Top Five Reasons for Academic Redshirting

The ranking activity required each focus group to come to a consensus regarding the top five reasons why parents academically redshirt children. The results for each group have been compared and contrasted. Colour coding has been used to show similarities and the anomalies have not been highlighted.

FG1 CC	FG2 NS	FG3 IW	FG4 OL
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Emotional 2. Basic skills – sitting, listening 3. Pressure expectations (teachers, parents, day care) 4. Family situation (e.g., moving) / Cost of childcare 5. Age of other children / social (sport) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Social – emotional development; readiness of the child 2. Individual child, personality (sensitive) 3. Socioeconomic Status (SES) 4. Disability 5. Family Situation / Siblings 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Socio-emotional readiness 2. Parental pressure / trend to delay entry 3. Family situation / personal experience 4. School – specific school or principal 5. Socioeconomic Status (SES), cost of childcare 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Quality of ECEC – parents have no idea. 2. Social and emotional development. 3. Own experience. 4. Developmental delay. 5. Individual child.

Appendix X Examples of Memos

Name	Codes	Referenc
Cindy's transcript - thoughts	1	1
Getting Started 18.12.2017	0	0
Ideas	0	0
Initial thoughts and interesting	0	0
Initial Thoughts on F2	0	0
Initial thoughts on Yvonne's sto	0	0
Methodology	0	0

What biases do you bring to the project?

I am a parent who has had to make this decision recently. I have decided to delay school entry for my autistic son. I actually feel that my hand was forced as people with Feb/March born children are delaying entry which means my son would be 10-11 months younger. In addition to his developmental delay (approx 12 months behind peers already).

Name	Codes	Referenc
Cindy's transcript - thoughts	1	1
Getting Started 18.12.2017	0	0
Ideas	0	0
Initial thoughts and interesting	0	0
Initial Thoughts on F2	0	0
Initial thoughts on Yvonne's sto	0	0
Methodology	0	0

Culture seems to be a key influence. Yet in Russia, children don't commence school until 7. Single mother? Cost of childcare???

Conflicting opinions between ECEC and the school. The ECEC support that the child is ready. The school principal and teachers are heavily advising against.

It all comes back to the quality of the ECEC care. Such varying experiences in terms of assistance with decision-making.

Name	Codes	Referenc
Cindy's transcript - thoughts	1	1
Getting Started 18.12.2017	0	0
Ideas	0	0
Initial thoughts and interesting	0	0
Initial Thoughts on F2	0	0
Initial thoughts on Yvonne's sto	0	0
Methodology	0	0

Culture seems to play a significant part in the DM process. I can almost guess the choice of a parent based on their cultural background.

Parents from the UK tend to send their children 'on time' as in the UK the starting age is four. Parents from Asian backgrounds tend to start 'on time'.

Two kids who both go to language school - both started school 'early'

Changes in July 2018 to government subsidies for child care - will this impact on starting age?

Name	Codes	Referenc
Cindy's transcript - thoughts	1	1
Getting Started 18.12.2017	0	0
Ideas	0	0
Initial thoughts and interesting	0	0
Initial Thoughts on F2	0	0
Initial thoughts on Yvonne's sto	0	0
Methodology	0	0

Undecided. Has enrolled son in Catholic school. But at the end of year was not sending him. Then in the last six weeks is confused.

Gender and month seem really important in this story.

Says her son is socially clever... but not ready academically.

She asked on a large online parenting page whether or not to send her Feb son and almost all 60 responses were not to send. Location? North Shore. Affluent. Would this have been the same if the members were located elsewhere in NSW?

I understand what Kaitlyn is saying about the ECEC centre and graduations. These days the centres go all out with caps and gowns and certificates. I saw the impact of this on my own son who is not starting school until 2019. It's tough on four and five year olds.

Name	Codes	Referenc
Cindy's transcript - thoughts	1	1
Getting Started 18.12.2017	0	0
Ideas	0	0
Initial thoughts and interesting	0	0
Initial Thoughts on F2	0	0
Initial thoughts on Yvonne's sto	0	0
Methodology	0	0
Notes on Ashini	0	0
Organisation of ECEC	0	0
Previous Children	0	0
Reflections on Brett's story	0	0
Thoughts on Hannah's story	0	0

Hannah

Seemed to want to refer to her first child's story - considered it a harder decision. Some other parents were similar. Seem to assume that because they have decided to favour a particular time (starting school) that all children in the family will follow suit.

