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## Parent Perspectives on How a Child-Centered Preschool Experience Shapes Children's Navigation of Kindergarten

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### Abstract

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The authors used qualitative case study methodology to explore parents' perceptions of their children's readiness for kindergarten. The authors interviewed parents, focusing on their children's experiences during their transition from a child-centered, play-based preschool setting guided by an emergent curriculum into a range of diverse kindergarten environments. Using data from parent interviews at the end of the children's kindergarten year and from the children's formative preschool assessments ("developmental stories"), the authors focused on six children's experiences of transition to kindergarten. Findings suggest that habits of mind developed during the preschool experience figured prominently in the children's transition processes into a variety of kindergarten settings, enabling them to successfully navigate their new, more structured environments.

### Introduction

*I think that Nim adjusted really quickly to kindergarten because it had gone so positively [at RGC]. She was never pushed to be something that she wasn't. She was taken on her terms and valued and celebrated for who she was, and I think that was just a great thing for her to learn. I think the basic respect and valuing that you give kids here is so huge. I think so many places don't give that to children, and I think it is so essential for growing and being able to connect with who [sic] you are. Both of my children really got that [at RGC], and that may be the most valuable thing. They have this sense that who they are and what they have to say matters. Within the context of a community, that other people matter, that compassion matters, that individuals are valued. (Shari, mother of two former RGC students)*

What does it mean to be "ready" for kindergarten? How are we preparing children to bring their strongest possible selves into the kindergarten classroom? What lasting experiences will they take from preschool to help them navigate their transition to kindergarten? These are compelling questions for preschool educators who look to philosophies of education and "preparation" for what will best help them support their students' future educational experiences. Given the current shift toward an increasingly academic focus in kindergarten classrooms (Hatch, 2002), discontinuities between play-based, child-centered preschool classrooms and many of the kindergartens that receive their graduates have become more pronounced in recent years. Although ample evidence supports this approach to teaching and learning at the preschool level (Gopnik, 2005; Diamond, 2010), young children entering kindergarten face increasing pressure to meet expectations imposed by more academic curricula (Bodrova, 2008; Diamond, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to examine the kindergarten transition of a group of children from a child-

centered preschool classroom that enacted an emergent curriculum (Dewey, 1902; Rinaldi, 2001) through the perspectives and interpretations of their families. Parents have been identified as important sources of knowledge regarding their children's transitions, learning, and aptitudes (Brink, 2002; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999; Dickinson & De Temple, 1998). Brink, for example, argues, "It is imperative... that an accurate picture of the child is obtained through the assessment process. The information that can be provided by parents and families is essential in creating this picture" (p. 251). Parents' perceptions, although subjective in nature, can offer nuanced, personal accounts of children's experiences. In this study, we considered parents to be powerful sources of knowledge regarding their children's kindergarten transition processes and sought their insights to inform our understanding of the children's experiences.

We are a preschool teacher and a faculty director of the Rita Gold Center (RGC), where this study was conducted. As Center "insiders," we saw this study as a first step toward understanding the ways in which our center's emergent, inquiry-based, child-led curriculum prepares children for the range of kindergarten classrooms that they encounter when they leave us. An overarching goal of this study was to begin to identify the habits of mind (Costa & Kallick, 2008) that children carry with them when moving from an emergent, child-centered, integrated curriculum into the structured, academically fragmented curricula of many kindergarten classrooms (Gardner, 1991).

## Theoretical Framework

This study's constructivist theoretical framework problematizes the concept of "readiness" or "preparation" for school, and is informed by (1) the notion of the early childhood curriculum as providing an integrated learning experience that reflects children's perspectives and inquiries (Dewey, 1902; Franklin, 1994); (2) an understanding that habits of mind are tools that may be carried and reinterpreted meaningfully throughout children's educational experiences (Katz, 1993; Graue, 1993; Galinsky, 2010); and (3) a view of the child as a competent, nuanced thinker capable of applying skills to address new challenges, structures, and communities (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990).

