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School Readiness and the Transition to Kindergarten: Developmental Domains, Systemic Influences, and the Role of Context

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Introduction

Children's transition to kindergarten and their skills at school entry forecast long-term academic success.[1,2] Given the importance of these early skills, school readiness has long been a priority for the United States education system. Over two decades ago, the primary objective of the National Education Goals Panel was "to ensure that all children enter school ready to learn."[3] Subsequently, the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) further elevated the importance of school readiness by requiring states to document how pre-kindergarten programs support the development of early skills. This legislation contributed to substantial growth in investment, enrollment, and workforce development within the early childhood education system.[4] Although the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted pre-kindergarten enrollment in 2020—and schools and

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families continue to grapple with its effects years later[5,6]—momentum toward early education expansion has not stalled. Countries around the globe continue to invest in improving and expanding early childhood education, as evidenced by the 32% increase in worldwide pre-primary enrollment over the past 35 years.[7]

Subject

There is no single indicator of kindergarten readiness.[8] Readiness encompasses a range of skills and developmental domains. Presently, the U.S. Department of Education defines the "essential domains for readiness" as language and literacy development, cognition and general knowledge (e.g., early mathematics, early science), approaches to learning, physical well-being and motor development, and social-emotional development.[9]

Research suggests that children's school outcomes, especially achievement, are relatively stable after the first years of school.[10,11] Moreover, evidence shows that interventions tend to be more successful during the early school years.[12,13] Consequently, researchers, policymakers, educators, and parents continue to grapple with what it means for children to be "ready" for school, seeking to ensure that children are exposed to essential experiences during these critical years.

This brief report summarizes practical considerations and research evidence on school transition and readiness, aiming to describe stakeholders' definitions of readiness and highlight key readiness characteristics and social contexts that influence its development.

Practical Context

Children and their families experience discontinuity during the transition to kindergarten, even though nearly 60% of American children receive regular care from a non-parental caregiver before this transition.[14] Within the U.S., the shift toward academic priorities and the heightened rigor present challenges to children as they begin kindergarten.[15] Emphasis on accountability has forced a "push down curriculum" in which children are expected to perform at higher academic levels at earlier ages. Many kindergarten classrooms have increased teacher-directed math and literacy instruction, and spend less time engaging in free play or center-based activities.[16]

The transition to kindergarten has become an increasingly visible issue as federal and state governments consider the merits of federally-funded preschool programs. For example, U.S. kindergarten teachers reported on the readiness skills of nearly 700 students and results

indicated that over 70% of children experienced challenges in at least one area during the transition to school. These teachers identified the most pressing needs as developing organizational skills, working effectively in groups, meeting academic expectations, and forming peer relationships.[17] Efforts to improve the kindergarten transition need to leverage home, school, neighborhood, and community resources to prepare children for school.[18] Some promising efforts include expanding access to high quality preschool programming,[19] increasing preschool-to-kindergarten transition activities,[20] and establishing stronger connections between home and school environments.[21] One challenge that exists is that even before kindergarten, children have been differentially impacted by social determinants of health and well-being that undergird readiness skills.[22,23]

Further, children entering kindergarten differ from those of a generation ago; they are increasingly diverse with regard to racial, ethnic, economic, and language backgrounds.[24] For example, among children and families enrolled in Head Start preschools, 29% identify as Black/African American, 37% as Latino, and 34% speak a language other than English at home.[25] This growing diversity among children stands in contrast to the demographic makeup of the kindergarten teacher workforce, which remains predominantly White, female, monolingual, and middle class.[26] To bridge this potential cultural gap between teachers and students, promising approaches to support transition to kindergarten need to identify and leverage the full variation of family strengths.[27] Moreover, effective transition practices must acknowledge and respond to systemic influences—such as racial, economic, and immigration-related inequities—that shape the early learning environments of children entering kindergarten.[28]

Focusing on child skills and developmental domains is just one perspective on readiness. For at least three decades, early childhood stakeholders have recognized that “readiness” is not only an attribute of the child but also can be measured as the extent to which schools, communities, and society create opportunities for children to learn and thrive. This understanding shifts the question away from: “Are children ready for school?” toward, “Are schools ready for children?”[29] We can only answer this question by fully understanding the preschool, family and community contexts in which young children spend their time.[30]

Research Context

Three main bodies of research literature inform discussions about school readiness. The first body is based on research examining the views of stakeholders (e.g., early childhood teachers,

parents) on their perceptions of school readiness. The second body of research examines definitions of school readiness by considering the relative importance of cognitive, social, and self-regulatory skills, as well as chronological age. The third examines school readiness in relation to early experiences—studying how classroom environments and family interactions influence child outcomes.

Key Research Questions

Key research questions include: How do teachers and parents define readiness? What are the cognitive, social, self-regulatory and chronological markers of school readiness? What are the child-care and home contexts associated with school readiness?

