# Assessing School Readiness

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On the surface, it appears that it should be quite simple to identify the characteristics of a child who is ready for school and then to assess whether or not any given child has these characteristics. But readiness is a difficult construct and one that has been the topic of great debate. Assessment of readiness is even more challenging. Policies such as Goals 2000, and more recently No Child Left Behind (2001), have contributed to bringing the issues of school readiness and assessment of school readiness to the forefront. A variety of concerns surround the topic of assessing school readiness. These include 1) the ability of educators, parents, administrators, and policy makers to articulate an agreed upon definition of readiness, 2) coming to an understanding and agreement on appropriate and ethical methods of assessing readiness, and 3) agreement as to how the information gained will be used.

## Origin of Readiness Assessments

Early childhood education is inextricably linked to the larger educational realm and is therefore affected by the trends and policies that govern "formal" schooling. During the 1980s, "high-stakes" testing in the upper grades contributed to the development of skills-driven curricula in kindergarten classrooms. As a result, children in the early grades were exposed to classroom curricula "characterized by long periods of seatwork, high levels of stress, and a plethora of fill-in-the blank worksheets" (Sheppard, 1994, p.207). This meant that children as young as five needed to come to school equipped with the social, physical, and cognitive maturity required to endure and succeed in rigorous, skill-driven educational settings that were inappropriate and inconsistent with the learning and developmental needs of young children.

An unfortunate, yet logical, result of trickle-down academics was that children were entering kindergarten unprepared for the grueling tasks that greeted them. In 1995 Pinata and La Paro (2003) conducted a survey of more than 3500 kindergarten teachers. They found that teachers reported that one-third of their students have problems making adjustments to kindergarten. The students' difficulties included following directions, inadequate academic skills, immaturity, poor social skills, and difficulties working as part of a group.

In an attempt to rectify the problem of children who were not ready for school, states, school districts, and individual schools have responded in a variety of ways. Proposed solutions have included raising the entry age for kindergarten, creating extra year-long programs for children not ready for more academic demands, and failing or retaining children who do not meet kindergarten expectations. Although the recommendation for children to repeat kindergarten came from teachers, there was a nationwide influx of formal readiness tests utilized during the 1980's to make critical decisions about school placements (Sheppard, 1997). The current NCLB legislation has also led to a significant increase in testing nationwide. Given its immense potential impact on the lives of children, readiness testing continues to be a controversial issue of great concern to early childhood professionals.

## Defining School Readiness

One of the issues surrounding the assessment of school readiness is defining what it means for a child to be ready for school. Defining school readiness is problematic because, by virtue of giving it a definition, we presume that children need to know and be able to do certain things before they can enter school, and that these can be measured in a reliable and accurate way. Nevertheless, in a society and a profession that is often driven by results and measurements, a definition of school readiness is essential. Only through a clearer understanding of the construct of readiness can we begin to find appropriate ways to assess it.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) asserts in a position statement on school readiness (1995) that any discussion of school readiness must consider at least three critical factors: (1) the diversity of children's early life experiences, (2) the wide variation in young children's development and learning, and (3) the degree to which school expectations of children entering kindergarten are reasonable, appropriate, and supportive of individual differences. The NAEYC further states, that it is the "responsibility of schools to meet the needs of children

as they enter school and to provide whatever services are needed in the least restrictive environment to help each child reach his or her fullest potential" (p. 1). In order to address the learning needs of children in an appropriate and ethical way, individual states, local school districts, and individual schools should define school readiness in a manner that includes all of the above critical factors stated by the NAEYC. Their position statement on school readiness suggests, like the definition presented in the state of Hawai'i's statement on readiness (see Harris article), that school readiness is not the sole responsibility of the child, and that schools in turn need to be ready to receive children at the developmental levels at which they enter school.

