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No Preschooler Left Behind: Preschool Policies in the NCLB World

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Current preschool learning guidelines, created in response to NCLB requirements, focus on three areas of human development in an effort to ensure that preschoolers are ready for kindergarten. This study examined four New England states' preschool learning guidelines, looking at how each detailed its support for preschoolers' development. The findings reveal that preschool learning guidelines have a primary focus on cognitive development, suggesting that the accountability movement has influenced preschool policy-making. This study is important for early educators, trainers of early educators, and policy makers as they strive to develop policy and practice that best supports early childhood growth and development.

"Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education. Our requirements for world leadership, our hopes for economic growth, and the demands of citizenship itself in an era such as this all require the maximum development of every young American's capacity. The human mind is our fundamental resource."
- President John F. Kennedy, February 20, 1961.

Introduction: The Human Mind - A Fundamental Resource

American students continue to lag behind students from other industrialized nations in most measures of achievement (Center for American Progress Action Fund, 2005; Fiestritzer, 2006; State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2005). In order to stay competitive the next generation must be assured a strong, early foundation for learning, crucial to children's later school and societal success (Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes Study Team, 1995; Early Learning, 1999; Engel, 2000; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999; Schweinhart, 1994; Stegelin, 1992). Unfortunately, current research shows that, too often, preschoolers are *not* receiving the quality early educational experiences they need in order to lay this critical foundation (Day & Yarbrough, 1998; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1998; Zill et al., 2001). These studies suggest that preschoolers are entering kindergarten without the skills that are essential for future school and societal success.

The No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB] of 2001 (The White House, 2002) is the federal government's answer to this school-readiness dilemma, concentrating on accountability at all levels of education, from preschool through graduation. The Good Start, Grow Smart initiative [GSGS] of 2002 (The White House, n.d.) was created to meet the school-readiness mandates put forth in NCLB and to ensure that the more than 9.8 million preschoolers in our country (Johnson, 2005) all enter school ready to succeed. GSGS requires all states to create quality early education standards which, for the purpose of this article, will be collectively referred to as preschool policy guidelines. These would align with states' K-12 standards. These preschool policy guidelines function as action plans for early education programs by providing content standards that are meant to be explicit articulations of what is expected of preschoolers' development. Further, they are intended to hold early educators accountable for quality teaching, and consequently they influence early educators' teaching practices.

Purpose

The study presented here examined the underlying philosophies of human development that are embedded in preschool policy guidelines. These policy guidelines were created to guide the practices of the more than 431,000 early educators working in preschool programs across the country (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006-2007a) in an attempt to ensure that preschoolers are ready for school. This study looked at the approach preschool policy guidelines take to preschoolers' development as a result of the accountability movement brought to bear by NCLB. Preschool policy guidelines are written to address all three developmental areas within the domain of human development: biosocial, psychosocial, and cognitive. These underlying views of human development reflect what the policy-makers deem as important and have an immediate and important effect on how teachers are expected to teach using the guidelines created. These policy guidelines, by defining how children learn best, create and define acceptable methods of teaching, some of which may support and some of which may contradict or even render ineffective the very goal of school-readiness that they intend to ensure. The following questions guided this inquiry:

- What are the predominant views of preschoolers' cognitive development embedded in preschool policy framework after NCLB and GSGS?
- What does comparing and contrasting the preschool policy frameworks indicate about underlying views of preschoolers' cognitive development?

Research Design and Method

Content analysis was used to analyze the data sets to quantify and analyze the presence of words and then make inferences about the messages, thus allowing the researcher to discover and describe the focus of individual, group, institutional, or social attention (Stemler, 2001). Language, in context analysis, is seen as a reflection and representation of the world. Content analysis answers the questions, "Who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect" (Babbie, 1999, p. 287).

This study analyzed four preschool policy guidelines used in the New England region. The four preschool policy guidelines were created by individual states after NCLB and in response to GSGS requirements. They include the following: Maine's Early Childhood Learning Guidelines [ECLG] (Maine Department of Education & the Maine Department of Health and Human Services, 2005), Massachusetts' Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences [MGPLE] (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2003), Rhode Island's Early Learning Standards [RIELS] (Rhode Island Department of Education, Rhode Island Department of Human Services, & Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2003), and Vermont's Early Learning Standards [VELS] (Vermont Department of Education, 2003). Document analysis guided the design of this study.

