School Readiness: Characteristics, Viewpoints, and Guidelines for Developing an Effective Kindergarten Program

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School Readiness: Characteristics, Viewpoints, and Guidelines for Developing an Effective Kindergarten Program

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

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Abstract

This study examined the recent literature on the subject of school readiness. Positive viewpoints, as well as negative viewpoints, associated with school readiness were discussed. Guidelines were presented for developing an effective kindergarten program with regard to school readiness. Also, conclusions were drawn from the current literature and recommendations were made for future kindergarten programs.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Background

School readiness has received recent and widespread attention from national media, professionals, and parents. State and local efforts for educational reform and improved accountability have prompted considerable concern regarding children's readiness to enter kindergarten. The issue of readiness gained national prominence when the first national goal for education stated that by the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn (National Education Goals Panel, 2000).

In the 19th century, children were to be seen and not heard. By contrast, today's young children are the center of a national concern. Political campaigns and issues focus around children and the demand for a better educational system, while the media and newspapers remind us daily about school-related atrocities, the increase in poverty, unemployment, infant mortalities, and the prevalence of violence in our fast-paced, technological society.

In an attempt to address these societal needs and the needs of today's children, there is a need to define readiness—past, present, and future. School readiness is regarded by some as well-defined and clearly articulated, while other educators identify it as an extremely complex and vague construct. "Readiness past is not readiness present, and readiness future is likely to be something else entirely" (Kagan, 1992, p. 48).

Before addressing the issue of kindergarten readiness, it is imperative that we look back to when the first kindergarten was established. Historically, the kindergarten was established in 1837. It was a German institution that focused on the education of
young children. This was in contrast to other school programs which educated younger
and older students together. Kindergartens, or programs for young children, came to the
United States in 1856 under the guidance of Margarethe Meyer Schurz, a German
immigrant (Decker & Decker, 2001). In the United States, kindergartens started as
schools for change to help enrich the lives of young children from disadvantaged
backgrounds, with education seen as an important tool for social reform (Seefeldt &
Barbour, 1998). According to Bredekamp and Copple (1997), the original intent of
kindergarten was to “support children’s social and emotional adjustment to group
learning” (p. 142).

Frederick Froebel, the Father of Kindergarten, was an advocate for the education
of teachers and the importance of teaching children. In the late 1800s, two major
influences affected the fate of the kindergarten, the child study movement of G. Stanley
Hall and the progressive education movement of John Dewey. Even though the first
public school kindergartens were Froebelian, the trickle-down phenomenon from
elementary education began with the expansion of kindergartens (Decker & Decker,
2001).

In the 19th century, Johann Pestalozzi was known for setting up a school for
juvenile delinquents. Even though he did not define the term readiness, Pestalozzi had
further stated that even though the concept of readiness was understood in the nineteenth
century, the readiness term did not appear in actual print until the 1920s. The idea of
readiness was not seriously recognized until the late 1920s. At that time, a reading
readiness committee was formed by the International Kindergarten Union promoting a
better understanding of the readiness construct (Kagan, 1990). Eventually, the progressives gained control of the kindergarten initiative and replaced the Froebelian curriculum. As early as the 1930s, concerns about the kindergarten curriculum were voiced. “Kindergartens vary in the amount of emphasis on academic skills, but academic programs have increased since the 1960s” (Decker & Decker, 2001, p. 9).

Classically, kindergarten was portrayed as a place where children discovered their world through play and exploration (West, Denton, & Reaney, 1999). Over the last century, this idea was clarified to stress the importance of opportunity for active engagement and exploration in real-world settings (Dewey, 1980). Kindergarten expanded to include support for children’s cognitive development and preparation for the academic instruction to come. “School readiness, as historically understood, implies rather fixed standards of physical, intellectual, and social development sufficient to enable children to meet school requirements and to assimilate the curriculum content” (Crnic & Lamberty, 1994, p. 92). From these statements, it would appear that the role of kindergarten was evolving toward a more cognitive purpose.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the current literature concerning benefits of and problems associated with school readiness and to develop guidelines for an effective kindergarten program. To accomplish this purpose, the following questions will be addressed:

1. What are the characteristics of school readiness?
2. What are the positive viewpoints associated with school readiness?
3. What are the negative viewpoints associated with school readiness?
4. What guidelines concerning school readiness should be used in developing an effective kindergarten program?

Need for the Study

The issue of accountability continues to top the nation's education agenda, demanding greater information on student performance (Jacobson, 2000), and creating increased pressure on the downward push of the curriculum content. Another current and controversial issue is that of delaying school entry for a year beyond a child's normal chronological age for kindergarten. "Although this practice has been said to reduce the need for grade retentions and special services, the research literature has yielded contradictory results about the effects of delayed entry on students" (May, Kundert, & Brent, 1995, p. 1). Crosser (1991) stated that "there is a need to focus on a stronger knowledge base on which to build entrance-age recommendations" (p. 145), which would lead to a clearer understanding of school readiness for parents and educators.

