

Voices from the field

Three Mistakes Made Worldwide in “Getting Children Ready” for School



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In an ever changing, ever diversifying, and ever-complex global society, we need educational policies and practices that support and prepare all young children. In particular, we need policies and practices that help children become well-rounded citizens. At the same time, there is no denying the many challenges and issues children, families, and educators face. A common challenge faced worldwide is policies and practices related to “school readiness.”

How school readiness is defined and put into practice varies greatly. Generally speaking, however, readiness focuses on addressing the “achievement gap.” Unfortunately, many readiness policies and practices have resulted in

unintended and negative side effects. Furthermore, in an effort to “close the gap,” tensions, between developmentally appropriate practice, effective early education, and what we do in a rush to “ready children” for school, have been created.

In this article, we focus on three readiness policies and practices, which we refer to as “mistakes.” We refer to them as mistakes because of their focus on (a) child attributes in the absence of other ecological variables, (b) compliance and uniformity, and (c) standardization of testing and instructional practices (see Call Out Box 1.0 for a summary of three readiness mistakes). Such practices are in stark contrast with what we know regarding early development and effective instruction.

We also offer three “readiness remedies” that emphasize the extraordinary, build upon the unique talents and gifts of children, and allow educators to make decisions regarding the delivery of effective and differentiated instruction. The three readiness remedies include (a) conceptualizing readiness as a relationship, (b) seeing the child as an integrated

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Call Out Box 1.0

Three mistakes being made worldwide in “getting children ready” for school:

1. Readiness is conceptualized as a trait
2. Readiness outcomes are fragmented and taught in isolation
3. Readiness policies and practices emphasize standardization

whole, and (c) expecting and valuing differences. We believe these remedies will support the delivery of effective instruction and promote the diversity that is . . . well . . . early childhood. Finally, we offer a new definition of readiness:

Readiness is a developmental process, largely unpredictable and highly influenced by the child’s social relationships and interactions. Readiness requires a whole-child perspective where individual differences are expected, valued, and celebrated.

Readiness Remedies

Readiness is not in the child’s head. Readiness is a relationship not a trait. Readiness always refers to the relation between the child and the demands and/or the expectations that are being made of or imposed upon him or her. (Elkind, 2014, p. 193)

Remedy One: Conceptualize readiness as a relationship.

Reconsidering and re-conceptualizing readiness begins by shifting focus from child attributes and standards to the relationships and the transactions that influence learning. By design, teaching and learning is a social endeavor. Children do not thrive unless they are surrounded by

responsive caregivers, family members, teachers, and peers. Home, child care, and school environments are not micro worlds or waiting rooms where the “school readiness skill” will eventually emerge. Rather, they are macro worlds full of complex transactions and interactions that occur between the environment, the child, peers, and adults. Any readiness policy or practice needs to acknowledge that learning and development is greatly influenced (positively and negatively) by social interactions and experiences. The science of neurobiology supports the notion that the human brain is constantly changing and the fact that social experiences shape and modify the brains’ structure and function (for more information, see resources from Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child). The key notion of Remedy One is that children’s experiences and interactions with others is what ultimately determine readiness. And, perhaps, if readiness were viewed as an ongoing, complex, and socially motivated process, we would be less likely to “redshirt” children from starting school, exclude children from general education, and keep children from moving to the next grade because they aren’t “ready.”

Integration is a core process essential for mental well-being within the individual and the family, and perhaps fundamental for the healthy functioning of a nurturing community. (Siegel, 2001, p. 70)

Remedy Two: See the child as an integrated whole. An aspect of a whole-child approach understands that development and learning happen only when complex skills are nurtured and matured,

simultaneously. Thus, we can't look for progress in one area of development, without understanding its reliance on other areas. For example, from a whole-child approach, if we want a child to write the letters of his or her first name, we wouldn't test or teach the isolated skill of writing letters. Rather, we would engage in authentic and ongoing assessment to guide decisions regarding the child's trunk control, shoulder strength, wrist flexibility, eye-hand coordination, ability to engage in symbolic and abstract thinking, as well as their interest and motivation to perform the task. Another example is when we want children to demonstrate self-control or "use their words" when they are upset. For this to occur, we must simultaneously assess, nurture, and foster integration of the body's systems (e.g., emotional and logical abilities).

It is critical that we define and talk about readiness with the understanding that early development is highly complex and influenced by a host of variables. See Call Out Box 2.0 for a brief summary of a whole-child approach to development and learning. Policies and practices should avoid focusing on the child's ability to demonstrate a set of discrete skills or a set of narrowly defined skills. Rather, the focus should be on the integration or clustering of skills into a functional whole.

To demand that all children be at the same developmental or achievement level because they are the same age is simply a denial of our biological and environmental variability. (Elkind, 2014, p. 193)

Remedy Three: Value differences. The current educational

Call Out Box 2.0

In a whole-child approach, readiness is understood in the sense that development and learning occurs

- within a complex and ever changing eco-system (i.e., the demands on the learner are continually shifting)
 - because of the integration of all systems of the body
 - at a natural pace that can't be accelerated by targeting developmentally inappropriate outcomes
-

policies tend to value academic-based outcomes and standardized testing to the point that little attention is given to the powerful effect of *social, cultural, and developmental* forces. Today's classrooms are more diverse than ever before, and the wealth of differences translates into dynamics never before seen in the history of education. These differences have the potential to create amazing learning experiences if we know how to seize the opportunity and if we value and honor our differences.

Remedy Three focuses on accepting that not all children will need to learn the same things, learn the same way, or learn at the same rate and pace. By accepting the inherent value in individual differences and diversity, schools can move toward teaching all children and away from discussing the readiness of individual children at arbitrary age/grade points. Increasing the investment and capacity to meet the needs of all children increases our understanding of the compensatory strategies and new or alternative learning pathways. The investment would also lead to insight into better and more targeted approaches to learning and instructional practices. Teachers can

make incremental improvements within the current policies, but real changes have to do with repairing the disconnect between what children can do and our expectations.

To teach all children regardless of the social, developmental, or cultural influence requires authentic assessment practices that rely upon using multiple methods and techniques (Bagnato, Neisworth, & Pretti-Frontczak, 2010). Instruction needs to be flexible, creative, and individualized—attributes only a teacher can guide, often in a moment-to-moment basis. Instruction should not be derived from a “canned” curriculum or pacing guide. A combination of skills and knowledge in evidence-based teaching practices, cognitive neuroscience, and creativity layered with common sense provides new synergy in the goal of educating children who would otherwise be deemed “not ready” for school.

Calls to Action

While recognizing the challenges we face regarding readiness, this article proposes a way forward.

Specifically, we propose a shift in focus regarding readiness policies and practices. That shift is one toward being transactional, integrated, and personalized in nature. For such a shift to occur, citizens worldwide will need to

1. Prioritize forming and fostering positive relationships with children
2. Engage in authentic, integrated, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences
3. Ensure ready families, schools, and communities—readiness policies and practices need to move beyond just the child’s readiness for school.

Finally, our calls of action and remedies are directly linked to consensus views on educational best practice . . . return of investment, equates to productivity and participation in active citizenship. School readiness policies and practices need to embody such investment in all children and the future of our communities.

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