Research Results

What is Readiness: Teachers' and Parents' Definitions

Studies have examined the definition of readiness among different stakeholders in the kindergarten transition process. A recent meta-analysis of 27 international studies of teachers' perception of school readiness found that more early childhood teachers identified non-academic skills (e.g., ability to show empathy, wait in line, take care of personal bathroom needs) as indicators of readiness as compared to academic skills.[31] Similarly, another study found that preschool and kindergarten teachers placed greater emphasis on self-regulatory and interpersonal skills rather than academic competence.[32] Parents, in contrast, may be more likely to define readiness in terms of academic abilities, such as the ability to count, name objects, or identify letters.[33,34]

Readiness as Defined by Cognition, Self-regulation, Social Competence, and Chronological Age

Early signs of cognitive ability and maturity link to children's performance in school.[35] For this reason, this approach to assessing readiness has been used as an indication that a child is prepared for the school environment.[36] One seminal meta-analytic study found that preschool and kindergarten cognitive assessments predicted, on average, 25% of variance in early elementary school cognitive assessments.[37] These findings suggest that cognitive indicators are important but other factors also account for the majority of variation in early school outcomes.

Accumulated evidence points to the significant role of self-regulation and executive functioning.[38-40] These features have a neurobiological basis and provide the foundation for many of the

behaviors and skills required in kindergarten.[41-43] Ability to attend selectively, show appropriate social responses, and stay engaged in academic tasks are all implicated as factors that contribute to and define school readiness. Relatedly, children's "approaches to learning," which include emotion-regulation, attention, persistence, and attitude, support their ability to take advantage of learning opportunities in the classroom and predict achievement in later elementary grades.[44-46]

Other research links children's social competence to academic performance. For example, children's early social-emotional skills and social adjustment (e.g., relationships with peers and teachers, emotion knowledge, and prosocial behaviors) are associated with academic outcomes and classroom engagement in kindergarten.[47,48] Conversely, problem behaviors, such as aggression or withdrawal, interfere with classroom learning.[49]

Children's age is also a marker of school readiness insofar as it indicates maturity in the cognitive, social, and self-regulatory domains. However, research on the effect of age is mixed. Some studies suggest that while there is some advantage to being slightly older upon the transition to kindergarten, the effects on academic and social-behavioral skills appear to diminish over time.[50,51] Other work finds that an earlier state-wide entry cutoff for kindergarten (resulting in older kindergartners, on average) linked to higher state test scores in 4th and 8th grade.[52]

Social Contexts for Readiness

Attributes of children's child-care environment contribute to their transition and adjustment to school. In early childhood classrooms, stimulating and supportive teacher-child interactions characterized by high closeness and low conflict can enhance students' social-emotional and academic competence.[53-55] Quality preschool or child-care also predicts ease of kindergarten adjustment, strengthens social and self-regulatory skills,[56,57] and reduces the likelihood of some negative outcomes, such as grade retention.[58] Greater educator training in child development and use of evidence-based curricula emphasizing both academic and social-emotional growth are features of preschool settings linked to stronger readiness outcomes.[59] Further, research shows that children who face early adversity, such as growing up in low income or impoverished homes, may have the most to gain from high quality early classroom experiences.[60,61]

Family processes also influence children's competencies as they enter school. Quality of parent-child relationships, including parental sensitivity and stimulation, contribute to early school

success.[62-65] Parents' behaviors toward their children and the stimulating materials and consistent routines they provide in the home environment are associated with children's adjustment to the first months and years of school.[66,67] Moreover, family involvement with school, such as participating in school activities and attending teacher conferences, relates to early gains in achievement.[68,69]

Conclusion

The evidence suggests that school readiness is a critical factor for predicting children's school success and that the characterizations of school readiness are multi-dimensional. While parents often highlight foundational academic skills, teachers tend to prioritize social-emotional and self-regulatory competencies as essential for a smooth transition to school. Research shows that cognitive skills, social competence, and self-regulation provide a foundation for academic success and that chronological age, alone, is an insufficient indicator of school readiness. Moreover, early indicators of school success often reflect the influence of supportive and stimulating family environments, along with access to high-quality early childhood education.

Implications

Programs designed to prepare children for kindergarten should strive to boost students' self-regulation, social competence, and cognitive skills. Families and early childhood educators are central to this process, serving as key contributors to children's readiness. For practitioners, it is essential to recognize the multidimensional nature of school readiness, and the importance of high-quality teacher-child relationships characterized by high closeness and low conflict. Effective transition practices can help bridge the expectations of families and schools, creating greater alignment as children enter kindergarten.[70] However, families and schools cannot do this alone. State efforts that establish standards and provide curricular frameworks can support systemic change. The California Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations is one valuable example of state-level guidance on school readiness skills and effective transition practices.[71]

It is important to recognize that children do not all begin their educational journeys from the same starting point. Disparities in access to early learning experiences, which are often shaped by structural inequities, can lead to differences in readiness skills that reflect broader patterns of economic and social inequality. To ensure all children have the opportunity to thrive as they

enter school, targeted investments in kindergarten transition practices and strong home-school partnerships are especially vital for youth from underserved communities.[72]

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