Text from the preschool policy guidelines was coded using Nvivo (QRS International, 2006), a program designed to assist in qualitative analysis. The data were analyzed using a multi-level deductive coding process (See Figure 1) that started by coding text from the four preschool policy guidelines into two broad categories: supplementary policy matters and human development. Text placed in the area of supplemental policy matters included such things as history of the creation of the policy, lists of committee members, and intended uses. Text was assigned to the category of human development if it referred to any instances or examples of how children grow, adapt, and change over their lifetime.

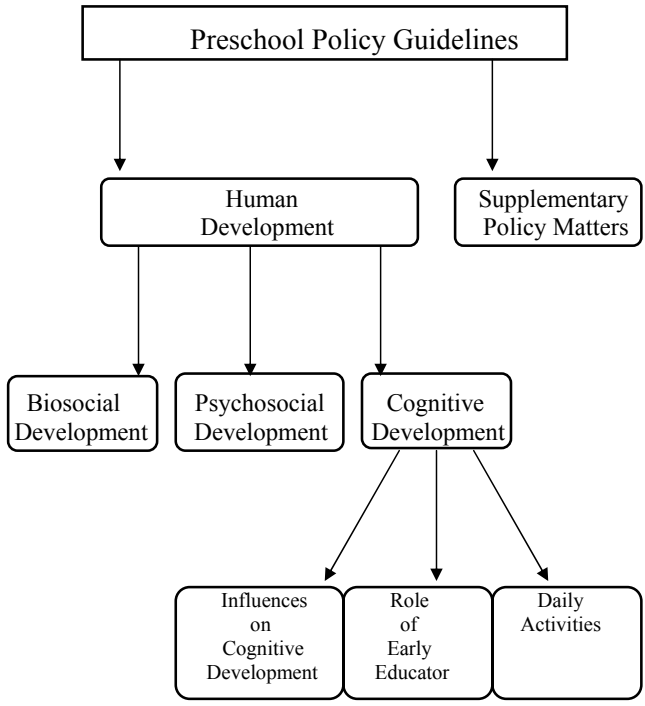

Figure 1. Coding levels used for preschool policy guidelines.

The second level of analysis focused only on text within the category of human development. At this level, text placed into the category of human development was further coded into one of the three developmental areas within human development: biosocial development, psychosocial development, and cognitive development. Biosocial development is the part of human development that includes all aspects of physical growth and development of the body and brain, as well as the social and cultural factors that affect how people grow and change. This includes nutritional, genetic, and health factors. Psychosocial development is the part of human development that consists of emotions, personality, relationships, and social skills. Psychosocial development is shaped by values set by family, friends, the community, the culture, and society. Finally, cognitive development is the part of human development that includes all the mental processes used to think, learn, decide, and communicate in an effort to acquire knowledge and/or become aware of the environment. It encompasses perception, imagination, judgment, memory, language, curiosity, and creativity (Berger, 2000).

The third and final level of analysis focused only on text previously placed within the code of cognitive development. This text was put into one of three subcodes: influences on cognitive development, role of the early educator, and daily activities. These subcategories reveal the focus of each policy in regard to how and by whom preschoolers' cognitive development could best be influenced and supported.

Preparing Preschoolers for School Success

The findings from this study analysis indicate that there has been a significant emphasis placed on children's cognitive development in preschool policy guidelines, as well as on those factors that can influence preschoolers' cognitive development the most. This sends a clear message about what is regarded as important elements of human development in preparing preschoolers for success in school and life.

This study does not allow the reviewer to quantify the extent to which NCLB and/or GSGS has had an effect on these preschool policy guidelines. However, this study certainly points to a significant underlying philosophy embedded in preschool policy guidelines. There is a primary focus on cognitive development and a minor focus on biosocial and psychosocial development. Current policies place much more emphasis on promoting cognitive or mental development and very little emphasis on promoting biosocial or health, and psychosocial or social/emotional development. This means that policy-makers are supporting the notion that a cognitively-ready preschooler will do better in public school than a preschooler who is physically healthy and socially and emotionally strong.

