

Readiness for school: A relational construct

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THE NOTION OF READINESS and what it means to be ready for school dominates much of the popular discussion, as well as the research base, about transition to school. Readiness means different things for different people, yet almost always there is a perception that readiness for school involves some assessment of the characteristics of individual children against some set of standard expectations or desirable attributes. The article explores three aspects of readiness: notions of children's readiness; schools' readiness for children; and family and community supports that underpin readiness. Recognition of the importance of each of these aspects supports the conclusion that a focus only on the characteristics of individual children provides, at best, a narrow and limited conceptualisation of readiness and one that can act against children's best interests.

Introduction

Readiness for school is a contested and controversial term. Yet it is also a term invoked regularly in discussions on the transition to school. Parents and educators anguish over whether or not a child is *ready* for school as they try to make decisions they believe will best support children as they move into formal schooling. Even when those involved recognise that an individual child's readiness is but one element of a successful start to school, the focus on children's characteristics remains.

Readiness means different things to different people (Meisels, 1999). Sometimes, readiness is described in terms of age or stage of development. At other times checklists of readiness skills and knowledge are used to identify what children should be able to do or know before they start school (Dockett & Perry, 2006). Still other definitions of readiness emphasise social and emotional aspects (Peth-Pierce, 2001). The common factor underpinning these approaches is the focus on the individual child and whether or not the child has reached a particular point that constitutes readiness.

While it is particularly important to consider children as individuals as they start school, it is also important to acknowledge that children do not exist in isolation—they are members of families, communities, cultural

and friendship groups, and so on. Neither are schools culturally neutral spaces—schools and those within them have a range of expectations that impact on how readiness is defined and enacted (Graue, 2006). Definitions of readiness will be influenced by family, community and school expectations, as well as by children's attributes. Relationships involving children, families, schools and communities will also have an impact on perceptions and expectations of *readiness* (Dockett & Perry, 2007).

The US National Education Goals Panel (1997) identified three components of school readiness:

1. Children's readiness for school (enabling them to participate in classroom and learning experiences).
2. Schools' readiness for children (schools responding to the children enrolled).
3. Family and community supports and services that contribute to children's readiness (promoting family and community environments that support learning).

These elements indicate that children's characteristics are one, but not the only, factor to be considered in discussions of readiness.

Children's readiness for school

Five dimensions of children's readiness for school have been identified (Kagan, Moore & Bredekamp, 1995):

- Physical wellbeing and motor development (including health status, growth, physical abilities).
- Social and emotional development (children's ability to interact with others, their perceptions of themselves, and ability to understand and respond to the feelings of others).
- Approaches to learning (including children's dispositions towards learning).
- Language development (including the ability to communicate effectively with others and emergent literacy).
- Cognition and general knowledge (including knowledge of specific cultural and social practices).

Several researchers have described these dimensions in detail (Emig, Moore & Scarupa, 2001; Halle, Zaff, Calkins & Margie, 2000), noting the importance of considering all areas of development, not just cognitive and language skills or curriculum areas such as literacy and numeracy, in determining children's readiness for school.

North American surveys of kindergarten teachers have indicated that many children are deemed to not have the necessary prerequisite skills to succeed in school (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2000). One consequence has been to focus on remediating these deficiencies to ensure that children do develop the skills and knowledge regarded as necessary (Niemeyer & Scott-Little, 2001). For example, several states have developed readiness assessments (Saluja, Scott-Little & Clifford, 2000), and children deemed 'not ready' often wait another year before starting school (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004).

Readiness assessments focus on the skills of individual children (Niemeyer & Scott-Little, 2001). There are many different assessments, including the Gesell School Readiness Test (Haines, Ames & Gillespie, 1980) and the Brigance Inventory of Early Development (Brigance, 1982). Readiness assessments are also incorporated in statements of standards, such as those developed by the Florida Department of Education (2008), which address the following areas:

- Physical health—physical health, knowledge of wellness.
- Approaches to learning—eagerness and curiosity, persistence, creativity and inventiveness, planning and reflection.
- Social and emotional development—self-concept, self-control, relationships with adults, relationships

with peers, social problem-solving.

- Language and communication—listening, speaking, vocabulary, sentence and structure, conversation.
- Emergent literacy—emergent reading, emergent writing.
- Cognitive development and general knowledge—mathematical thinking, scientific thinking, social studies, the arts.
- Motor development—gross motor development, fine motor development.

In many Australian schools, general checklists developed by teachers, regions or school systems are used to gauge children's skills and understandings of areas deemed to be important in making a successful start to school.