"The growing diversity of our nation's population and the forces that are affecting both family life and schools has challenged the belief that children are the only ones who need to be readied. Rather, it is becoming clear that parents, educators, and communities must all be prepared for young children's transition to school" (Ramey & Ramey, 1994, p. 195). The National Education Goals Panel believes that it is vitally important that children start school ready to learn. Yet, "ensuring that schools are ready for children is important as well" (Shore, 1998, p. 40), if not more important. As the nation increasingly focuses on making young children ready for school, attention must be given to making schools ready for children (Kagan, 1994). There needs to be a shift in how readiness is perceived, a shift from expecting the child to be ready for school to expecting the school
to be ready for the child. In the National Association for the Education of Young
Children (NAEYC) Position Statement on School Readiness (1990), the NAEYC verified
the need to develop guidelines for an effective kindergarten program, in which the school
is ready for the child.

Limitations

This research study is limited in numerous ways. The construct of school
readiness has evolved over time, yet the definition still remains complex and vague. For
example, Parks (1996) defined readiness as “a multifaceted and subjective construct
which has multifaceted and subjective meanings” (p. 2). In contrast, Graue (1993)
defined it as “… some combination of cognitive, psychomotor, and socio-emotional
development that should be presented in a balance that is congruent with the child’s
chronological age” (p. 4). For the purpose of this paper, school readiness was defined as
“… a multidimensional concept that considers behavioral and cognitive aspects of the
child’s development as well as the child’s adaptation to the classroom” (Parker, Boak,
Griffin, Ripple, & Peay, 1999, p. 413). Another limitation was the inadequate
availability of the most recent studies, limiting the review of literature in this paper.
Although many of the studies were invaluable for understanding the characteristics and
viewpoints concerning school readiness, most of the studies tended to overlook the need
for developing and implementing guidelines for effective kindergarten programs.

Definitions

In the literature reviewed in this study, researchers used the term school readiness
synonymously with readiness and kindergarten readiness. In this paper, school readiness
will include all of these terms. For the purposes of clarity and understanding, the following terms will be defined:

**Entrance Age** – “Becoming five years of age by a set date, regardless of their degree of maturation” (Parks, 1996, p. 3). “Most states have age of entry guidelines that require children to have turned five sometime between August 31 and January 1” (West, Denton, & Reaney, 1999, p. 9).

**Holding Out** – “Holding out refers to the practice whereby parents choose to delay their child’s entry to kindergarten to give their child more time to get ready for the more highly charged educational setting in which he or she will be enrolled” (Pianta & Cox, 1999, p. 61).

**Readiness Test** – “Assessment of a child’s level of preparedness for a specific academic or preacademic program” (NAEYC, 1988, p. 4).

**School Readiness** – “… a multidimensional concept that considers behavioral and cognitive aspects of the child’s development as well as the child’s adaptation to the classroom” (Parker, Boak, Griffin, Ripple, & Peay, 1999, p. 413).

**Screening Test** – “Also called developmental screening test, a test used to identify children who may be in need of special services, as a first step in identifying children in need of further diagnosis; focuses on the child’s ability to acquire skills” (NAEYC, 1988, p. 4).
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Characteristics of School Readiness

Definition of School Readiness

School readiness has become a highly controversial and complex issue in early childhood education (Parks, 1996). Even though much research has been done on the topic, the construct of readiness still remains elusive. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that “readiness is a multifaceted and subjective construct which has multifaceted and subjective meanings” (Parks, 1996, p. 2). Webster (1994) defined readiness as a “developmental stage at which a child has the capacity to receive instructions at a given level of difficulty” (p. 1195). Early childhood educators and psychologists have generally depicted readiness as a construct which is conceptualized as a characteristic of an individual child; it matures as the child grows (Parks, 1996).

According to Hammond (1986), readiness is a broad term that is defined as the characteristics that enable a child to do well in school, including the characteristic domains of physical, affective, and cognitive. Readiness has also been commonly portrayed as “…some combination of cognitive, psychomotor, and socio-emotional development that should be presented in a balance that is congruent with the child’s chronological age” (Graue, 1993, p. 4).

Whatever the definition of readiness, it is evident that readiness is an innate construct which is essential for a child’s success in school (Parks, 1996). For the purpose of this paper, school readiness will be defined in a broader and more comprehensive nature as “…a multidimensional concept that considers behavioral and cognitive aspects
of the child’s development as well as the child’s adaptation to the classroom” (Parker, Boak, Griffin, Ripple, & Peay, 1999, p. 413).

In further clarifying and discussing school readiness, there are four assumptions that bring about a better understanding of readiness in the lives of young children. According to May and Campbell (1981), the four basic assumptions are the following:

1. Readiness has been a known concept of educators for a long time.
2. Readiness has consistently been a fundamental part of theory.
3. Readiness recognizes the importance of individual differences among learners.
4. Readiness is a concept of broad applicability.

As the third assumption maintains, it must be recognized that readiness is influenced by many issues associated with individual differences in the learners (May & Campbell, 1981). To come to a greater understanding of readiness, there is an urgent need to acknowledge these issues associated with present-day children who are entering kindergarten.