Additionally, specific activities to support preschoolers' cognitive development have become the focus as opposed to a supportive and nurturing early childhood educator. This implies that the accountability movement produced by NCLB has filtered down to influence preschool education, and more significantly, that cognitive development is currently the focus (at least by policy-makers) in the domain of human development in preparing preschoolers for school.

The Post-NCLB Focus on Cognitive Development

Table 1 illustrates this emphasis on cognitive development. All four of the preschool policy guidelines from Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont presented a minimal focus in biosocial and psychosocial development (32%), and a much greater focus on cognitive development (68%), providing evidence that cognitive development is what policy-makers deem as the important area within human development for school-readiness (See Table 1).

Table 1
Percentage of Instances of Cognitive, Biosocial, and Psychosocial Development

Development	Maine (ECLG)	Massachusetts (MGPLE)	Rhode Island (RIELS)	Vermont (VELS)
Biosocial	8.3 %	18.1 %	11.6 %	10.4 %
Psychosocial	19.2 %	13.5 %	22.3 %	23.5 %
Cognitive	72.5 %	68.4 %	66.1 %	66.1 %

Note. ECLG = Maine's Early Childhood Learning Guidelines, MGPLE = Massachusetts' Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences, RIELS = Rhode Island's Early Learning Standards, and VELS = Vermont's Early Learning Standards.

For programs serving preschoolers, the emphasis placed on cognitive development may pose a fundamental shift in thinking and may have dramatic effects on how early education programs are run. For example, less emphasis on biosocial development may mean that teachers put less emphasis on physical activity and nutrition. In a country where childhood obesity is rapidly rising (Torgan, 2002), where tooth decay is still one of the most common childhood diseases (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006), and where children are showing signs of early cardiovascular risk factors such as higher cholesterol (American Heart, 2006) a lack of significant emphasis on biosocial development would be unfortunate.

Furthermore, with this focus on cognitive development, some early educators in a rush to meet state content standards may not allow sufficient time for preschoolers to participate in the important relational skills needed to advance their budding psychosocial development. Traditionally, early education has been a time for preschoolers to practice and refine their rudimentary interpersonal skills. During spontaneous play and natural interactions children use the feedback they receive from their environment and other people to refine their learning, thereby developing their imagination, creativity, cooperation skills, and autonomy (Bredekamp, Knuth, Kunesh, & Shulman, 1992). Early educators encourage these beginning psychosocial skills by designing safe spaces that encourage young children to interact with peers and adults, practice relationship building, and promote a sense of autonomy.

Further, Vygotsky would contend that children's learning is significantly influenced by social and cultural values; learning and instruction are shaped by the values and goals of a community (Vygotsky, 1986). Understanding what is valued in a society shapes a child's behavior into adulthood. For example, "in every culture children learn practical skills such as casting a fishing net, sewing on a button, or using a TV remote control, and social skills such as shaking hands, showing deference to elders, or expressing one's wishes in an acceptable manner" (Berger, 2000, p. 51). Thus, an early education program that emphasizes music, arts, exploration, and physical activities, not only shapes the values of young children, it pedagogically supports a more holistic approach to child development. Cognitive development cannot be separate from psychosocial development.

Lastly, research confirms that young children's construction of knowledge and development is closely linked to personal experiences and interactions with their physical environment and social relationships (Berger, 2000; Moll, 1990; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003). Development is unified across domains of human development, with progress in one area clearly influenced by development in other domains (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2002). Progress in cognitive development is, therefore, dependent upon progress in biosocial and psychosocial development. The development of language, reasoning, and social skills furthers learning in more academic areas such as math, science, social studies, and language arts (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Hyun, 2000). The areas within the domain of human development are not separate, and treating them as such, or emphasizing one more heavily than the others, may have negative effects on preschoolers' development.

Leaving Some Preschoolers Behind

Creating specific content-based academic expectations for preschoolers is very difficult because preschoolers' development varies greatly depending upon family relations, environment, and experience (Christenson, 1999; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Creating standards that assume all children develop and learn in a similar time frame is likely to disadvantage certain populations. Students who come to school with little support from home and/or little experience in preschool are most at risk, and this tends to be children from impoverished families, minorities, English language learners, and students with disabilities.