## True Kindergarten Readiness and Skills Preparation

Graue (1993) explains that meanings of "school readiness" are locally constructed and thus constantly shifting. Given the instability of such conceptions of readiness, we look beyond the situational for a broader definition; the current study draws a distinction between children's actual "readiness" (Graue, 1993) for kindergarten, and the traditional definition of readiness as a matter of skills preparation. Kagan (1990) refers to the latter as the conception of "readiness for school," which is a construct built on children's acquisition of skills or basic concepts such as letters or numbers, and which does not represent actual preparedness to fully enter into and succeed in learning in the kindergarten classroom. Rather it is indicative of a child's acquisition of certain skills which are not entirely essential to success in the kindergarten environment (Graue, 1993, 2009). Kindergarten teachers report that rote memorization of numbers, letters, colors, and so forth does not make students successful in kindergarten (Graue, 1993; Ackerman & Barnett, 2005). Those skills are, in fact, quite easily taught; it is the "readiness for learning," the ability to fully engage in the kindergarten experience, that is most challenging to teach and yet is the essential component of the child's learning and preparedness for kindergarten (Katz, 1993; Graue, 1993).

## Habits of Mind

Genuine readiness for learning involves "habits of mind" (Costa & Kallick, 2008) that enable individuals to seek, acquire, and respond to knowledge about their world. Habits of mind have also been conceptualized as dispositions (Katz, 1993) or life skills (Galinsky, 2010). Galinsky argues,

...think of executive brain functions as managing, not ordering. We use them to manage our attention, our emotions, and our behavior in order to reach our goals. Nor are they just intellectual skills—they involve weaving together our social, emotional, and intellectual capacities" (2010, p.6).

Habits of mind may include such traits as persistence, thinking flexibly, taking responsible risks, applying past knowledge, listening to others with understanding and empathy, and questioning and posing problems. They can be transferred across diverse settings; children use them to make sense of their school environments as they encounter evolving academic and social expectations.

## The Competent Child

In this study and in the RGC classroom, the child is perceived as a competent, complex thinker, researcher, and learner capable of deftly integrating information from past experiences to derive meaning and navigate environments (Dewey, 1902, 1915; Franklin, 1994; Rinaldi, 2001). Rogoff (1990) offers a similar perspective: "It is part of the nature of children to seek the meaning—the purpose and connotation—of what goes on

around them, and to involve themselves in ongoing activity" (p. 18).

## The Emergent Curriculum

Dewey (1902, 1915) argued that children's most powerful learning originates in their genuine experiences. Children's understandings of the meaning of their experiences are then supported or challenged and extended within the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978). An important element of the philosophical grounding of this study and of RGC is the belief that emergent, child-centered practices offer optimal learning experiences for young children; we view these teaching practices as those that best meet children's thinking, learning, and developmental needs. The notion of young children's integrated thinking is seconded in Franklin's (1994) work on the interconnectedness of the child's learning, and shared by educators in the early childhood programs of Reggio Emilia, Italy (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993).

## Research Questions

This study was a first step in a larger, ongoing investigation of RGC children's transition experiences. It was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do families describe the ways that their children demonstrated forms of "readiness" within their kindergarten environments?
2. From the parents' perspectives, what do individual children bring from the child-centered, emergent preschool classroom to shape their experiences in kindergarten? What habits of mind do they see as continuous across the transition?

## Methods

We selected qualitative case study methods for this exploratory study (Stake, 2005) as we looked closely at the habits of mind parents perceived that their children carried into their kindergarten environments from RGC. We chose to found the data on parent perceptions because of the particularly rich information about children's transitions to which parents have access (Brink, 2002; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999; Dickinson & DeTemple, 1998). Brink (2002) explains:

Early childhood professionals need to accept that parents and families know the child in ways that educators cannot. They also need to acknowledge that families can provide information on the child's history, behaviors in a variety of settings, and cultural and family concerns that are crucial to developing an accurate understanding of the child (p. 256).

Thus we considered parental perspectives to be potentially rich sources of valid insights into the children's transitions to kindergarten.

## Setting

RGC is a university-affiliated child care center, fully integrated with the early childhood education program at the College, and is overseen by a faculty director (the first author). It is a practicum site for students who are studying to be early childhood teachers and a research site for faculty and students throughout the College. The preschool classroom serves children ranging in age from 3-5 years. Group size ranges from 12-15 children. The co-head teachers are assisted by student teachers and graduate assistants; typically, three to five adults are in the classroom. The center is guided by a strong curricular philosophy as well as a mission to support research and learning in early childhood education.