**Issues Associated With School Readiness**

The kindergarten year marks a period of rapid change in the way children think about themselves and the world around them (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). This change is influenced by developmental (e.g. age, maturation) and environmental (e.g. schooling, family resources) factors (West, Denton, & Reaney, 1999). Children enter school demonstrating a vast array of knowledge, skills, and behaviors. To enrich children’s first experiences in formal education, it is important to understand these, as well as the factors that influence them.
Until recently, there has been a lack of information about what children know and do at entry into school. With the initiation of the U.S. Department of Education’s Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K) in the fall of 1998, there is now data available on the cognitive and noncognitive knowledge and skills of a large and nationally representative sample of American kindergartners (West, Denton, & Reaney, 1999).

The findings from the ECLS-K show that a diverse population of children entering school demonstrates a considerable range of cognitive knowledge. On the average, approximately fifteen percent of students start kindergarten with basic reading and mathematic skills that are one or two proficiency levels higher than the average first-time kindergartner. Small numbers of students come to school with very advanced skills. In reading, a majority (66 percent) can recognize letters of the alphabet by name. Most students (94 percent) can recognize single-digit numbers, identify simple geometric figures, and count to 10 when referring to basic mathematical skills (Zill & West, 2000).

Children entering kindergarten in the United States in the 1990s are different from those who entered kindergarten in prior decades. As summarized by West, Denton, and Germino-Hausken (2000), first-time kindergartners come from increasingly diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, social, economic, and language backgrounds. Many kindergartners entering school come from single-parent families and from stepparent families. They also differ in the level and types of early care and educational experiences that they have had prior to kindergarten (Zill, Collins, West, & Germino-Hausken, 1995). Our nation’s schools face new challenges as they are expected to meet the educational needs of all children regardless of their backgrounds and experiences.
Entrance Age into Kindergarten

Of the cognitive and noncognitive knowledge, skills, and behaviors of first-time kindergartners, there are factors that account for their ranges in skills. For decades, the factors of age, sex, and family risks have been studied in research.

Historically, school entrance age has been the responsibility of state legislators, but both public and private concerns (e.g. reading readiness, kindergarten curriculum, research findings on the effects of other variables such as gender and socioeconomic status on a child’s abilities) have been influential factors for establishing the age at which children have been granted admission to school (Parks, 1996). The legal age for school entrance in the United States has shifted from “4 years 9 months in 1958 to the present admission age of 5 years” (Parks, 1996). Hall (1963) reported that age of school entrance was as great a concern to educators in 1963 as it is today.

The current literature is ambiguous regarding the optimal age of entrance and its effect on achievement. Some researchers suggest that students who are young at the time of kindergarten entrance experience more academic difficulties (Diamond, 1983; Hall, 1963), whereas others report no academic weaknesses as a result of age (Dietz & Wilson, 1985; May & Welch, 1986) especially if teachers and the curriculum accommodate student differences (Smith & Shepard, 1988). Ilg and Ames (1965) reported that entrance age is a relatively poor indicator of a child’s future success in school. In several longitudinal studies, an initial entrance age effect in social and academic differences at the lower grades did not persist through high school. The age at which differences disappear varies among the students at grade three (Shepard & Smith, 1985) and grade 4 (Miller & Norris, 1967).
Zill and West (2000) attributed the variation of age entrance into kindergarten to three causes. First, school systems differ in their policies regarding how old children must be, and by what date, in order to qualify for kindergarten entry. Second, children are born throughout the year, so some students just make the cutoff entrance date and others just miss it. Third, some parents simply choose to delay their children’s entry into kindergarten.

The ECLS-K study found that nearly two-thirds of children entering school were between 5 years and 5 years, 8 months as of September 1st of the reference year, 1998. Nine percent were not yet 5 years old as of the same date. Nearly one-quarter were almost 6 years old (5 years, 8 months to 5 years, 11 months), and 4 percent were already 6 (Zill & West, 2000).

Variation in children’s age is associated with differences in kindergartners’ knowledge, skills, and behavior. The ECLS-K provides the most current data on the difference that the factors, specifically age, make on kindergartners’ variation of skills upon entry. The findings support the claim that older students often have advantages with respect to the knowledge and self-regulation skills that they bring to the classroom. Older students are closer to being able to read and do arithmetic, know more about nature, science, and human society, have more advanced motor skills, are more socially adept and less prone to problem behaviors, and are more persistent at classroom tasks (Zill & West, 2000).

The ECLS-K findings regarding age-related differences in cognitive and non-cognitive skills are consistent with what many parents and teachers already believe, namely that older children tend to be larger and more mature than younger children and
that children learn much before they come to school (Mergendollar, Bellisimo, & Horan, 1990). In addition, the findings lend support to policy analysts who have questioned the practice of allowing parents to withhold their children from kindergarten for a year, because it gives these children advantages over other children who enter at younger ages (Zill, Loomis, & West, 1997). In agreement with ECLS-K findings, Uphoff and Gilmore (1986) reported that older children entering kindergarten fail less often, obtain higher grades, and fare better on standardized testing than do younger five-year-olds.