Currently, the preschool population consists of a growing number of children with developmental delays and disabilities (Odom & Diamond, 1998), and is the most culturally diverse age group in our country (Washington & Andrews, 1998). For this diverse population, a focus on cognitive development in preschool may prove especially disastrous. Early educators, in an effort to ensure that all children are cognitively ready for school, may resort to inappropriate methods to ensure preschoolers learn the skills outlined in preschool policy guidelines. This can have potentially damaging emotional, social, and academic consequences for preschoolers labeled as educational failures before they even enter the K-12 school system (Hatch, 2002).

Additionally, there is a danger in focusing early educators' teaching on one area of human development. An over-emphasis on cognitive development means a de-

emphasis on biosocial and psychosocial development as evidenced in the four current preschool policy guidelines. Narrowly-focused standards could direct early educators away from other necessary areas of school-readiness, such as motivation and learning how to learn, as well as other important facets of early childhood education, like health and social and emotional development. In the extreme, it could limit teaching practices causing education to become rigid, superficial, and narrow (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2002).

This over-emphasis on cognitive development could unfold in unintended ways, forcing undertrained and undereducated early educators to abandon exploratory play and child-directed learning, resulting in too much rote learning. Preschoolers use imaginative or symbolic play to work out emotional issues, develop a sense of self, create and test theories about their world, and practice their latest learning and skills. Piaget believed that this interactive and dynamic play is a key aspect of normal cognitive development (Isaaca, 1960; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). A child deprived of opportunities to play could be developmentally delayed.

The Role of the Early Educator: Mixed Messages

During the third level of coding, only text within the code of cognitive development was analyzed. Text within cognitive development was placed into one of three subcodes: influences on cognitive development, role of the early educator, and daily activities. These subcategories reveal the focus of each policy in regard to how and by whom preschoolers' cognitive development could best be affected and supported. It became apparent that, here too, policy-makers have a definite idea about how young children best learn (See Table 2).

Table 2
Instances of Supporting Cognitive Development in Preschool Learning Guidelines

Cognitive Development	Maine (ECLG)	Massachusetts (MGPLE)	Rhode Island (RIELS)	Vermont (VELS)
Influences on Development	22	44	6	12
Role of the Early Educator	9	24	4	25
Daily Activities	68	207	36	67

Note. ECLG = Maine's Early Childhood Learning Guidelines, MGPLE = Massachusetts' Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences, RIELS = Rhode Island's Early Learning Standards, and VELS = Vermont's Early Learning Standards.

Current preschool policy guidelines have, on average, only 16 references to the role of the early educator. However, references to the activities that the children are to be

engaged in average 94 in each document. Current polices generally have a minimal focus on the important role of the early educator and a focus, instead, on specific cognitive activities for preschoolers.

This low number of indicators that clearly define the role of the early educator creates an interesting dichotomy. On one hand, this may signify an emerging respect of early educators' ability to develop strategies that will help preschoolers meet defined state standards. On the other hand, it may leave early educators feeling at a loss as to how best to meet preschoolers' needs. In New England states, as in most states across the country, there are minimal training requirements and little or no experience necessary for many early education jobs (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006-07b). And yet, to design appropriate learning environments that will ensure school-readiness, early educators are being asked to combine a sophisticated understanding of preschoolers' developmental needs and early education theory.

Further, the current preschool policy guidelines cite specific examples of activities that one might use or expect to see in an early education classroom to support preschoolers' cognitive development. Early educators, trying to meet the standards, may focus on these activities to the exclusion of others, thereby spending an inordinate amount of time concentrating on the activities that encourage cognitive development. This could effectively limit imaginative, spontaneous play, and stymie emergent curriculum that originates from the children's unique developmental levels and interests. This could, in the long run, result in children developing less curiosity and less interest in school. The preschool policy guidelines, therefore, may actually undermine the goals they are attempting to achieve.