From the UK. Definitely found adapting to Australian schooling system difficult, as in the UK children start at 4. Felt like her son was being left behind.

First parent to actually mention competition, though others have alluded to it in their response.

Because Hannah is a PhD student, I found she started to analyse her own responses throughout the interview. It was by far the longest.

A bit hazy on her ability to recall whether she had visited / enrolled her eldest son in schools in the UK > I think.

Appendix Y Participant Information Letter – Interviews



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER

PROJECT TITLE: Parents' Decision-Making Concerning School Entry for their Child

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Kirsten MacKinnon (Doctoral Research student) under the supervision of Dr Valerie Margrain & Dr Sarah Heinrich

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in the research project described below.

What is the project about?

This project will investigate parents' decision-making concerning school entry options for their child. For example, you could be favouring sending your child to school as soon as the option is available, or you could be favouring waiting a year, or you could be completely undecided. You will have the opportunity to discuss how you determine when the right time for your child to start school is and any influences on decision-making.

Who is undertaking the project?

This project is being conducted by Kirsten MacKinnon (Doctoral Research student) under the supervision of Dr Valerie Margrain and Dr Sarah Heinrich. Kirsten currently works in a primary school as a Physical Education specialist teacher. She has recently completed two Master's degrees, receiving two academic awards in the process.

Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?

This project is deemed *low risk*. There is a small possibility participation in the study could cause emotional harm, such as inducing feelings of anxiety in participants. If you feel distressed in any way, they are advised to contact the Lifeline crisis support number on 13 11 14. This service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Alternatively, support can also be accessed online through the *Crisis Chat Service*, currently available between 7pm - 4am (AEDST), 7 days per week at <https://www.lifeline.org.au/Get-Help/Online-Services/crisis-chat>.

What will I be asked to do?

Kirsten is seeking between 8-15 participants to individually attend one interview. This will involve you answering some questions about decision-making involved concerning school

entry options for your child. Each interview will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

There is also an opportunity to volunteer to undertake a follow-up interview (30 minutes) after your child has completed one school term. This, however, is not mandatory.

How much time will the project take?

Each participant will be invited to attend one interview, approximately **60 minutes** in duration. This interview will occur between September - December of 2017. Interviews can be undertaken at times that suit you and will be held at a local venue for your convenience.

What are the benefits of the research project?

1. Provides participants with the opportunity to discuss their thoughts and feelings involved in the experience of deciding when to send their child to school.
2. Provides an opportunity for reflection, which will help participants clarify their understanding of the experience.
3. This study will benefit the wider community because it may help others to understand the dilemma and conflicts *some* parents face when deciding school entry options for their child.

Can I withdraw from the study?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are not under any obligation to participate. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time until the final interview has been transcribed, without adverse consequences. Any data received before this time will be destroyed and not used in the study. There will be a two-week window period to allow participant reflection and opportunity to withdraw from the study.

Will anyone else know the results of the project?

Electronic data will be kept on secure, password protected servers, only accessible to the researchers. Hard copy information and audio files will be quickly converted to electronic format, including consent forms, then the originals shredded using university secure document disposal services. Prior to electronic conversion any hard copy information will be kept in a locked cupboard, in an area not freely accessible to the public. Only Kirsten and her supervision team will have access to the data.

Kirsten will undertake to promptly replace the names of participants with pseudonyms (false names) on electronic transcripts of interviews, and to remove identifying information about people, schools and early childhood centres. Data will be labelled with a code (such as 00A; 00B etc.) that will not identify the name of the participant. This ensures that you will not be identifiable to anyone other than the researchers.

Kirsten plans to publish the research in peer reviewed journals of relevance. She will share the general (anonymised) summary of findings with ACU colleagues. Kirsten wishes to seek your permission to use data collected in this study for potential future studies.

Will I be able to find out the results of the project?

Kirsten is happy to forward a link to future published articles.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?

If you have any questions about this research, please contact **Kirsten** by email kirsten.mackinnon@myacu.edu.au. If you have a question about ethics or supervision, please contact Dr Valerie Margrain at valerie.margrain@acu.edu.au

If you wish to discuss the research in person, please email Kirsten to arrange a time.

What if I have a complaint or any concerns?

The study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University (**review number 2017-183H**). If you have any complaints or concerns about the conduct of the project, you may write to the Manager of the Human Research Ethics Committee care of the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research).