Research evidence in support of the use of delayed entry for increasing children’s future success is scarce (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). Crosser (1991) found that boys who had begun kindergarten at age 6 tended to be academically advantaged on standardized achievement tests in fifth or sixth grade over boys who had begun kindergarten at age 5, but only in the area of reading. Older girls did not gain any significant advantage by delayed entry. In the studies that followed delayed-entry children into their elementary school grades (Cameron & Wilson, 1990; Dietz & Wilson, 1985), these studies concluded that there were no significant differences in standardized test scores between children who had delayed entry and other students currently in the same grade. Their findings concluded that delayed entry does not appear to provide substantial, if any, benefit for students, indicating a need for serious consideration of its continued use for unready students.

Realities Concerning School Readiness

Readiness Assessments

Along with assumptions about readiness, May and Campbell (1981) also list two important realities concerning school readiness. The first is the reality in education that
there is a need to determine the educational performance of children through testing. The second assumption refers to the fact that the term readiness is not accepted by all educators.

As kindergarten enrollments have grown, so too has the range of backgrounds and experiences that children bring to school. Kindergarten programs have also changed and often stress academic skills that were previously reserved for older children (Freeman & Hatch, 1989; Smith & Shepard, 1988).

Testing of young children entering kindergarten has become a widespread practice. School systems around the country are using various types of tests to assess children prior to kindergarten entrance, during the kindergarten year, and at the end of the year (Freeman, 1990). Typically, achievement tests are used in the elementary grades for testing readiness for promotion to the next grade level. However, most teachers of kindergarten students use some form of a readiness test to predict whether the children are ready for first grade. In addition, the NAEYC (1988) described a third type of assessment, the screening test, which is commonly used.

Basically, readiness tests can be classified into one of two categories: those that measure developmental milestones (such as the Gesell School Readiness Test; Ilg, Ames, Haines, & Gillespie, 1978) and those that measure academic knowledge (such as the Metropolitan Readiness Tests [MRT], 6th ed.; Nurss, 1995). Many researchers (Freberg, 1991; May, 1986; Meisels, 1998) have found that the widely used readiness tests are relatively poor predictors of future school success and that typical assessment practices lack sufficient validity and reliability for making placement decisions. At best, these tests are correctly placing slightly more than one-half of the children screened. That
translates into a large number of children every year being identified as unready for school, when they may actually be as ready as those who are placed into the school systems. For example the Metropolitan Readiness Test (Nurss, 1995), currently in its sixth edition, is possibly the most widely used and valid readiness test (Nurss & McGauvran, 1976). It measures reading readiness and academic achievement (Schultz, 1989). It has the best predictive validity, reporting correlations of .70 to .78 with later first grade measures of achievement. Although these correlations are high if the test is used for instructional planning or program evaluation as intended by its authors, the scores still indicate that approximately one-third of children would be misidentified as unready if the MRT was used for placement into kindergarten (Bredekamp & Shepard, 1989). It is also critical to note that many school districts use school-made or teacher-made screening tests whose reliability, standardization, and psychometric details are nonexistent (Meisels, 1987).

The testing of young children has come under attack in recent years. In 1988, the NAEYC issued a strong statement against the use of standardized norm-referenced tests in kindergarten. Meisels (1987) described the dangers of labeling children and determining their placement based on scores from tests that have limited reliability or validity. Concern has been voiced regarding the accuracy of these tests in identifying children for special programs. Shepard and Smith (1986) pointed out that "none of the available tests are accurate enough to screen children into special programs without a 50 percent error rate" (p. 80).

Considering the nature of the young learner, early childhood scholars propose that assessment should be rooted in developmentally appropriate classroom activities whereby
teachers assess via observation, and by using a variety of materials (Culbertson & Jalongo, 1999; Puckett & Black, 1994), consider development over time, and refrain from comparing children on a given day (Puckett & Black, 1994). Suffice it to say that the field of education is far from reaching a clear, comprehensive, objective, measurable definition of school readiness (Kagan, 1990; Meisels, 1998, 1999). Concerns exist with the use of standardized school readiness assessment instruments (Carlton & Winsler, 1999).

Readiness is Not Accepted by All Educators

Since the late 1980s with the establishment of the National Education Goals, the simple declarative statement—all children will start school ready to learn—has carried the topic of readiness and education of young children to a major national issue (Pianta & Cox, 1999). Some educators find the term school readiness too vague and ambiguous and others find the readiness concept too rigid (May & Campbell, 1981). Pianta and Walsh (1996) stated that the concept of readiness is useless.

Conflicting viewpoints regarding the direction which kindergarten should take have their roots in various perspectives regarding child development. Theories of child development that influence educational practice are dominated by three major schools of thought: maturationism, behaviorism, and interactionism (Freeman & Hatch, 1989). Maturationism, adopted by Gesell (Ilg & Ames, 1972) and others, stressed the role of genetically controlled biological change in behavior and learning. Concerns over age entry to kindergarten are motivated by maturationist thought. In contrast, behaviorism, associated with Skinner, emphasizes the importance of environmental factors. The trend toward competency-based, skill-oriented instruction evolves from a behaviorist viewpoint.
Interactionism, also known as cognitive-developmental theory, is based on the work of Piaget and views development as the dynamic interaction of the individual and the environment. It is a comprehensive view of readiness, with a dual focus on the child and the environment in which the child is being taught (Pianta & Cox, 1999).