Critics of these assessments highlight the problems of measuring skills in isolation, as well as the often inappropriate use of both the tests and the results (Snow, 2006). The predictive power of readiness assessment has also been challenged, with La Paro and Pianta (2000) reporting that such assessments predict, on average, 25 per cent of variance in early school academic/cognitive performance, and less than 10 per cent of the variance in social/behavioural measures in kindergarten, first grade or second grade. Dockett and Perry (2007, p. 32) state:

Readiness assessments provide limited information about academic and social success in the first three years of school. Other factors—including what happens at school—account for the majority of variance after two to three years at school.

There is much variation among children starting school. Some of this can be attributed to age. However, much of this difference can also be attributed to children's experiences (Bowman, Donovan & Burns, 2001). In many situations, there is a tendency to equate age and maturity so that older children are described as being more mature. Children who are more mature are those most often regarded as ready for school (Dockett & Perry, 2007). There is clear evidence that children who are older when they start school generally know more than their younger peers (Denton & West, 2002). However, this is also evidence indicating that, in terms of predicting school success, what happens at school is even more important than the age at which children start school (Meisels, 1999).

Depending on the state Australian families live in, and the school system children will attend, some families will have a choice about when a child will start school. For example, a child living in NSW, born in July and planning to attend a public school, could start school in the year they turn five (and so start school at age four years and six months) or they could start school at the

beginning of the year they turn six (starting school at age five years and six months). This is possible because the cut-off date for age is the end of July in the year the child turns five, and there is only one intake of new students into schools each year. Some families with this choice will have their child start school as soon as they are eligible; other families will keep a child out of school for the extra year. There are many reasons behind such choices. One reason reported, particularly in the North American literature, draws on the belief that children who start school older, rather than younger, have both a social and educational advantage when they do start. This process of delaying entry has been dubbed 'redshirting' (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). Redshirting is more common for boys than girls, and among higher-income families (Datar, 2006; Graue & DiPerna, 2000). Anecdotal reports of delayed entry to school in Australia suggest a similar situation.

The age at which children can or should start school remains contentious. Graue (1999, pp. 110–111) reminds us that there will never be one best age for all children in all contexts: '... there is not a magic date by which all children will be ensured success'. There is mixed evidence on the value of children starting school older, rather than younger, with some reports of younger children making rapid progress in the first year of school (Stipek & Byler, 2001) and other reports of younger children starting school at a disadvantage (McClelland, Morrison & Holmes, 2000). It may well be that these contrasting results indicate that age alone is not an ideal predictor of school success. Other factors, such as family, school and community contexts, as well as the experiences children have at school, interact with factors such as age. It is also important to note that success at school is often equated with academic success—yet social success can be equally important (Thompson, 2002).

Children's feelings about school and their abilities to interact positively with others at school form the basis of their social and emotional readiness. Other important factors include children's ability to regulate their own behaviour and to recognise and respond appropriately to the feelings and perspectives of others (Ladd, Herald & Kochel, 2006; Thompson, 2002). There are several advantages to considering children's social and emotional readiness for school—including the recognition that social and academic success are often linked (Klein, 2002) and that relationships and interactions occur within contexts—suggesting that readiness is, at least partially, about children's interactions with people in a specific context. Relationships assume particular importance as children start school. These include children's relationships with peers and teachers as well as relationships between families and school.

Assessing the readiness of individual children at the point of school entry remains a common experience for many families and educators across Australia. Children, too, tend to emphasise the things they need to know or be able to do in order to start school (Dockett & Perry, 2007). It certainly is possible to identify a set of skills and knowledge regarded as providing the basis for an effective start to school. It is also possible to assess children against these specific skills and knowledge. However, a reliance only on this approach fails to recognise the importance of interactions and contextual factors, the notion that readiness means different things in different contexts, and the research evidence that such assessments provide limited predictive information about children's future school success. In an effort to address these limitations, Stipek (2002) has called for a 'greater focus on making schools ready for children by tailoring teaching and learning opportunities to children's diverse skills, rather than concentrating on making children "ready" for schools' (p. 8).

Schools' readiness for children

The second component of the US National Education Goals Panel's (1997) definition of readiness emphasised the importance of ready schools—schools responsive to their student population. These characteristics of ready schools have been outlined by Ackerman and Barnett (2005):

1. Ready schools *provide necessary supports* for children. These could include transition programs, high expectations for all children, as well as staff committed to developing programs appropriate for all children.
2. Ready schools have *teaching and learning programs* that support the professional development of teachers, recognise the importance of adjusting teaching styles to respond to children, and facilitate parent involvement.
3. Ready schools are *adaptable*. Ready schools have strong leadership that facilitates adaptation to meet the needs and strengths of their students and access appropriate resources. Collaborative relationships between school and family, school and community are promoted.

Assessing the readiness of schools for children can take many forms. For example, it could include reviews of class sizes, the number of first-year-of-school teachers with early childhood training, implementation of a developmentally appropriate curriculum, and professional development opportunities for teachers (Duran & Wilson, 2004). In other contexts, effective transition-to-school programs or high levels of community engagement will be factors that contribute to schools' readiness for children (Gonzalez, 2002).