Manager, Ethics
c/o Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)
Australian Catholic University
North Sydney Campus
PO Box 968
NORTH SYDNEY, NSW 2059
Ph.: 02 9739 2519
Fax: 02 9739 2870
Email: resethics.manager@acu.edu.au

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

I want to participate! How do I sign up?

1. You are invited to self-nominate to participate in the study by sending an email to Kirsten simply stating your willingness to participate.
2. In order to ensure you meet the criteria for the study, please email Kirsten your postcode, child's month of birth and anticipated commencement of school year (2018 or 2019 or unsure).
3. Kirsten will then email you a letter inviting you to participate and consent forms which you will be asked to sign and return.
4. To avoid any researcher bias in the selection of participants, Kirsten will accept applications that are returned signed and completed in the order that they arrive to achieve a relatively even distribution of perspectives.

If your application for the study is unsuccessful, you will receive an email to inform you. You will also be invited to participate in the focus group component of the study (to be conducted in 2018).

Yours sincerely,

Kirsten MacKinnon

Dr Valerie Margrain

Dr Sarah Heinrich

DATE 19th September 2017

Appendix Z Participant Information Letter – Focus Groups



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER

PROJECT TITLE: Parents' Decision-Making Concerning School Entry for their Child

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Kirsten MacKinnon (Doctoral Research student) under the supervision of Dr Valerie Margrain & Dr Sarah Heinrich

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in the research project described below.

What is the project about?

This project will investigate parents' decision-making concerning school entry options for their child. For example, you could be favouring sending your child to school as soon as the option is available, or you could be favouring waiting a year, or you could be completely undecided. You will have the opportunity to discuss how you determine when the right time for your child to start school is and any influences on decision-making.

Who is undertaking the project?

This project is being conducted by Kirsten MacKinnon (Doctoral Research student) under the supervision of Dr Valerie Margrain and Dr Sarah Heinrich. Kirsten currently works in a primary school in Sydney as a Physical Education specialist teacher. She has recently completed two Masters degrees, receiving two academic awards in the process.

Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?

This project is deemed *low* risk. There is a small possibility participation in the study could cause emotional harm, such as inducing feelings of anxiety in participants. If you feel distressed in any way, they are advised to contact the Lifeline crisis support number on 13 11 14. This service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Alternatively, support can also be accessed online through the *Crisis Chat Service*, currently available between 7pm - 4am (AEDST), 7 days per week at <https://www.lifeline.org.au/Get-Help/Online-Services/crisis-chat>.

What will I be asked to do?

Kirsten is seeking participants to attend one focus group, which will comprise of a group interview with 6-8 participants in a group. This will be held at a local venue or online for your convenience. Participation in the focus group will involve you answering some questions about

decision-making involved concerning school entry options for your child. There will be an opportunity for storytelling if desired. Each focus group will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

How much time will the project take?

Each focus group will run for approximately **90 minutes**. Refreshments will be provided as a token of thanks for your time.

What are the benefits of the research project?

1. Provides participants with the opportunity to discuss their thoughts and feelings involved in the experience of deciding when to send their child to school.
2. Provides an opportunity for reflection, which will help participants clarify their understanding of the experience.
3. This study will benefit the wider community because it may help others to understand the dilemma and conflicts *some* parents face when deciding school entry options for their child.

Can I withdraw from the study?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are not under any obligation to participate. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time until the final focus group has been transcribed, without adverse consequences. Any data received before this time will be destroyed and not used in the study. There will be a two-week window period to allow participant reflection and opportunity to withdraw from the study.

Will anyone else know the results of the project?

Electronic data will be kept on secure, password protected servers, only accessible to the researchers. Hard copy information and audio files will be quickly converted to electronic format, including consent forms, then the originals shredded using university secure document disposal services. Prior to electronic conversion any hard copy information will be kept in a locked cupboard, in an area not freely accessible to the public. Only Kirsten and her supervision team will have access to the data.

Kirsten will undertake to promptly replace the names of participants with pseudonyms (false names) on electronic transcripts of interviews, and to remove identifying information about people, schools and early childhood centres. Data will be labelled with a code (such as 00A; 00B etc.) that will not identify the name of the participant. This ensures that you will not be identifiable to anyone other than Kirsten and the supervision team.