**Positive viewpoints associated with school readiness**

Some advocates for school readiness take a maturationist viewpoint. Moore and Moore (1979), who believed that children's biological time table of normal development makes ineffective any attempts to speed up learning, stated that "... a wide range of ordinary life experiences are valuable and in fact appear fundamental for optimum school readiness" (p. 89). Kagan (1992) also acknowledged that "children should be given time to develop according to their individual time clocks" (p. 48). Kagan and maturationists advocate that development precedes learning. Rather than placing children in school environments that are too advanced for them, or attempting to reform schools to accommodate individual differences, children should be kept out of school until they are ready, with such judgments typically determined by a readiness test (Ilg & Ames, 1965).

The crux of the current entry age debate centers on the concept of school readiness. Cnic and Lamberty (1994) recount that historically, age five has not always been considered as the prime age for school entry. Uphoff and Gilmore (1986) report findings that suggest that older children have many more advantages over younger students. Moore (1985) suggested that there is no evidence that children are ready for school until age 8 to 12 years of age, strongly suggesting that "... the child should be allowed to develop physically and to explore personal fantasies and intuitions until
somewhere between ages 8 and 12” (p. 63). On the same note, Smith and Shepard (1988) report that kindergarten teachers believe that readiness is essential to success. But they also believe that readiness reflects skills or abilities the child brings to the school setting as a function of their age rather than something that children acquire with exposure to the curriculum.

What a child knows and how the child behaves are both products of the child’s experiences before entering school (Plomin, 1990). Thus, measures of children’s knowledge and behavior at school entry can serve as indicators of how well families, child-care institutions, and preschool programs prepare children for school. At the same time, these measures provide guidance about what kind of curriculum might be appropriate for the first year of school (Freeman & Hatch, 1989; Knudsen-Lindauer & Harris, 1989). If teachers are aware of the skills and abilities that the typical child has mastered before the first day of class, teachers and school systems are less likely to design a course of study that is either too challenging or not challenging enough for the typical child. In this regard, it is useful to appreciate not only what the average child knows at school entry, but also what the range of knowledge is across the entire class of children (Zill & West, 2000).

The ECLS-K found that as children enter kindergarten, they demonstrate a wide range of knowledge and skills. At kindergarten entry, children at risk for later school difficulty are less likely to know their skills. Across the kindergarten year, the same at-risk children gained on their more advanced counterparts, closing the gap between the skill levels of the two age groups. However at the same time, the at-risk children were falling behind in more sophisticated knowledge and skills, thus widening the gap with
their more advanced classmates. After a year of formal schooling, differences in children's knowledge and skills were still present (West, Denton, & Reaney, 1999). Some critics might speculate that this gap could be closed by delaying entry of the at-risk children; others see the gap as a natural component of a typical kindergarten classroom.

In considering the state of our knowledge base in school readiness, Willer and Bredekamp (1990) observed that there are specific reasons to support school readiness: 1) learning occurs only in school; 2) readiness is a specific inherent condition within every child; 3) readiness is a condition that can be easily measured; 4) readiness is predominately a function in time and some children need more time than others; 5) children are ready to learn when they can sit quietly at a desk and listen to a teacher; and 6) children who are not ready do not belong in school. Willer and Bredekamp (1990) observed that these six explanations serve mostly to keep children out of school rather than assuring that children will be ready and capable of achieving success in school.

**Negative viewpoints associated with school readiness**

The maturationist view that development precedes learning has not been well established, and indeed, Vygotsky's (1978) opposing notion that learning precedes developmental progress is critical when considering the school readiness controversy (Kagan, 1990). The maturational approach places the burden of proof on the child for readiness, entirely ignoring more contextual and ecological influences. In essence, the maturational approach suggests that schools and families have no explicit role or responsibility for children's readiness (Cmic & Lamberty, 1994).

Taking a Vygotskian perspective, children are seen as ever-ready learners who have grown into the intellectual life around them and are stimulated by it. Children thrive
in environments where adults and peers encourage and enhance their learning, and consequently, their development (Kagan, 1992). So, Vygotskian theorists, rekindling environmentalists’ arguments, advocate placing children in rich learning situations as a means of hastening development (Kagan, 1992). Readiness is seen as “... a condition of the institution, not the individual” (Kagan, 1990, p. 274), meaning that “schools must be ready for children ... for all children” (Kagan, 1992, p. 49). This is best summed up by stating that the concern should focus not on whether children are ready for schools, but on whether schools are ready for children.