In RGC's emergent curriculum, the majority of curricular choices arise in response to the children's play and interests. The teachers consistently interact with the children, responding to and documenting their play as individuals, as well as their involvement in group activities. The focus on the individual interests and pursuits of each child is reflected in the freedom the children are allowed in their play and the responsive interactions of the teachers. Lickey and Powers (2011) describe this type of approach as reflecting "the philosophy that all children have a basis from which to begin a meaningful and authentic process of discovery and learning" (p. 2). The emergent curriculum is viewed as not only meeting young children's immediate needs, but also eliciting their strengths and sustaining them during challenging transitions.

## Participants

Families of seven children who had recently transitioned to kindergarten after spending at least two years in the RGC program were invited to participate in the study. One family did not respond to the request and another family agreed but was away during the interview period. Four families ultimately participated, representing five children (two boys and three girls). Participant characteristics are described in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
Participant Characteristics

Child	Parent Interviewed	Family Placement	Cultural/Linguistic Heritage	Kindergarten Attended
Alexander	Joanne	Older of two children in immediate family; two older step siblings are present in the home sporadically	Third generation Italian on mother's side.  Italian spoken at home; Alexander comprehends but responds in English	Highly ranked Gifted and Talented School in New York City
Maggie	Rowan	Middle child of three children  Oldest sibling has special needs.	European-American Only English spoken.	Inclusive public school in suburban New York serving kindergarten through first grade; school is located across the street from the family home
Samantha	Fritz	Only child	South American on mother's side; summers are spent with family in South America.  Spanish and English are spoken at home; Samantha speaks fluent Spanish	Progressive New York City public school
Ky	Shari	One of two adopted children who essentially function as twins  Ky is about 2 weeks younger than his sister Nim, but they have been together their entire lives and were placed in the same crib at birth	Kazakh by birth; spent the first 9 months of life in Kazakhstan. Aware of his adoption; will explain "some babies come from Kazakhstan" but identifies as "from New York!" Only English spoken	Small private kindergarten in New York City serving preschool and kindergarten only
Nim	Shari	One of two adopted children who essentially function as twins  Nim is about 2 weeks older than her brother Ky, but they have been together their entire lives and were placed in the same crib at birth	Kazakh by birth; spent the first 9 months of life in Kazakhstan; aware of her adoption but identifies as American  Only English spoken	Small private kindergarten in New York City serving preschool and kindergarten only

### Data Sources

*Interviews.* Both researchers met with individual parents for interviews at the RGC. Interviews consisted of open ended questions (see [Appendix](#)) which led to conversations about the children's transitions to and experiences in their kindergarten classrooms. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded and transcribed.

*Assessments.* The preschool assessments reviewed in our data are developmental stories that follow a full year of the child's experience in the classroom based on daily written documentation charts or notes on the child. The teacher reviews a child's charts in their entirety as a foundation for writing an extensive "story" or narrative assessment of the child's preschool year. Although each story is unique, all follow a framework for describing the child's characteristics and ways of engaging in the life of the classroom. We referred to these stories to establish connections between children's ways of being in preschool as described by their teachers and their parents' perceptions of their transitions to kindergarten.

### Analysis

Independent reviews of the interviews and stories were conducted by each researcher and coded for emergent themes (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), allowing the researchers to independently select recurring ideas expressed in the data. The researchers then engaged in collaborative analysis, synthesizing findings across cases into three overarching themes (Stake, 2005; Wolcott, 1994). The interviews were analyzed for parent perceptions of transition, changes across the preschool to kindergarten setting, and for both learning and social activities that parents reported occurring in the kindergarten classrooms. The children's developmental stories were analyzed for learning characteristics and social skills, as well as the children's individual strengths and interests as expressed in the preschool setting. The researchers discussed emergent themes, the ecologies of the families (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and the overall relationship to curricular philosophy and perspectives on kindergarten readiness.