Kirsten plans to publish the research in peer reviewed journals of relevance. She will share the general (anonymised) summary of findings with ACU colleagues.

Will I be able to find out the results of the project?

Kirsten is happy to forward a link to future published articles.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?

If you have any questions about this research, please contact **Kirsten** by email:

kirsten.mackinnon@myacu.edu.au. If you have a question about ethics or supervision, please contact Dr Valerie Margrain at valerie.margrain@acu.edu.au.

If you wish to discuss the research in person, please email Kirsten to arrange a time.

What if I have a complaint or any concerns?

The study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University (**review number 2017-183H**). If you have any complaints or concerns about the conduct of the project, you may write to the Manager of the Human Research Ethics Committee care of the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research).

Manager, Ethics
 c/o Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)
 Australian Catholic University
 North Sydney Campus
 PO Box 968
 NORTH SYDNEY, NSW 2059
 Ph.: 02 9739 2519
 Fax: 02 9739 2870
 Email: resethics.manager@acu.edu.au

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

I want to participate! How do I sign up?

1. You are invited to self-nominate to participate in the study by sending an email to us simply stating your willingness to participate.
2. In order to ensure you meet the criteria for the study, please include your postcode, child's month of birth and anticipated commencement of school year (2018 or 2019).
3. Kirsten will then email you a letter inviting you to participate and consent forms which you will be asked to sign and return.
4. To avoid any researcher bias in the selection of participants, Kirsten will accept applications that are returned signed and completed in the order that they arrive to achieve an even distribution of perspectives.

If your application for the study is unsuccessful, you receive an email to inform you.

Yours sincerely,

Kirsten MacKinnon

Dr Valerie Margrain

Dr Sarah Heinrich

Date 19th September 2017

Appendix AA Participant Recruitment

Dear

I am currently a Doctor of Education student at the Australian Catholic University. I am seeking participants for my research which is focused on exploring parents' decision-making concerning when to send their children to school. Could I please seek permission to advertise on your site / at your early childhood service for potential participants for my research project? There will be two groups of participants for this study. Permission is sought to advertise for participants at two different stages during the research project. I have included both advertisements below. Thank you in anticipation.

Kind regards, Kirsten
MacKinnon
kirsten.mackinnon@myacu.edu.au

For 2017

ADMIN APPROVED ADVERTISEMENT FOR INTERVIEW

Are you grappling with the decision about whether to send your child to school next year? I am currently a Doctor of Education student at the Australian Catholic University. I am seeking participants for my research which is focused on **exploring parents' decision-making concerning when to send their children to school**. I am seeking between 8-15 parents who would be willing to participate in one 60-minute interview (either face to face or online) and who meet the following criteria:

- Live in NSW (any location)
- Have a child born in the months between January and July;
- Are in the process of deciding whether to send their child to school next year. For example, you could be favouring sending your child to school at the earliest possible time, or you could be favouring waiting a year, or you may be completely undecided.

If you would like to be part of this study or have any questions, please contact me by email to receive more information: kirsten.mackinnon@myacu.edu.au under the supervision of Dr [Valerie Margrain valerie.margrain@acu.edu.au](mailto:valerie.margrain@acu.edu.au)

For 2018

ADMIN APPROVED ADVERTISEMENT FOR FOCUS GROUP

I am currently a Doctor of Education student at the Australian Catholic University. I am seeking participants for my research which is focused on **exploring parents' decision-making concerning when to send their children to school**. In 2017, I interviewed a number of parents to explore their experiences in deciding when to send their child to school. I am now seeking a new group of parents or carers who would be willing to participate in a focus group (group interview with 6-8 people - based on geographical location) to discuss issues concerning decision-making around school entry. To be an eligible to participate, you need to meet the following criteria:

- Live in NSW (any location)
- Have a child born in the months between January and July;
- Are in the process of deciding whether to send their child to school next year. For example, you could be favouring sending your child to school at the earliest possible time, or you could be favouring waiting a year, or you may be completely undecided).