Early childhood educators and the NAEYC position statement on developmentally appropriate practices (Bredekamp, 1987) insist that all programs for young children be geared to the developmental level of the children in the program. Some critics of the current trend in kindergarten instruction, including the NAEYC, believe that expectations have become increasingly high and unrealistic as the curriculum from upper grades has been pushed down to lower levels, thus dooming large numbers of young children to inevitable failure (Charlesworth, 1989). Kindergarten programs with increased academic demand seem to reflect widespread concern among parents. Uphoff and Gilmore (1986) described the curriculum shove down as one in which the kindergarten curriculum now includes much of what previously was reserved for first grade. Although “kindergarten used to mean brightly colored paintings, music, clay, block building, bursting curiosity, and intensive exploration” (Freeman & Hatch, 1989, p. 596), today’s trend is toward a more structured kindergarten curriculum. From the traditional early childhood developmental view, the solution appears obvious: Match the
curriculum to the children (Bredekamp, 1987). Unfortunately, it is currently more popular to fit the children to the curriculum.

Many educators have expressed concern over the increased emphasis on academic skills in kindergarten (Freeman & Hatch, 1989). Golant and Golant (1990) reported that developmental theorists and early childhood educators have zealously shunned the trickle down phenomenon that has forced five year old kindergarten students to succumb to the rigorous academic curricula of first grade. Golant and Golant (1990) stated that unrealistic expectations and tensions of the academic curriculum have forced some children to reach their frustration levels and have caused them to experience kindergarten failure. The NAEYC (1988) also claimed that it is unrealistic to impose an escalated curriculum upon kindergarten children, and then expect them to be academically successful. They observed that all children (no matter how young) have the potential to succeed in school, providing they are taught using developmentally appropriate curricula. Elkind (1981) accused the media and education policy makers of contributing to the dilemma of young children being pushed beyond their maturational abilities. Too much structure, too soon, can lead to \textit{elementary school burnout} (Elkind, 1987). In a study of children’s age at the time of kindergarten entrance, Uphoff and Gilmore (1986) concluded that children who are not developmentally ready when they begin school may face life-long disadvantages: “the present situation has built-in expectations and requirements that are simply too much for too many young children” (p. 15). Davis (1980) wrote that “time wasted on workbooks, the paper-and-pencil thief of a well balanced program, means a reduction of vivid, first hand, worthwhile experiences that are the birthright of the 5s” (p. 77). Finally, Hymes is one of the severest critics of the school
readiness concept. His concept of readiness resembles Davis’ idea, and he recommends the use of a child developmental approach based on the premise that the curriculum fits the child and the goals of general education (May & Campbell, 1981).

Experts in child development have recommended that appraisals of children’s status at school entry not be limited to academic knowledge and skills, but include evaluations of the whole child (Resource Group on School Readiness, 1991). The Group identified five domains of development that are important to a child’s preparation for school: physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language usage; and cognition and general knowledge. Besides the direct assessments of the children, the collection of information from parents and teachers is also recommended (Zill & West, 2000). The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study involving kindergarten children, mentioned previously in this paper, adopted this whole-child view of school readiness (West, Denton, & Reaney, 1999).
Developing Guidelines

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children *Position Statement on School Readiness*, the construct of school readiness is based on the assumption that there is a predetermined set of capabilities that all children need to acquire before entering school. Therefore, the NAEYC (1990) advocated that “those who are committed to promoting universal school readiness must consider three critical factors:

A. the diversity and inequity of children’s early life experiences;

B. the wide range of variation in young children’s development and learning;

C. and the degree to which school expectations of children entering kindergarten are reasonable, appropriate, and supportive of individual differences.” (p. 21)

To develop guidelines concerning school readiness, the preceding readiness factors will be used. Each of the factors will be addressed individually to aid in describing the features of an effective kindergarten program.

1. Teachers must ensure that children have a successful transition to kindergarten.

The growing diversity of our nation’s population and the forces that are affecting both family life and schools require a planned and coordinated approach by families, educators, and the community to ensure a successful transition into kindergarten (Ramey & Ramey, 1994). Until the inequities of life experiences are addressed, the use of
readiness criteria will continue blaming the child for a lack of life experiences. This traditional idea of school readiness needs to shift towards open discussions, mutual adaptations, and respectful understandings among the key adults in children’s lives. No longer should readiness be looked at as the responsibility of children and their families, but rather by all the adults, institutions, and agencies that serve those children (Ramey & Ramey, 1994).

School readiness needs to be viewed as a transition process that begins before school entry and continues through the elementary years. The idea of a transition process recognizes the need for children, families, and teachers to adapt to and understand one another so that children will enjoy and be successful in their school years. This viewpoint emphasizes the positive approach that “all children are eager to learn” (Ramey & Ramey, 1994, p. 195).

2. Teachers must understand, respect, and respond to individual student differences in developing kindergarten programs.

The findings of the ECLS-K (Zill & West, 2000) show that American children possess considerable variation in their skills and knowledge as they enter kindergarten. The results from the ECLS-K (Zill & West, 2000) demonstrate that “children are neither alike at school entry, nor ready to be stretched and molded by the varying qualities and demands of different kindergarten programs” (p. 31). In other words, one size does not fit all for kindergartners today. This claim is additionally supported by a 1995 study conducted by Zill and colleagues on preschoolers approaching the kindergarten age. The findings emphasize the challenges that kindergarten teachers face in meeting the needs of children who are not demographically, but rather, developmentally diverse.
Peck, McCaig, and Sapp (1988) advised that the kindergarten curriculum address all areas of a child’s development. Hitz and Richter (1993) listed the foundations, or developmental areas, as physical, social, emotional, and intellectual, and assert that these are established early in a child’s life. The quality of these foundations will determine the extent to which a child succeeds in school and later life. Consequently, “it is imperative that public schools scrap readiness as an entrance criterion and provide all young children equal access to environments designed to develop those foundations” (Hitz & Richter, 1993, p. 12).

