

# Kindergarten Readiness and Preschools: Teachers' and Parents' Beliefs Within and Across Programs

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## Abstract

This qualitative interview-based study compares beliefs about kindergarten readiness and about the roles of preschools in readiness among parents and preschool teachers in three early childhood programs in the northeastern and southwestern United States. Interviews focused on beliefs concerning meanings of kindergarten readiness and the role of preschool in preparing children for kindergarten, and on resources participants used to inform their beliefs and practices about children's readiness for kindergarten.

Participants in all programs and geographic locations identified the primary purpose of preschool to be kindergarten preparation. While teachers and parents generally expressed support for play in the preschool curriculum, parents were more likely to cite specific skills as indicators of readiness. Within-program and across-program beliefs indicated shared perceptions of readiness linked to social and emotional development, attainment of literacy skills, and familiarity with school routines. Parents expressed anxiety regarding kindergarten transitions and expectations. Teachers believed that their programs prepared children for kindergarten, but were unsure if parents shared those beliefs. Responses differed across programs regarding the degree of parental responsibility for readiness, the efficacy of delayed kindergarten entry, and knowledge of local kindergarten expectations. Recommendations for practice include prioritizing communication about kindergarten readiness among teachers and parents, such as sharing information and concerns about assessments and local kindergarten expectations.

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## Introduction

The establishment of public prekindergarten programs throughout the nation (Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Sansanelli, & Hustedt, 2009) indicates the priority of kindergarten readiness as a goal of national, state, and local educational policies (National Educational Goals Panel, 1997; Maine Department of Education, 2004; Texas Education Agency, 2008). As accessibility of public and private preschool programs increase, parents describe heightened awareness about preschools' roles in specific school preparation and readiness (Hatcher & Engelbrecht, 2006). In contrast, preschool teachers traditionally address readiness through a developmental "whole child" approach (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Preschool teachers' and parents' ideas about readiness and preschools have been explored in a variety of contexts (Diamond, Reagan, & Bandyk, 2000; Kim, Murdock, & Choi, 2005). Because of the national impetus toward universal preschool for 4-year-old children (Pew Center on the States, n.d.), as well as a new focus on the continuum of PreK–Grade

3 education (Takanishi, 2010), comparison of parental and teacher beliefs within and across programs in diverse locations lends insight into both local and national shared readiness perceptions and preschool connections to K–3 education.

This qualitative, interview-based study examines parental and teacher beliefs about readiness and preschool roles in readiness in three programs in the northeastern and southwestern United States. Researchers explored these research questions: What are the beliefs of parents and preschool teachers concerning meanings of kindergarten readiness? What are the beliefs of parents and teachers about the role of preschool in preparing their children/students for kindergarten? What sources of information do parents and teachers use to inform their beliefs and practices about children's readiness for kindergarten?

## Literature Review

### Teacher and Parent Beliefs about Readiness

Kindergarten readiness is a complex idea linked to multiple meanings and factors. Chronological age, developmental stage, specific academic and social skills, and home/school connections are associated with readiness. Local communities may offer different definitions of readiness (Graue, 1993, 2010). Roots of current definitions of readiness can be traced to the National Educational Goals Panel (1997), which declared a national priority for all children to enter school "ready to learn." While readiness definitions increasingly include specific academic goals, a multidimensional view of readiness is still the basis for many state early childhood programs (Maine Department of Education, 2004; Texas Education Agency, 2008).

Beliefs about and perceptions of readiness form within the context of local communities surrounding children, schools, and families. An ecological view of readiness includes the interactive effects of particular environments—schools (both preschools and the receiving kindergartens), family activities, and child and community characteristics—described by Graue (1993) as "local meanings of readiness" (p. 37). Teacher beliefs are a crucial factor in determining practice, but empirical studies linking teacher beliefs to parent beliefs in the same settings are limited. The timing of school entry, for example, is closely tied to teacher and parent beliefs (McBryde, Ziviani, & Cuskelly, 2004). Kim, Murdock, and Choi (2005) noted that parent' beliefs about kindergarten readiness varied; they also found few links between expressed beliefs and engagement in readiness-related at-home activities with children.