One approach to ensuring that schools are ready for children has been to promote continuity between prior-to-school settings and schools. This does not mean that prior-to-school settings should embrace the same curriculum, or curriculum expectations. It does suggest that closer connections between settings can be promoted. Many prior-to-school settings and schools already collaborate in ways that support such continuity, often through the development and implementation of transition to school programs (Perry, Dockett & Howard, 2002). Effective transition to school programs demonstrate a commitment to engaging with children and families across the transition period. Other strategies for promoting continuity across prior-to-school and school contexts could include providing time and opportunities for staff in different settings to build understandings of their approaches and expectations, developing complementary curriculum and approaches to learning and teaching, and sharing resources.

The influence of schools on children's perceived readiness cannot be overlooked. What happens at school is critical in determining how children and their families respond to and engage with school, both at the time of starting school and in terms of later school success (Meisels, 1999). Schools that provide supports for children—in the form of transition programs, learning programs directly relevant for children, and programs promoting continuity of educational context and commitment—are likely to be schools that are 'ready' for all, rather than some, children.

Promoting a positive transition from home to school requires mutual understanding and respect: both school and home need to understand what occurs in each context and to respect that. To achieve this aim, some major shifts in thinking from teachers and parents are needed. While the need for parents to respect school is often emphasised in educational literature, Doucet and Tudge (2007, p. 315) note that the same respect is required from teachers for parents:

A clear gap in communication often emerges; in the same way that teachers tend to treat children in a top-down fashion, trying to scaffold children to fit into the school rather than trying to learn from them and encouraging a mutual adaptation ... they tend to treat parents as novices to the educational 'game'. In this top-down model, teachers take on the role of experts who own the knowledge about schooling.

Mutual respect can be seen in the relationships and interactions between school staff and families. Schools that engage with families in multiple ways—reaching out to communities rather than expecting families to adopt specific school agendas—promote greater understanding and respect. For example, where schools make efforts to engage with families in their

first languages or in venues that are comfortable for them, the view that families have much to contribute to their children's education is promoted in a context that also promotes respect for the school staff.

Ready schools employ ready teachers. Such teachers regularly access professional development that encourages them to develop flexible approaches to teaching and learning that engage their students, develop their own capacities as well as those of their students, maintain high expectations for all students, and build the collaborative relationships that underpin efforts to promote success for all students. Positive, respectful relationships, combined with strong leadership, are at the core of ready schools. These elements are similar to those described by Fullan (2007) as critical in promoting educational reform and by Newmann (1996) as underpinning the effective schools movement.

Family and community supports

In any definition of readiness for school, individual children and the schools they attend are important. Also important is the broader context in which children, families and schools exist. Piotrkowski, Botsko and Matthews (2000) offer a definition of readiness that includes 'social, political, organisational, educational, and personal resources that support children's success at school entry' (p. 554). These supports reflect the third area identified by the National Education Goals Panel (1997).

The supports available within communities contribute to perceptions of readiness. The National Education Goals Panel (1997) identified three elements of family and community support:

- Access to high-quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that help prepare children for school.
- Recognition of the importance of parents as teachers and access to support for parents to fulfil this role.
- Provision of adequate nutrition, physical activity, and access to health care.

Various states and counties in the US have interpreted these elements in different ways and developed their own dimensions of family and community support, relevant to their own context. For example, the state of Wisconsin (Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, 2003) has indicated that some of the major family and community supports needed to promote children's readiness for school are:

- children receive the health care and nutrition services they need for healthy development (including prenatal, maternal health care).
- families have access to resources needed to support

their children's growth and development (including adequate income, housing, employment, education and family support).

- all children have access to quality early care and education programs. Children at developmental and/or social risk receive early intervention services.
- children grow up in safe and stable environments.

The attention to family and community supports recognises that readiness is something that develops gradually over time and as children and families engage in a range of experiences (Snow, 2006). High-quality prior-to-school programs that are accessible—culturally, geographically and financially—have demonstrated positive outcomes for children's social and academic competence and are linked with a positive start to school (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Childcare Research Network, 2002; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004).

What happens in families has also been linked to children's readiness for school. Pertinent family characteristics include caregiving practices, parental education and attitudes and socioeconomic status (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta & Howes, 2002). Families provide a range of supports for children that can be particularly important in facilitating a positive start to school. These include providing a nurturing environment; promoting children's learning through interactions with valued people and resources; acting as mediators to help children negotiate outside the family; and acting as advocates for children in seeking out positive environments and resources, and intervening for children as appropriate (Pianta, 2004, pp. 15–16). Each of these supports helps children interact appropriately in different contexts—such as home and school. However, families do not exist in isolation, and the community supports that exist and are accessible for families can determine the extent to which families can fulfil these roles.