Making schools responsive to the needs of individual learners requires ensuring that teachers and administrators understand child development and how children learn. School personnel need to consider practices that lead to individualization of content so children can progress at their own rate. The educational system needs to recognize that all children are unique learners that require various instructional strategies and different time frames for mastering the same material. Until then, there will be parents and schools delaying entry for children deemed unready, and retention will be used as a remedial strategy to try to homogenize classrooms (May, Kundert, & Brent, 1995). Developmentally appropriate programs that meet the needs of children at all levels of development may help avoid these pitfalls.

3. Teachers must set appropriate expectations that support and enhance the learning and needs of individual students.

Children’s adjustment to kindergarten depends on the curriculum, activities, and approaches to learning used in the classroom. This adjustment can be placed on a continuum from developmentally appropriate to developmentally inappropriate practices.
(Maxwell & Eller, 1994). To address the negative viewpoint first, the harmful effects of developmentally inappropriate practices have been supported by research. A preliminary study by Burts and colleagues (1990, 1992) found that kindergarten children in a developmentally inappropriate classroom exhibited more stress behaviors than children in a developmentally appropriate one.

According to the NAEYC, all high-quality, developmentally appropriate programs have certain attributes in common. Such a program is one that provides a safe and nurturing environment that promotes the development of each child “while being sensitive to the needs and preferences of families” (NAEYC, 1996, p. 6). When this type of program is implemented into kindergarten classrooms, it recognizes the individual student differences present in all classrooms and the various life experiences that children bring to the school environment. Both of these characteristics are associated with the school readiness guidelines.
CHAPTER 4
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The intent of this study was to examine the current literature concerning benefits of and problems associated with school readiness and to develop appropriate guidelines for an effective kindergarten program. The paper addressed four questions to accomplish this purpose:

1. What are the characteristics of school readiness?

Despite the extensive research done on this topic, the construct of school readiness remains vague. In this paper, school readiness was defined in a broad and comprehensive manner as "... a multidimensional concept that considers behavioral and cognitive aspects of the child's development as well the child's adaptation to the classroom" (Parker, Boak, Griffin, Ripple, & Peay, 1999, p. 413). Readiness is influenced by many issues associated with individual differences in the learners (May & Campbell, 1981).

The kindergarten year marks a rapid change in the way young children think and learn. This change is influenced by developmental and environmental factors, for instance, age, maturation, family resources, and schooling (West, Denton, & Reaney, 1999). From decades of research, additional factors of gender, school entrance age, and family risks also account for the students' ranges in skills and abilities. Because of the need to acknowledge issues associated with readiness and the factors that influence kindergartners' entry into school, an Early Childhood Longitudinal Study completed by
the U.S. Department of Education provided comprehensive data on the cognitive and noncognitive knowledge, skills, and behaviors of first-time American kindergartners (West, Denton, & Reaney, 1999). Children entering kindergarten in the United States come from increasingly diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, social, economic, and language backgrounds (West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000). Many come from single-parent and stepparent families. They differ in the level and types of early care and educational experiences that they have had prior to kindergarten (Zill, Collins, West, & Germino-Hausken, 1995).

2. What are the positive viewpoints associated with school readiness?

Conflicting viewpoints on school readiness are based in various perspectives of child development. Some advocates for school readiness take a maturationist viewpoint. Moore and Moore (1979) stated that children's biological time table of normal development makes unproductive any attempts to speed up learning, stating that “... a wide range of ordinary life experiences are valuable and in fact appear fundamental for optimum school readiness” (p. 89). Kagan (1992) also acknowledged that children should be given time to mature according to their personal time clocks and advocated that development precedes learning. Rather than placing children in school environments that are too advanced for them or reforming schools to accommodate individual differences, children should be kept out of school until they are deemed ready, with such judgments typically determined by a readiness test (Ilg & Ames, 1965). Smith and Shepard (1988) reported that kindergarten teachers believe that readiness is crucial to success but reflects skills or abilities children bring to the school setting as a function of their age rather than something that children acquire with exposure to the curriculum.
What a child knows and how the child behaves are both products of the child’s experiences before entering school (Plomin, 1990). Thus, measures of children’s knowledge and behavior at school entry can serve as indicators of how well families, child-care institutions, and preschool programs prepare children for school. At the same time, these measures provide guidance about what kind of curriculum might be appropriate for the first year of school (Freeman & Hatch, 1989; Knudsen-Lindauer & Harris, 1989).

In considering the positives of school readiness, Willer and Bredekamp (1990) stated that there are six assumptions that support school readiness. Learning occurs only in school. Readiness is a specific inherent condition within every child. Readiness is a condition that can be easily measured. Readiness is predominately a function in time and some children need more time than others. Children are ready to learn when they can sit quietly and listen to a teacher; and, children who are not ready do not belong in school.

