

Voices

from the field

Stop Trying to Make Kids “Ready” for Kindergarten



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In 1975, when I entered kindergarten, no one worried about whether I was “ready.” They were just happy if I did not cry when my mom dropped me off and that I took a nap. So when did kindergarten become the make it or break it year regarding a child’s successful evolution into a functioning adult? Today, as approximately 4 million children in the United States enter kindergarten,

their “readiness” is a hot and contested topic for parents, teachers, administrators, and even politicians.

What is readiness for kindergarten? How do we know when a child is ready? Unfortunately, as with many topics in education reform and improvement, policy makers ignore the complex questions about readiness and instead focus narrowly on select variables. The focus for kindergarten readiness is on select literacy and math skills (e.g., the child’s ability to recognize letters, blend sounds, count objects, use quantity terms). Such a limited notion of “readiness” has led to a dangerously high-stakes approach to early education where a child’s “readiness” can impact whether they can enter kindergarten, which programs receive funding, and how teachers will be evaluated.

The shift from helping children get along with friends, gain independence, and explore through play, to an obsession with gathering information to hold teachers and schools responsible for a child’s success, started in the 1990s around the time of Goals 2000: Education America Act (P.L. 103-227). Often referred to as the accountability

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movement, Goals 2000 gained momentum with the passage of No Child Left Behind (Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA] reauthorized in 2001). Today, the Race to the Top competition, the Common Core State Standards, and the Quality Rating and Improvement Systems all perpetuate the misguided approach to

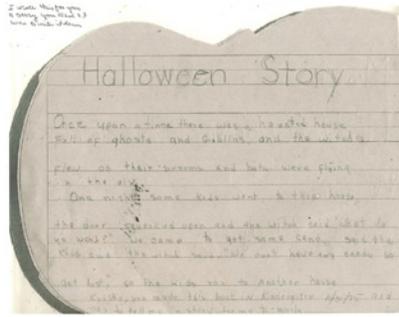


kindergarten readiness by focusing on a compliance, children's performance on a narrow set of skills, development of early learning standards, and administration of standardized tests.

Why the increase in accountability mandates that focus on children before they enter kindergarten? Because, public K-12 systems face enormous pressure to close the achievement gap for students who are struggling, address underachievement in academic performance, and ensure all learners are proficient across identified standards. Such pressure has rapidly turned attention to the early years, where it is assumed that later difficulties stem from the gap that exists before entry into kindergarten. The "illogic" that follows is that IF ONLY children would come ready to learn, the gap could be closed, achievement would be realized, and proficiency obtained.

The current approach to readiness has persisted despite repeated calls to address the complexities of readiness (e.g., alleviating the effects of poverty, ensuring quality of early education experiences), and despite research on the impact early relationships and social emotional competence have on later success versus knowing letters and sounds and being able to count. The misguided approach to readiness also persists in a country where universal pre-k education is not provided and its importance debated regularly.

What can be done about wanting children to be ready but not wanting to focus solely on narrowly defined child outcomes? First, "readiness" needs to be defined as children living within ready families, going to ready schools, and participating within



ready communities. Readiness for families means access to healthcare, options for housing, adequate nutrition, and quality childcare. Readiness for schools means involvement of families, inclusive classrooms, well-prepared and supported teachers, and manageable class sizes. Readiness for communities means economic stability and growth, safety, civic involvement, valuing of cultural differences, and coordinated social services.

Second, parents, teachers, and policy makers need to understand that children's performance in one area of development (e.g., mathematics) is highly related to other areas (e.g., motor, language, social). For example, if a child is expected to "know their colors," this ability is also related to being able to classify, being able to label, having an understanding of the characteristics of objects, the ability to approach challenging tasks, an ability to use hands to activate objects, and so forth. The narrow focus on select skills from a few areas of development does not show the whole picture of a child's gifts and abilities. We also know that during the years before kindergarten, children develop and acquire skills at

different rates, thus measuring readiness at a single point in time (e.g., entry into kindergarten) is an inaccurate assessment of who is "ready" or will be successful.

Finally, there are at least five things parents and early educators can do to promote a child's readiness and success. Be consistent, be predictable, and be responsive. For example, read children's cues and build upon their interests when setting the daily schedule. Teach about empathy and support children's ability to exhibit self-control. Teachers can ensure their curriculum emphasizes knowledge about rules and social norms, that they teach about feelings, and that they help children learn to solve problems. Capitalize on children's talents by using descriptive praise, encouraging children when they face challenges, and giving them feedback on what they are doing right. Talk to children often and meaningfully. For example, introduce new words daily, encourage conversations by asking open-ended questions, and make connections between what is familiar and what is novel.

Public education needs to be accountable for providing a quality education; however, not by viewing readiness as a trait and focusing efforts on a narrowly defined curriculum. Children are complex, and efforts should be directed to ensure families, schools, and communities are ready to address these complexities. It is time to deliver quality education for all children and stop trying to make children "ready" for kindergarten.

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