### Findings

Three overarching themes emerged: *Engagement of Self*, *Social Adeptness and Flexibility*, and *Reading and Navigating Environments*. The themes represented particular habits of mind encouraged by the philosophy at RGC, and which, according to parents' reports, became tools with which the children navigated their kindergarten experiences. Comparison of data from parent interviews and the developmental stories revealed that children met the challenges of kindergarten in much the same ways that they had met the challenges of preschool. They generalized skills and competencies learned as preschoolers to the demands of the kindergarten curriculum and social environment. Anecdotes and interview responses which best represented the themes were agreed upon by both researchers and used to help articulate connections across and between the children's experiences (Stake, 2005; Wolcott, 1994).

### Engagement of Self

The parents reported that their children demonstrated high levels of self awareness and self assurance which proved essential during their transitions to their kindergarten environments. They drew on personal strengths they had exhibited in the preschool classroom to solve problems and negotiate challenges. They perceived school as a positive place where they could find ways to demonstrate their individual creativity. They were able to self-regulate and to seek out meaningful spaces for themselves within the context of kindergarten.

*Starting with Strength.* A common thread in the parent interviews was a focus on the cultivation of individual children's strengths, which parents saw as a by-product of the emergent, child-centered curriculum at RGC. Evidence of children engaging their strengths was shown in all of the preschool stories. Every child's story included examples of ways that he or she took initiative and played a role in shaping and guiding the curriculum and activity of the classroom as a whole. Samantha had organized formal preschool balls. Ky had conducted Star Wars research. Maggie and Nim had engineered complex dance performances, and Alexander led classmates on elaborate adventures that centered on the jungle gym. The stories showed that their RGC teachers perceived these children as classroom leaders, whose ideas and initiative shaped the classroom community.

The notion of "starting from a point of real strength" (in the words of one mother) was articulated by all of the parents when discussing their children's kindergarten transitions. Parents described their children as approaching the transition with confidence and without trepidation. Maggie's father Rowan reported, "She went every day without tears. She was up early. She was, you know, basically running out the door, and it's been that way the whole year. She has not missed a day." Shari, mother of Ky and Nim, said that her son Ky "really took to it like a duck to water. Like, he'd come home brimming with exciting information, all thrilled." Samantha's father Fritz noted that his daughter's kindergarten transition "...went quite smoothly and it was very uneventful."

The parents frequently described their children as starting kindergarten with a great deal of confidence in themselves and the ability to use their voices as a part of a larger community. They reported that the children consistently expressed a preference for "choice time," "creative writing," and other parts of the school day in which they could make choices that suited their interests and contributed to their learning; one parent described these times as, "...those places where you're the most *you*." This "engagement of self" seemed to enable each of the children to connect their past experiences to opportunities afforded by kindergarten in order to make their learning more meaningful. For example, Rowan commented that "the open curriculum and the collaborative nature of the classroom (at RGC) really paid big dividends for Maggie." According to Ky's mother Shari, midway through his kindergarten year, the teachers spoke informally with her "about how he could integrate information, like memories ... integrating it into new information and how just, you know, how deep his thinking ran along those things." Alexander's mother Joanne made an explicit connection between his success in kindergarten and his experiences at RGC: "I was struck at how good a transition he made, and that was really just very powerful...there was a real confidence that he acquired during these three years (at RGC) in himself and his abilities, his ability to self-regulate, control himself."

*Physical Communication.* The RGC philosophy acknowledges that from the earliest years, young children use their whole bodies to communicate with the world, shaping their voices through an integration of verbal and physical communication (see, e.g., Fogel, 2009; Trawick-Smith, 2006). This physicality is understood and embraced as central to young children's communication and participation in the classroom (see, e.g., Giudici, Rinaldi, & Krechevsky, 2001; Dewey, 1902). The children's preschool stories described a wide range of instances in which their physical communication was treated as a part of the larger conversation in their classroom.

For example, Nim's story described how "day after day, Nim would express an interest in watching ballet videos of Swan Lake or The Nutcracker on the computer and then ask to put on a performance. She had unknowingly become quite an influence and leader within the preschool community as many of her friends began to share this interest in dance and would allow Nim to organize shows in which they would all take part. Within a few weeks we had also arranged for the preschoolers to take ballet lessons at a local dance school..."

Similarly, in Alexander's preschool story, his teacher wrote, "One day we witnessed an extended play sequence in which Alexander and his friends were 'dumping' manipulatives and dress-up materials in and around the loft,

and talking in a loud, excited manner...we asked Alexander about the play, and he very articulately told us what had happened. He said there was a big storm and they were all hiding in the loft. He stated that he was the storm and he was putting snowflakes and dresses in the cracks of the stairs."