If you would like to be part of this study or have any questions, please contact me by email to receive more information: kirsten.mackinnon@myacu.edu.au under the supervision of Dr Valerie Margrain at valerie.margrain@acu.edu.au

Appendix BB Consent Form for Interviews



 CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEWS
Copy for Participants

TITLE OF PROJECT: Parents' Decision-Making Concerning School Entry for their Child

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Kirsten MacKinnon (Doctoral Research student) under the supervision of Dr Valerie Margrain & Dr Sarah Heinrich

I (*the participant*) have read and understood the information provided in the Letter to Participants. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in (*please tick*)

- One interview which will be audio recorded:
- This interview will occur in September – December 2017 and will take approximately 60 minutes

Pre-screening questions

1. Please indicate your postcode:
2. Please provide your child's month of birth
3. Please indicate (circle your response) the anticipated year your child will commence school:
2018 2019 Unsure

Optional Follow-up Interview

- A follow-up interview which will be audio recorded, which will occur after your child has commenced school
- This interview will occur at the end of your child's first term at school (May 2018 or May 2019) and will take approximately 30 minutes

I realise that participation in this study is completely voluntary and that I am not under any obligation to participate. I understand that I can withdraw my consent at any time without

decision-making involved concerning school entry options for your child. There will be an opportunity for storytelling if desired. Each focus group will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

How much time will the project take?

Each focus group will run for approximately **90 minutes**. Refreshments will be provided as a token of thanks for your time.

What are the benefits of the research project?

1. Provides participants with the opportunity to discuss their thoughts and feelings involved in the experience of deciding when to send their child to school.
2. Provides an opportunity for reflection, which will help participants clarify their understanding of the experience.
3. This study will benefit the wider community because it may help others to understand the dilemma and conflicts *some* parents face when deciding school entry options for their child.

Can I withdraw from the study?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are not under any obligation to participate. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time until the final focus group has been transcribed, without adverse consequences. Any data received before this time will be destroyed and not used in the study. There will be a two-week window period to allow participant reflection and opportunity to withdraw from the study.

Will anyone else know the results of the project?

Electronic data will be kept on secure, password protected servers, only accessible to the researchers. Hard copy information and audio files will be quickly converted to electronic format, including consent forms, then the originals shredded using university secure document disposal services. Prior to electronic conversion any hard copy information will be kept in a locked cupboard, in an area not freely accessible to the public. Only Kirsten and her supervision team will have access to the data.

Kirsten will undertake to promptly replace the names of participants with pseudonyms (false names) on electronic transcripts of interviews, and to remove identifying information about people, schools and early childhood centres. Data will be labelled with a code (such as 00A; 00B etc.) that will not identify the name of the participant. This ensures that you will not be identifiable to anyone other than Kirsten and the supervision team.

Kirsten plans to publish the research in peer reviewed journals of relevance. She will share the general (anonymised) summary of findings with ACU colleagues.

Will I be able to find out the results of the project?

Kirsten is happy to forward a link to future published articles.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?

If you have any questions about this research, please contact **Kirsten** by email: kirsten.mackinnon@myacu.edu.au. If you have a question about ethics or supervision, please contact Dr Valerie Margrain at valerie.margrain@acu.edu.au.

If you wish to discuss the research in person, please email Kirsten to arrange a time.

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3. Kirsten will then email you a letter inviting you to participate and consent forms which you will be asked to sign and return.
4. To avoid any researcher bias in the selection of participants, Kirsten will accept applications that are returned signed and completed in the order that they arrive to achieve an even distribution of perspectives.

If your application for the study is unsuccessful, you receive an email to inform you.

Yours sincerely,

Kirsten MacKinnon

Dr Valerie Margrain

Dr Sarah Heinrich

Date 19th September 2017

Appendix CC Consent Form for Focus Groups



CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUP

Copy for Participant

TITLE OF PROJECT: Parents' Decision-Making Concerning School Entry for their Child

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Kirsten MacKinnon (Doctoral Research student) under the supervision of Dr Valerie Margrain & Dr Sarah Heinrich

I (*the participant*) have read and understood the information provided in the Letter to Participants. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in (*please tick*)

- One focus group, which will be audio recorded:
- The focus group will occur between March – June 2018 and will take approximately 90 minutes

Pre-screening questions

1. Please indicate your postcode:
2. Please provide your child's month of birth
3. Please indicate (circle your response) the anticipated year your child will commence school: 2018 2019 Unsure

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are not under any obligation to participate. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time until the final focus group has been transcribed, without adverse consequences. I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way. I agree that a general (anonymised) summary of findings may be shared with research participants and with ACU staff.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

SIGNATURE

DATE

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATORS:

Kirsten MacKinnon

Dr Valerie Margrain

Dr Sarah Heinrich

DATE: 19th September 2017