## Traditional Uses of Readiness Assessment

Traditionally, readiness assessment tools have been used for a variety of sometimes questionable and controversial purposes. The practice of "academic red shirting" is one outcome of readiness assessments. This concept is based on the practice of "athletic red shirting" which allows college athletes to mature physically while protecting their years of eligibility. In this scenario, a child who does not perform adequately well on a readiness assessment upon entry to kindergarten is asked to sit out a year, with the justification that the following school year, the child will be more mature and better equipped to succeed in kindergarten (Sheppard, 1997). The results of readiness assessments are also used to retain children in kindergarten an extra year if they do not perform up to the standards needed for them to enter first grade. Sheppard (1997) refers to this as kindergarten "flunking" or retention. The decision to retain a child in kindergarten should be made jointly after a discussion between parent and teacher, and should be based upon multiple factors. However, readiness tests have traditionally been used to keep children from being promoted to the next grade level with little parental input. Readiness tests have also been used inappropriately as a tool to identify children with special needs and for placement in specific kinds of remedial classroom settings—a purpose that they are not designed to fulfill. Determination of whether a child should receive special education services requires a comprehensive evaluation of all aspects of the child's development. Readiness assessments, however, are designed for use in improving and informing instruction and planning within the classroom. Unfortunately, they are seldom put to this appropriate and worthwhile use.

In 1988, Gnezda and Bolig conducted a survey of fifty states, which found that four states mandated testing specifically to determine a child's readiness for school before kindergarten, and that testing was mandated by local school districts in twenty-six states. In addition, the survey found that readiness testing before first grade was mandated in six states and locally in thirty-seven states. Furthermore, they found that readiness testing was predominantly a local practice with minimal control by state agencies. The most disturbing finding from their survey was that screening tools which should be used as a first step in identifying children with special needs and readiness tests that were intended for instructional planning were frequently used interchangeably and for purposes which they were not designed for. One of the indicators of effective assessment included in NAEYC's position statement states that assessment instruments should be used for their intended purposes. Educators should be sure that the assessments being used are designed to provide the specific information that they need.

More recently, Saluja, Scott-Little, and Clifford (2000) conducted a study to see how states define and assess readiness for kindergarten. At that time, no state had any formal definition of school readiness other than age of eligibility. Eighteen states reported that they were using some kind of screening or assessment when children enter kindergarten. Twenty-six states reported that they do not mandate readiness assessment but that local districts have the discretion to assess children prior to kindergarten or upon entry. In addition, twelve states reported that the data collected is used to inform instruction; seven states used data for school improvement; six states reported that data is used for screening purposes and to identify children with special needs and developmental delays; and four states reported that local districts decide how to use the information.

The NAEYC position statement on curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation argues that we must make "ethical, appropriate, valid, and reliable assessment a central part of all early childhood programs." The organization also urges that assessment be used for beneficial purposes to include (1) making sound decisions about teaching and learning, (2) identifying significant concerns that may require focused intervention for individual children, and (3) helping programs improve their educational and developmental interventions. As we proceed, in Hawai'i, to implement readiness assessment instruments, it is essential that we honor these guidelines and make a conscious effort to utilize information gained

from these assessment tools in a meaningful manner that is beneficial to all children.

## The Ability of Readiness Assessments to Predict School Success

Before deciding what kind of readiness assessment to use, it is critical to decide what is being assessed and what the information will be used for. These questions should guide the type of assessment instrument used with young children. Maxwell and Clifford (2004) argue that in order to choose a readiness assessment tool, some key questions, such as the definition of readiness, the purpose for assessing readiness, and the characteristics of the children being assessed must first be answered. According to Lori Shepard,

> Measurement specialists will always tell you that test validity depends on test use. A test may be valid for one purpose and not for another; it may even have adequate reliability for some uses but be too inaccurate to support other more critical decisions. Therefore, to judge the technical adequacy of readiness tests, it is essential to know their purpose. (1997, p. 92).

Carlton and Winsler (1999) argue that readiness tests can be classified into two categories: tests that measure developmental milestones and tests that measure academic knowledge. Two of the more popular and widely used readiness tests are the Gesell School Readiness Test, which measures developmental milestones, and the Metropolitan Readiness Test, which measures academic knowledge. Most studies have found that these widely used readiness tests are "relatively poor predictors of future success and that typical assessment practices lack sufficient validity and reliability for making placement decisions" (Carlton & Winsler, 1999, p.340). With the Gesell test, for example, only half the children who were potential kindergarten failures were accurately identified, even though seventy-eight percent were identified using teacher judgment (Sheppard & Smith, 1986). In general, readiness tests have not shown much promise, yet we continue to use them to make important decisions for children and their school experience.