Finally, as evidenced by this study, there is quite a variation in the approach and consistency reflected in these policies, suggesting that the government's effort to increase preschoolers' readiness to learn may be haphazard at best. For organizations such as Head Start, which is organized regionally but operates locally, this variety across preschool policy guidelines makes regional training and management challenging. For early educators employed by regional programs that might move and work among various states in New England, the lack of consistency is likely to make professional development disjointed and frustrating. In sum, the regional variation of these policies brings into question whether educators will be able to deliver solid preschool programs, and this is likely to have negative consequences for preschoolers going on to K-12 schooling in New England.

Discussion

Policy preschool guidelines are intended to influence early educators' teaching practices, and thus shape preschoolers' experiences. The results of this study, therefore, have important implications for early educators, for preschoolers, for those who train early educators, for policy-makers, and for parents.

Implications for Early Educators

There are significant implications from this study for early educators and their teaching practices. The emphasis on cognitive development may increase the pressure that early educators feel to meet cognitive-based standards this may in turn result in their over-emphasizing academics and under-emphasizing biosocial and psychosocial development. This could cause some early educators to put children through endless drills, forsaking play and child-initiated activities that have been proven to support preschoolers' development across domains.

As many early educators have minimal training and nominal resources, implementing these policies becomes even more challenging. Early educators may not have the depth of knowledge to understand how best to manage these preschool policy guidelines, and there could be negative repercussions for both preschoolers and early educators from their growing frustration. Early educators may possibly attempt to implement the policies in developmentally inappropriate ways. They may become frustrated, give up, and thus provide preschoolers very little in terms of quality programming or developmental support, or they may continue to struggle and experience burnout, increasing the already high job turnover rates.

The findings of this study point to the necessity for today's early educators to possess advanced knowledge, skills, and abilities that will enable them to "engage students in rigorous, meaningful activities that foster academic learning" (National Research Council, 2001, p. 22) in a way that honors each preschoolers' individual development across all domains of human development. Along with schoolteachers, early educators are being held to a higher level of accountability detailed in content-based learning standards. However, unlike schoolteachers, early educators often lack the training, salaries, resources, or support to be capable of meeting the new standards being set for them and their teaching.

Implications for Preschoolers

"Higher and tougher standards of learning for all populations of students are focusing on a narrow view of learning" (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002, p. 1). Pressure to meet the new content-based standards that focus more on cognitive development than on biosocial or psychosocial development found in preschool policy guidelines may cause early educators to change the way they teach. They may feel obliged to disregard play and child-initiated activities in order to meet the new standards. This could result in preschoolers' social, emotional, and physical needs being ignored.

Additionally, the major risk of any standards movement is that the responsibility for proving that standards are being met will fall on children's shoulders (NAEYC, 2002). Since the inception of NCLB, K-12 students have been given tests designed to measure whether teachers and schools are meeting the NCLB standards. Students bear the responsibility for proving the effectiveness and quality of teaching. This trend to test has spread to early education; in 2003, the Head Start National Reporting System was used to test 450,000 four- and five-year olds (Rothman, 2005). Preschool policy guidelines are now required in each state. Will the assessment of the policy guidelines'

effectiveness be placed on the shoulders of preschoolers? How will states determine if early education programs are meeting the standards they have set? In other words, policy-makers need to clearly articulate to early education programs the expectations about who is responsible for meeting the standards and how assessments will happen.

Implications for Those Who Train Early Educators

With content-based standards that focus on cognitive development a reality for preschoolers, it is essential that early educators have access to the knowledge, skills, and abilities that will allow them to engage preschoolers in appropriate and meaningful activities that encourage learning across all human development domains. This means that states must take responsibility, both financially and pedagogically, to offer appropriate and meaningful trainings for all early educators. States need comprehensive training plans that are affordable and designed to support early educators along both their educational and professional path. It also means that at every available opportunity, trainers should endeavor to help early educators better understand how to appropriately incorporate cognitive development into the program, while retaining the essential biosocial and psychosocial domains so important for complete child development.