In contrast, the parents reported that in their children's kindergarten classrooms the more active aspects of children's communication did not seem to be valued. Maggie's father Rowan indicated that the atmosphere in her kindergarten classroom was "organized, structured, and efficient. Professional, you know..." He also said, "I mean, Mrs. G. is very, you know—these are the rules and it's very directed. Very, very directed...[Maggie's] a stay-in-your-desk kind of kid." Similarly, Alexander's mother Joanne reported, "They're at desks most of the day...I mean, they have to sit at assigned tables...and they get rotated a bit, but they're there quite a bit..."

In most of the kindergarten classrooms the parents described, children could be physically active either at recess or "choice-time," which represented a small percentage of the school day. The interviews consistently reflected parents' awareness of the strengths and level of involvement their children displayed when they could actively engage their bodies in their learning and interactions with others. For example, Joanne reported that in kindergarten, her son Alexander "really liked the movement, you know, anything with movement, he's happy. So, he liked gym and science." Rowan referred to active times of the kindergarten day as being fruitful for Maggie's communication with others: "I think her friendships were developed more along the lines of recess and lunch time and gym and things like that, that were more similar to RGC." The parents seemed acutely aware of this dissonance between the physically active components of the children's preschool experiences and the limitations placed on their children's physical communication in the more sedentary environments of the kindergartens.

### **Social Adeptness and Flexibility**

According to teachers' assessments and parents' reflections, in both preschool and kindergarten, the children showed high levels of social adeptness and flexibility, beyond typical notions of social competence. They consistently showed an aptitude for leadership, which Recchia (2011) describes as a relational construct which balances children's independent ideas and voices with a high level of awareness of other children, allowing them to assert themselves while also responding to and integrating the needs of others. Our analysis showed that this combination of traits allowed the children to engage a broad range of peers in their play. They were dominant at times, but also capable of accepting the strengths of others, making their social relationships strong and fluid.

*Social Empathy.* At RGC, the children had experienced a curriculum in which development of social empathy was central. All children were valued as contributing members of a larger community and became accustomed to integrating diverse peers' voices into their play and project work. The six RGC graduates' developmental stories reflected the empathy and awareness of others evident in their play in the preschool. Alexander's story described how he created a show called "Space Princess Incredibles", carefully designed to engage classmates who were enthusiastic about superheroes as well as those who preferred princesses. According to Nim's story, she had mentored a younger student who was experiencing a challenging transition into the preschool classroom. Nim was highly aware of her peer's distress, and perceived herself as responsible for supporting this child as she gradually became integrated into the community. Maggie's developmental story highlighted her thoughtful care for all of her peers in the classroom, and the ways in which her attitude shaped the class as a whole by encouraging other children to consider their classmates' perspectives. Maggie was also described as thinking carefully about her siblings; she often saved "special treats" from her classroom for them, despite the fact that she would then have less herself. Her preschool teachers scaffolded these habits of mind, supporting her verbally and encouraging her to visit a sibling in another classroom.

It became evident that the children's social empathy helped them to make meaningful connections with peers in both preschool and kindergarten. Galinsky (2010) refers to "perspective taking", which can help children in relationships with peers in addition to enabling them to take the teachers' perspective. As preschoolers, the children took the lead in developing play themes and ideas, but they could also step back so that other children's ideas could be integrated or others could take the lead. These traits seemed to carry over into the kindergarten settings. For example, Maggie's father Rowan reported that in kindergarten, she "...waits and she picks her spot, and you know, eventually she warms up to people, but the kids seem to really— she's very interested in people, so the kids really you know, I think they take note of that. Like she knows everyone's favorite color and she knows what everyone eats for lunch..." Shari, the mother of Ky and Nim, commented that Ky "has a very strong sense of justice...Like noticing on behalf of his peers as well as himself." She also said, "They both just really got that [at RGC], and that may be the most valuable thing, like just this sense that who they are and what they have to say matters. Within the context of a community, that other people matter, that compassion matters, that individuals are valued."

It was evident that the children had become strong social participants in their kindergarten environments, sought out for their ideas and their responsiveness to the thoughts, feelings, and ideas of others.