### Preschools' Roles in Readiness and Transition to Kindergarten

The primary focus of preschool education has shifted in recent years from experiential, play-based programs to a more academic model. Teachers and parents assume that a major outcome of preschool includes increased readiness of children for kindergarten in social/emotional and academic aspects. The increased academic demands of kindergarten (Goldstein, 2007) resulted in expectations that preschool children will enter kindergarten having some familiarity with print, letter and sound recognition, and beginning writing skills. The changing culture of kindergarten has given rise to significant questions about how preschool fits into children's overall school careers, and states have begun to create learning standards for preschool-age children. Currently, national educational policies focus on aligning preschools with K–3 programs (Wat, 2010).

Behaviors associated with kindergarten readiness include following rules and routines, taking turns, and communicating personal needs and feelings (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010). Despite recognition of the importance of children's transitions and adjustments to

kindergarten (Graue, 2010; McBryde et al., 2004), teachers may receive limited training in transition practices (Early, Pianta, Taylor, & Cox, 2001).

## Sources of Readiness Information

Early childhood educators have developed formal and informal assessment tools to evaluate readiness. Some programs rely on play-based instruments or observations (Long, Bergeron, Leicht Doyle, & Gordon, 2006) while others use tools based on broad learning domains (Augustyniak, Cook-Cottone, & Calabrese, 2004) or specific skill assessments (Brown & Mowry, 2009). Parents' and teachers' beliefs about kindergarten readiness influence their decisions about kindergarten enrollment, their choices of curricula, and their overall images of both preschools and kindergarten. Close examination of teachers' approaches to kindergarten readiness and of parents' and teachers' beliefs about readiness across programs, including comparisons of data from different areas of the United States, can inform development of locally relevant strategies and program adjustments that reflect shared beliefs (Graue, 1993).

## Method

This research was based on a qualitative study conducted by the first author and a colleague (Hatcher & Engelbrecht, 2006) that explored parental beliefs about children's kindergarten readiness in five play-based programs accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in an urban area of the southwestern United States. Hatcher and Engelbrecht (2006) recommended further study comparing teachers' and parents' beliefs about school readiness within programs to discover whether their beliefs are congruent.

This study also used in-person open-ended interviews with the addition of two elements. Teachers and parents from three programs in different parts of the country were interviewed, and the interview data were analyzed and compared within and across the programs, to explore whether shared beliefs about kindergarten readiness might be identified at the local level and nationally.

## Setting

The research involved three programs in two states. All three programs served preschool-age children, using developmentally appropriate, play-based approaches as described by NAEYC (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Programs were distinct in location, setting (rural, small city, suburban), and size. Program A is a small, university-based lab school in a predominantly rural county of a northeastern state (county population 30,000, 18 persons per square mile). Children exiting the program and entering kindergarten have one public school option, as the surrounding area has no private or parochial schools. More than 21% of the county's approximately 2,000 children live in poverty. The average household income is \$39,827 (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009), and approximately 25% of the population has bachelor's degrees or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Program A employs five staff members (four full-time and one part-time) and enrolls children in one of two programs: a full-day, full-year classroom or a three morning per week, school-year classroom. Total program enrollment is 36 children ages 3–5. The program serves as a teaching site for the university's early childhood education program, but 90% of enrolled families are from the surrounding community.

Program B is a university-based full-time child care center in a small city of more than 120,000 (county population 234,000) in a southwestern state. Multiple kindergarten settings, including private, public, and parochial schools are available to children exiting the preschool program. Twenty-seven percent of the county's approximately 58,000 children live in poverty. The average

annual household income is \$38, 963, and approximately 20% of the population has a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Program B serves 61 children, infants through preschool, with 31 preschool-aged children enrolled. The full-day, full-year program employs 19 staff members (14 full-time and 5 part-time). Program B is a part of the child and family studies academic component of a private university and serves as a teaching and research laboratory. Sixty-five percent of the children in the program are children of university faculty, staff, or students. The remaining 35% are from families not directly associated with the university.