Pianta and La Paro (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of seventy longitudinal studies that involved more than 3,000 children in order to determine how well assessments predicted children's social and academic competence during the transition from preschool to kindergarten and from kindergarten to first and second grade. The results of their analysis indicate that the average correlation of the child's academic/cognitive functioning test results in preschool with performance in the early elementary years was only .43. In the social skills area, there was a .32 correlation with performance in the early elementary years. Overall, they found that readiness assessments predicted only about 20 % of the variability in children's academic performance in school and 10 % of the variability in children's social performance in school. These results offer little support for testing children in preschool to predict school readiness and school success.

Readiness tests have some important limitations which educators and policy makers should be aware of. First of all, because each assessment tool is designed for a specific purpose and should not be used for other purposes, schools must be clear about their purposes in doing an assessment and choose an appropriate assessment tool. Secondly, each school readiness assessment tool is designed with an explicit or implicit definition of school readiness and therefore, individuals who wish to assess children must be clear on their own definition of school readiness before they can choose an appropriate assessment tool. Lastly, assessment tools are only as good as the individuals actually implementing the assessment and interpreting the data. Therefore, training is necessary for individuals who conduct the assessment if it is to be used accurately and appropriately (Maxwell and Clifford, 2004).

## State Efforts to Address the Assessment of School Readiness

Awareness of the importance of providing a clear definition of school readiness and of appropriate assessment has become a critical issue for children and early childhood professionals due to the increasing demands for standards-based measures and an increasing demand for accountability in the preschool and early years. The Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR) provides an example of a school readiness framework intended to support teachers and improve assessment and instructional techniques to support young children's readiness for school (Maryland State Department of Education, Final Report, 2003-04). The framework includes assessment, instruction, family communication, and articulation among programs. It utilizes the Work Sampling System as an assessment tool to help teachers document and assess children's skills, knowledge, and behavior across multiple domains. This comprehensive approach makes use of a

definition of school readiness as a construct inclusive of the child, family, school, and community.

Hawai'i already has made progress in this area. It was one of the first states in the nation to enact a statewide definition of school readiness. Hawai'i defines readiness as an interaction between the child, school practices, family, and community—all critical factors influencing a child's ability to succeed in school. In a 2003 a report to the Hawai'i State Legislature the School Readiness Task Force made recommendations relating to school readiness. These included assessing the readiness of children and schools at the system level, supporting preparation and ongoing education of practitioners and administrators, linking K–3 content and performance standards to Hawai'i preschool content standards, and establishing a statewide approach to promoting successful transition from home or early childhood program to kindergarten.

Recently, the Hawai'i State School Readiness Assessment tool (HSSRA) has been developed and implemented by the Department of Education. This two-part instrument (described in detail in the article by Brandt and Grace) is designed to gather system-level data on children's readiness for school and schools' readiness for children. The primary purpose of this assessment tool is to provide information to teachers and schools on how to better meet the needs of their incoming kindergarteners.

## Conclusion

Assessing school readiness is difficult and complex. It involves a variety of stakeholders—children, parents, families, teachers, administrators, policy makers, and community members—each of whom brings their own values, beliefs, and perspectives to the issue of school readiness. Maryland and Hawai'i are two positive examples of states working to create comprehensive readiness systems that focus on children and the ways in which teachers and schools can best meet the needs of their students. They encourage schools, teachers, parents, and administrators to share the responsibility of school readiness, and allow for more successful early learning experiences for children.

The assessment of school readiness should not be a negative experience for children and families. School readiness assessments should provide teachers and schools with indicators of children's developmental levels and that information should be used to plan instruction and design appropriate learning environments. Assessment of school readiness should also be a two-fold process that looks not just at where children are developmentally, but also how well prepared and committed schools are to addressing the needs of young children. This implies that schools need to have teachers and administrators who are knowledgeable about early childhood education and who understand how children learn and develop skills and knowledge.

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