### **Reading and Navigating Environments**

According to their parents, the children demonstrated a particular ability to observe, research, and analyze the culture of the kindergarten classroom to inform their choices about their participation and behavior. Despite the dramatic differences between school environments, all of the parents reported that their children transitioned fluidly, consistently wanting to go to school. They seemed to quickly comprehend the culture of their school settings and to integrate themselves fairly easily— seeking out appropriate spaces in which to express themselves, and identifying times to be “quiet as can be” (as one child was initially described by her kindergarten teacher).

*Environmental Reading and Empowerment.* The parents frequently described their children as inquirers and collectors of information about their new environments, a characteristic that Costa and Kallick (2008) refer to as “remaining open to continuous learning” (p. 37). The children seemed to be adept at reading the terrain of the kindergarten classroom, its expectations, limitations, and freedoms, and to make choices accordingly.

Shari, mother of Ky and Nim, reported that the kindergarten teachers “said that he (Ky) was beautiful at following directions, and ...[talked about] his excitement and intellectual engagement.” According to Alexander’s mother Joanne, “The things he brings home tend to be things that he does during his free choice time or on rainy days they’ll have indoor recess, so he’ll bring home notes he’s written to me. He’s into making mazes now.” Maggie’s father Rowan commented, “I mean, [RGC] was basically you had all day to, you know, develop your friendships ... in the [kindergarten], I’m sure that all of her friends that she made weren’t really made during classroom time... [F]rom what we did get to see and from what we can surmise from the parent-teacher conference or whatever, I mean, she’s a stay-in-your desk kind of kid, and her behavior would be much more...(pause) would be quiet. I guess that’s the word.”

None of the children seemed to balk at the increased structure or academic focus their parents described. Instead, their parents reported that they were proactive in reading the environment, acclimating to it while seeking spaces for self-assertion, and pushing back when the environment was having a negative impact. They recognized that they must “follow directions” or that certain activities were only for “choice time,” and they sought out the intellectual engagement available in their moments of relative freedom. In all of these instances, the ability to effectively “read” the kindergarten rules, expectations, and possibilities, helped the children to meet their own individual learning needs.

*Choosing to Be “Quiet as Can Be”?* As discussed above, all of the children whose parents participated in the study seemed to align their classroom behaviors accordingly to their understandings of their kindergarten environments. For several children, this clearly allowed them to both meet the expectations of the classroom and seek out moments for self-expression. However, some concerns arose around the reported behavior of two of the children. At one point in his interview, Samantha’s father Fritz reported, “Diana and I dropped her off at school one day and I said, ‘How’s Samantha doing?’ and the teacher says, ‘Good and quiet as can be.’” One of the interviewers reflected that this “doesn’t sound like the girl we know.” Fritz also commented, “And it was funny, the teacher started calling on her, and her response was, ‘But I didn’t raise my hand,’ you know what I mean? So there it was, there was some resistance there, and so I think part of it has to do with experience and confidence and knowing how to be in a setting like that...”

Rowan reported that his daughter Maggie “would just do [what is expected] and not complain about it and, you know, meet all the tasks at the level they’re supposed to be done or way above...” He added that she “will do what she’s told without questioning and without opening up creativity-wise and without self-directing or changing her environment.”

Both Fritz and Rowan indicated that their children became significantly more subdued than they had been in preschool as they conformed to their interpretations of kindergarten expectations, which may have limited their impact on and potential contributions to the kindergarten experience.

## Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore parents’ perspectives on their children’s transitions to kindergarten, with a particular focus on those traits which seemed most closely linked to kindergarten readiness. Specifically, we hoped to discern ways in which the child-centered environment and the emergent curriculum of RGC might or might not prepare children to be successful in kindergarten environments.

We found that participating parents described their children as ready and eager to participate in kindergarten. The children consistently interpreted the school setting as a positive place. The parents also perceived their children as demonstrating habits of mind which enabled thoughtful and confident navigation of diverse kindergarten environments. These habits of mind appear to have been those intentionally supported and fostered during their preschool experiences at RGC. Far from parroting rote and transitory memorization of information and skill sets, according to the parents, these children demonstrated genuine readiness to learn, using tools which allowed them to access and make meaning across the social, structural, and academic components of the kindergarten environments.