Program C is a full-day Head Start program that operates preschool classrooms during the school year in partnerships with school districts throughout a five-county region in a southwestern state. This region includes urban, suburban, and rural communities. The multisite program serves 1,071 children and employs 54 teachers and 53 instructional assistants. Head Start is intended to serve children from families with incomes below federal poverty guidelines; however, local programs may reserve 10% of slots for families whose income is above the poverty guidelines. In this service area, those slots were filled with children with identified disabilities.

## Participants

Twenty-nine females, 13 teachers and 16 parents, participated in the study. One participant answered both the teacher and parent questions. The parents were mothers of children in the preschool programs. Participants from Program A were five teachers and six parents. Program B had four teacher and five parent participants, and Program C had four teacher and five parent participants. Across the programs, teachers' education ranged from associate's to master's degrees; their preschool teaching experiences ranged from two to more than 30 years. As a whole, parent participants were highly educated, with 15 parents having some college experience (see Table 1). Parents' annual estimated income levels ranged from less than \$20,000 to more than \$80,000 (see Table 2). Parents in Program B reported the highest income and level of education.

**Table 1**  
Teacher and Parent Education Levels

Group	Highest degree earned				
	High school	Some college	Associate's degree	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree
<b>Teachers</b>					
Program A			1	2	2
Program B		1	1	2	
Program C				3	1
All teachers	0	1	2	7	3
<b>Parents</b>					
Program A				5	1
Program B			1	1	3
Program C	1	2	2		
All parents	1	2	3	6	4

*n* = 29

**Table 2**  
Parental Family Incomes Per Year

Group	Less than \$19,999	\$20,000–\$39,000	\$40,000–\$59,000	\$60,000–\$79,999	More than \$80,000
Program A			3	1	3
Program B				1	4
Program C	2	1	1		1
Total for all	2	1	4	2	8

*n* = 17

## Research Design

Volunteers (parents and teachers) from the three programs participated in open-ended, qualitative interviews and completed brief demographic questionnaires. One researcher from each of the three programs obtained IRB approval and permissions and conducted in-person interviews at their respective site. All interviews occurred within a four-month time period at the end of the school year to capture parental and teacher beliefs in anticipation of the next school year. Interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes and varied from approximately 20–50 minutes.

Researchers followed a prescribed research protocol that outlined research and analysis procedures to ensure transferability of data. Demographic information was summarized, and descriptive statistics were compiled for each group as well as for all participants.

## Data Analysis

The authors independently identified emergent themes from interview transcripts by following a multistep analysis that included: (a) three readings of each interview to establish overall understanding and general impressions, (b) data coding and identification of data units (significant statements) as adapted from Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993), (c) sharing of themes with all researchers and collapsing of themes, if necessary, according to Creswell's (1998) spiral image of data analysis, as dictated by the data, and (d) relating themes to demographic data while comparing within- and across-program beliefs.

Two criteria were particularly important to the interview analysis: similarity of developmental areas considered important to readiness, such as social and emotional development, and commonality in language and phrases used or purposes described by participants. An expert early childhood researcher/educator reviewed the themes and compared them with a sample of participants' responses to verify whether the themes reflected the content of interviews. The six themes that emerged in the analysis form the framework of the discussion of findings below.

## Findings

### Themes

Six themes emerged to inform the research questions. The first three themes reflected participants' beliefs about readiness, informing Research Question 1. Theme 4 included preschool roles as preparation for kindergarten, related to Research Question 2. Theme 5 included descriptions of sources of readiness information, informing Research Question 3. A sixth theme also emerged in both teacher and parent interviews, cutting across all of the research questions: a general feeling of anxiety about kindergarten expectations and children's readiness.

*Theme 1: Readiness for kindergarten as social and emotional factors.* Twenty-five of 29 participants associated kindergarten readiness with social-emotional maturity and the ability to interact successfully with peers and teachers. Responses included descriptions of social skills, social problem solving, and emotional expression. One parent commented: "I think for me it [kindergarten readiness] means ready socially to interact with their peers. ... My biggest concern is the social aspect" (Parent 2). Teachers often emphasized ensuring "the continuum of social-emotional growth" (Teacher 1) and described opportunities for practicing social skills in preschool as opposed to what they perceived as the more structured kindergarten environments. Two teachers felt that their hard work on children's social skills may not be recognized by parents or kindergarten teachers.