Different communities have different expectations of children, and this can extend to different perceptions of what is required or important as children start school. For example, in some rural communities where going to school involves a lot of travel, expectations about how children will manage that travel influence perceptions of children's readiness for school. In other communities, where academic success is emphasised, children's academic preparedness for school will be at the forefront of discussions of readiness.

Communities have an important role to play in defining and shaping perceptions of readiness. Communities provide infrastructure and social links that together make up social capital (Putnam, 2004). Communities with high levels of social capital provide a range of benefits for children through the relationships that exist and the availability of resources. Physical resources—such as

schools, child care and health services—are important. So, too, are rich relationships that buffer and support families.

When schools and early childhood services engage with and in communities with a focus on promoting a positive start to school, they can enhance the available social capital within a community. This occurs through the building of stronger relationships and connections—for example, between preschools and schools, between families and schools. Engaging with communities can also enhance the provision of resources—for example by pooling resources or by combining to lobby for the greater provision of resources.

One significant approach to considering issues of readiness has focused on developing a community measure of readiness, rather than a measure of individual children's readiness for school. The EDI (Early Development Instrument) (Janus, 2003) is compiled from teacher responses to an extensive questionnaire about children at their school. While data are collected about individual children, these data are reported at the community level, enabling communities to identify what works well in that community, as well as ways to improve the supports provided for children and families. An Australian adaptation of the model—the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)—has been developed (Sayer, Coutts, Goldfeld, Oberklaid, Brinkman & Silburn, 2007). Results report percentages of children in each community described as developmentally vulnerable, as well as those described as doing well across several developmental domains. Community measures, such as the EDI and the AEDI, allow communities to monitor what happens for their children and families, and to plan to change local resources, provision or supports to improve children's life chances.

Changing views of readiness

There are many ways of defining and conceptualising children's readiness for school. These, in turn, influence the ways readiness is enacted. For example, maturationist perspectives reflect on the 'gift of time' to promote readiness (Graue, 2006), and environmental perspectives draw on behaviourist theories to identify demonstrable skills and abilities that can be assessed in order to determine children's readiness for school (Meisels, 1999). The approach underpinning this paper is classified as interactionist. It incorporates elements of maturationist and environmentalist theory, as well as recognition of the importance of social and cultural contexts that derives from social constructivist theory. Building on this, an interactionist definition construes readiness as a relative term, focusing on the interaction between characteristics of the individual child and the child's environment. This perspective argues that 'readiness is something to be demonstrated by children in situ, over time' (Meisels, 1999, p. 58).

Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological theory recognises the importance of both the individual and the context, and the interactions between these. It is through regular interactions with people, objects and symbols within the environment that individuals learn what is expected, what is considered appropriate, and how they should interact with others. Characteristics of individuals will also influence these interactions. So it is with the transition to school: as children interact with other people in the context of school, they develop an understanding of what is expected of them at school, what activities are considered appropriate within school, and how they are expected to interact with others. Successful interactions, including a successful start to school, will depend not only on the characteristics of individual children, but also on the nature of the school environment and the community context in which the school, children and families are located. This perspective argues that understanding children's readiness for school must go beyond assessing children's skills and abilities and judging how well children will fit within the existing structure of school. Rather, readiness for school is conceptualised as a complex set of interactions between individuals and their families, schools and communities.

Conclusion

As communities reiterate the importance of education, as families seek to support their children's success in education, and as educators face increasing calls for accountability, there is renewed attention paid to notions of children's readiness for school. Throughout this paper we have argued that any discussion of school readiness should consist of much more than measures of individual children's skills and knowledge. Schools' readiness for children, and the available family and community supports, play an important role in developing children's competencies and creating environments where all children are supported.

We argue that readiness is a relational concept. When we talk of readiness, we must talk of readiness for something. In any discussion of readiness, the school itself must be considered—a child may be 'ready' for one school but 'not ready' for another. When we consider readiness for school, we must move beyond the view that readiness is something that exists within individual children, in measurable quantities, able to be 'topped up', or left to 'mature' when specific levels are not met. We must consider the role of families, schools and communities. Children do not live in isolation—they are members of many different groups and interact in many different contexts. Experiences and interactions within these contexts, including those occurring within and between families, prior-to-school settings and schools, contribute to perceptions and expectations of readiness. Many people and groups contribute to children's readiness—the children themselves, families, schools and other educational

contexts and communities in general. Readiness develops over time and through cumulative experiences and interactions, mediated by relationships.

Redefining readiness as a characteristic of child, school, family and community supports and interactions also redefines the expectations of all involved. Such a definition rejects notions of individual children being labelled ready or not, in favour of a much more collaborative approach that identifies school, child, family and community strengths and seeks to build on these, while also identifying areas where change and greater access to resources and support is needed.

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