Implications for Policy-Makers

Policies are textual interventions into practice that privilege the policy-makers' reality (Ball, 1994). Requiring preschool policy guidelines that focus on cognitive development sends a message from policy-makers to early educators that cognitive skills are more highly valued in today's society. Policy-makers would perhaps argue that the focus on cognitive development was not intended to limit or leave out biosocial and psychosocial development, pointing out that it is still included as a portion of the standards. However, policy-makers cannot predict or assume to know how these preschool policy guidelines will be enacted in every situation in every setting (Ball, 1994).

These policies that detail preschoolers' cognitive development could increase the odds of failure on the part of the early educators trying to implement them, as well as potentially obstructing school-readiness efforts. Policymakers and early educators should continue to communicate and discuss approaches to early education that reflects today's best understanding of early childhood development theories so that policy guidelines and implementation guidelines become more internally consistent and, therefore, more able to be implemented effectively.

Finally, there is evidence that the benefits are negligible from even well designed standards when there is minimal financial investment in professional development and program resources (Elmore, 2002). To support early educators' school-readiness efforts, it is necessary to provide education, training, and materials. The standards within preschool policy guidelines may well fall short of their mark of ensuring that all preschoolers will enter school ready to learn without focused attention to coordination, communication, consensus building, and financing (NAEYC, 2002).

Implications for Parents

This study was not designed to address parent issues in regard to preschoolers' cognitive development. However, certain implications emerged that necessitate further mention. Current research supports the idea that a combination of early education experiences, family environment, and parenting contribute to preschoolers' future success and life chances (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). Parents need to be aware of the importance of early learning to lifelong growth and development as they consider what their own child needs to become a healthy, contributing member of society. Additionally, parents should remember that they are consumers, and as such, they should thoroughly investigate their early education options before deciding on a program for their preschooler. This includes asking questions, visiting a variety of programs, and finding out what elements of human development are incorporated and emphasized throughout the day.

Moreover, this new concentration on cognitive development is causing some parents to rethink preschool and kindergarten options. Across the country, almost 10% of all kindergarten eligible preschoolers are "red-shirted." This term comes from the college practice of freshman athletes waiting a year to play so that they will be older, bigger, and more mature (Katz, 2000; Sailer, 2002). Some parents of preschoolers are opting for the kindergarten version of red-shirting, waiting an extra year to have their preschooler start kindergarten so their child will be older, bigger, and more mature. Kindergarten has become more academically demanding as schools try to comply with and maintain higher state and federal educational standards. Worried that their child is not ready for the newer, more academic kindergarten curriculum, many parents are voluntarily red-shirting their child as a way to prevent the stress and strain they believe their child will suffer.

As a result of red-shirting, early education programs are seeing an increase in the age of the preschoolers in their programs. Children who might typically be in kindergarten are still in preschool, changing the preschool classroom age from 3, 4, and some 5-year olds, to a group of 3, 4, 5, and some 6-year olds. This added age bracket of preschoolers could completely change how an early educator designs the space and implements learning activities as these children are usually larger, and more advanced cognitively than their younger peers. The wider age range makes teaching more challenging and demanding which could lead to a situation where early educators may not have the level of knowledge and skill to support all the children effectively.

Conclusion

There are currently more than 9.8 million preschoolers age three to five in our country (Johnson, 2005). The belief that their "readiness" is critical to later school success and our nation's progress has placed early education in the middle of national and scholarly debate, gaining the attention of early education advocates, organizations, and the public. Community members and policy-makers want a better future for all children, and thus expect more from early education programs and early educators than ever before. With more than 431,000 early educators working in preschool

programs across the country (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006-2007a), preschool policy guidelines may have profound and lasting effects on early educators, their teaching practices, and educational outcomes for children.

Today, NCLB has thrust early education squarely into the political arena. Initiatives, acts, legislation, mandates, policies, and guidelines are being written to influence and even control what is socially allowable, doable, and thinkable for early educators' teaching practices. The previously, and oft ignored, field of early education is undergoing rapid and sweeping fundamental reforms. Further, early educators are, for the first time, finding themselves and their teaching practices highlighted and scrutinized by the public. The importance of early educational experiences cannot be over emphasized. This study demonstrates that with further examination and consideration, preschool policy guidelines could be better conceptualized, constructed, and implemented to enhance school-readiness efforts for all preschool-age children.

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