3. What are the negative viewpoints associated with school readiness?

Vygotsky opposes the notion that learning precedes development in relation to readiness (Kagan, 1990). The maturational approach places the burden on the child, suggesting that schools and families have no apparent role in children’s readiness (Crnic & Lamberty, 1994). Instead, children should be seen as learners who have been stimulated by the intellectual world around them. Vygotskian theorists advocate placing children in rich learning situations. Readiness is a condition of the institution, not the individual child (Kagan, 1992), meaning the focus should not be on whether children are ready for schools, but on whether schools are ready for children. Social skills, physical development, cultural background, intellectual development, and emotional adjustment
are important developmental areas, and each contributes to children’s success in school. Every child enters school ready to learn and it is the responsibility of schools to meet the varying needs and abilities of children (NAEYC, 1990).

Reviews of school readiness assessments suggest that there are multiple inherent problems (Crnic & Lamberty, 1994). Shepard and Smith (1986) suggested that none of the existing tests are sufficiently accurate to justify readiness decision making. Scholars express the inappropriateness of testing young children due to their rapid, episodic, and individualized growth (Kagan, 1990). Kagan also expressed that few school readiness assessments are valid and reliable screening instruments. Shepard and Smith (1986) observed that these tests are incomplete portrayals of what children know or in predicting their future achievements. Rather, experts in child development recommend that appraisals of children’s status at school entry not be limited to academic knowledge and skills but include evaluations of the whole child involving five domains of development that are important to a child’s preparation for school: physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language usage, and cognition and general knowledge (Resource Group on School Readiness, 1991).

4. What guidelines concerning school readiness should be used in developing an effective kindergarten program?

This study determined that there is a need for a set of appropriate guidelines to follow in developing an effective kindergarten program regarding school readiness. The first step is to acknowledge and address the growing diversity and inequities of life experiences. This can be accomplished with a planned and coordinated approach by families, educators, and the community to ensure a successful transition process that
begins before school entry and continues through the elementary years (Ramey & Ramey, 1994). The transition process needs to include open discussions, mutual adaptations, and respectful understandings among the key adults in the children’s lives. Collaboration is critical in breaking down the inequities among students.

The second guideline is to respect the individual differences in children’s development because of the variation in skills and abilities of any group of children entering school (NAEYC, 1990). Teachers and schools must recognize and respond to such variation by individualizing their curriculum and teaching practices. The curriculum should address all areas of a child’s development, including the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual areas that are established early in life (Hitz & Richter, 1993).

Finally, appropriate expectations must be set to support and enhance the learning and needs of individual students. Developmentally appropriate programs are based on what is known about child development and learning, individual students’ characteristics and experiences, and their knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which they live (NAEYC, 1996). An effective program provides a safe and nurturing environment that is sensitive to the needs and preferences of families and recognizes the individual differences present in all classrooms and various life experiences that the students bring to the learning environment. The decisions are dynamic and changing, and require educators to remain life-long learners throughout their teaching profession.

Conclusions

Readiness remains a controversial issue in education today. A clearer understanding of the construct of school readiness and a more individualized approach would better support the interests of young children and the early childhood field.
The following conclusions were drawn from this research study:

1. There is an urgent need to acknowledge the current issues associated with readiness and the factors that account for the variations in children’s readiness skills.

2. The age of entry debate is a concern to educators and legislators. The contradictory results of delayed entry into school require more extensive research and clarification of its effects on student achievement and classroom instruction.

3. A reality in education is the need to determine the educational performance of young children through assessments. A consideration should be made for a more reliable and developmentally appropriate approach to assessing young children that includes a complete evaluation of the needs, abilities, and background of the whole child.

4. More accountability and the downward push of the curriculum have become major concerns in kindergarten. There needs to be a shift in how readiness is perceived, a shift from expecting the child to be ready for school to expecting the school to be ready for the child. Preparing the school setting and the curriculum for the interests of the students is what best meets the needs of all young children.

5. To ensure a successful transition to kindergarten, a planned and coordinated approach by families, educators, and the community is needed.

6. Being aware of the diversity and inequities of children’s life experiences provides a more successful and positive start into school.

It is apparent that the concept of readiness is gaining momentum in the education field. Recent research is favoring a more unified approach to school readiness.
Recommendations

Based on the review of the literature, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. More extensive research to broaden the concept of school readiness would enhance the educational opportunities for incoming students.

2. There needs to be more research to focus on a stronger knowledge base on which to build entrance-age recommendations, which would lead to a clearer understanding of school readiness by parents and educators.

3. Schools need to embrace the challenges of today's society to make schools ready for the children and to meet their educational needs, regardless of backgrounds and life experiences. Schools need to meet the individual needs of all students.

4. Teacher training programs are needed to provide educators with better strategies for how to incorporate and implement developmentally appropriate practices into their curriculum and teaching.

5. More descriptive and longitudinal data of the knowledge, abilities, backgrounds, and life experiences of first-time kindergartners is needed to understand young children better and to achieve a quality transition into school.
References


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