While parents’ reports were primarily positive, the issue of silence as conformity to kindergarten expectations arose regarding two of the girls. Both Samantha and Maggie initially responded to their new classrooms by being “quiet,” and observing more than actively engaging. Over time, each seemed to find a comfortable social

"place"; however, this finding raised questions for us about possible limitations to the capacity of the child-centered emergent curriculum at RGC to fully prepare children for some of the dramatic change in expectations that they may encounter in kindergarten.

Overall, however, the participating parents described their children as having positive transitions to the academic and social contexts of kindergarten. It appears that habits of mind fostered by RGC's child-centered environment and emergent curriculum positioned these children as ready to learn what they were expected to learn in kindergarten. The parents reported that the children competently sought and processed knowledge, responded thoughtfully to others, and seemed ultimately to have facilitated meaningful learning experiences for themselves. They appeared to be ready for the broad range of possibilities and challenges presented in kindergarten.

### Limitations

This research was limited to a specific population of parents and children, who had attended preschool at the RGC, a university-based children's center. The data collected covered two years: the preschool year during which the assessments were written and the kindergarten year during which the interviews were conducted. While this group represents a small, very specific part of the population, the small sample size and the nature of the family-researcher relationships made possible a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of transition experiences, providing a deeper, insider perspective that can add meaningfully to the literature on experiential contributions to successful kindergarten transitions.

It is important to address the researchers' particular relationship to the children and families. The second author had taught all of the children for a minimum of two years, although she had written only one of the developmental stories (Maggie's). Both authors knew the families, but the first author saw the stories for the first time during the analysis process.

We took care to follow the interview protocol, and to reach consensus on themes and interpretations of the data. We would argue that our relationships make available to us authentic understandings of the families' personal ecologies that inform the study, and that this knowledge would not be available to more "objective" observers or researchers (Schoen, 1983).

We also acknowledge strengths and limitations of grounding our study in the perceptions and interpretations of parents. While this choice offers a particular view of the children and their experiences, parental perspectives provide both intimate insights into children's kindergarten experiences, and longitudinal understandings of their progress from preschool through kindergarten. The validity of parent knowledge with regard to young children's learning experiences has been established (Brink, 2002; Dickinson & De Temple, 1998; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999). Dickinson and De Temple argue, "Because they are based on long-term observations of their child's inclination and aptitudes, parental reports provide a type of information that cannot be obtained from tests and can be acquired by teachers only through extended contact with a child" (1998, p. 256). Parents' views on kindergarten transition have not been fully represented in the literature, making our approach one that has the potential to contribute insights to both researchers and practitioners.

### Implications and Conclusions

This study highlights the potential importance of an often-forgotten yet essential perspective in children's educational experiences: that of parents. The intimate and longitudinal knowledge contributed by parents in this study provided a unique lens through which to view the transition experiences of young children.

This study was grounded in a reconceptualization of notions of "readiness" and appropriate "preparation" for kindergarten. Rejecting traditional and localized constructs of readiness, we focused instead on habits of mind which may support the child across educational experiences over time. The development of these habits of mind is embedded in the child-centered classroom with an emergent curriculum in which classroom interactions promote self-regulation, awareness, confidence, and understanding of the self and others. Empathy is fostered through participation in group problem-solving which integrates ideas from all members of the classroom community, and children's sense of self is supported and extended through the inclusion of their ideas. These characteristics were reflected in the children's preschool assessments, and, according to the perspectives of their parents, supported their navigation of their diverse kindergarten settings.

Academically-focused assessment has become deeply entrenched as an indicator of preparedness. However, our findings support the understanding that genuine preparedness for kindergarten involves complex, integrated modes of thinking, learning, and engaging with the world. Preschool experience with a child-centered emergent curriculum offers a foundation for learning and social development that can help children successfully navigate a range of kindergarten environments.

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### Appendix Interview Questions

- What are your memories of the kindergarten transition?
- How would you compare your child's experiences to those of other children in the classroom?
- How do you think your child's experiences at RGC might have influenced his or her experiences in kindergarten?
- Did you perceive any ways in which the RGC curriculum influenced your child's experiences in kindergarten?
- Were there any particular challenges or difficulties in making the transition or in the kindergarten environment?



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