Parents and teachers alike commented on preschool influences upon children's abilities to solve interpersonal problems with discussion. Eleven of 13 teachers described the importance they placed on helping children solve such problems, while 11 of 16 parents mentioned problem-solving as strengths of the programs. All parents and teachers in Program B cited the teaching of problem-solving skills as key for kindergarten readiness. One parent commented:

From day one, from our first experience here [in preschool], they've been really big on expressing yourself with words. ... That's been a huge, huge help, and I think that's a life skill that they do a good job of teaching the children here. (Parent 14)

*Theme 2: Readiness as specific school-related skills.* All 13 teachers and 11 of 16 parents mentioned the need for children to acquire mastery of what the authors defined as school-related behaviors and self-regulatory skills. Responses were considered to reflect this theme if they addressed behaviors usually associated with success in school, such as paying attention, cooperation with the school routines, working in large groups, taking direction from a teacher, and staying on specific assigned tasks. One teacher described these behaviors as

following a routine, the same routine every day, so that they get used to it ... and I think that in kindergarten there is a routine as well, so they're already used to that. They are used to sitting in a group and listening to a teacher, sharing their thoughts about themselves in a group. (Teacher 2)

Eleven parents emphasized the importance of children cooperating with teachers. One parent stating that "they [children] need to know what is being asked of them, what they need to know" (Parent 8). Parents and teachers also described the ability to take care of one's own needs as indicating readiness. A teacher commented, "We [teachers] have to teach it [self-help skills] all over again, you know what I mean. ... But you know, flush the commode, wash your hands" (Teacher 7).

*Theme 3: Readiness for kindergarten as language and literacy skills.* Eleven teachers and 12 parents described literacy skills (both general and specific) as essential to kindergarten readiness. Specific skills such as letter recognition, sound/letter association, recognizing sight words and names, and writing—especially the ability to write one's own name—were noted. One teacher from Program A described her changing expectations for writing, based on local kindergarten practices:

I want their names to be written with a capital first letter and lower case. ... The children in this program come in the beginning of the morning and sign in on a question of the day. ... I don't like to see them [children] going into kindergarten and immediately being corrected. (Teacher 2)

Not all teacher comments were this specific about kindergarten expectations for writing, but 9 of the 13 teachers mentioned that they included name-writing in their curriculum. In contrast, only 5

of the 16 parents mentioned name-writing as critical. Parent responses instead focused on reading as the crucial element in literacy, and the belief that preschool children should have extensive prereading skills in order to succeed in kindergarten. Participants also commented more generally about children's vocabulary growth or use of language.

A majority of parents from all programs were generally well informed about expectations for reading and writing in kindergarten and described their respective preschool programs as providing a solid foundation for literacy skills. All parents in Program B, for example, expressed awareness that local kindergartens expected children to have substantial reading skills before entering kindergarten, tying this knowledge to their expectation that preschools were providing these skills. In contrast, two parents from Program A said they were unsure what was expected at the district's required kindergarten screening day. Parents in Program C were particularly focused on literacy and could identify multiple practices focused on children's literacy skills, such as assignments for writing or reading at home, play-based literacy activities, and special help with speech delays. One parent reported, "They [preschool] gave me things to work on with him, like working on his writing, and working on knowing his letters" (Parent 11).

*Theme 4: Preschools' essential roles in preparing children for kindergarten.* Participants expressed positive feelings about preschool and appreciation for their young children's learning and social opportunities; 11 of 13 teachers and 15 of 16 parents related quality preschool experiences to anticipated success in kindergarten. Parents mentioned opportunities to develop worthwhile approaches to learning such as enthusiasm and curiosity while being introduced to group experiences. One parent commented,

Because they've been at [school name], I think that's a huge advantage. ... They're used to being around larger groups of children and having teachers, other than parents, lead them in activities. ... We have a neighbor, those kids stay at home. ... It's very different in how that child reacts in group situations. (Parent 17)

While specific questions about the association of play with kindergarten readiness were not included in the interviews, the importance of children's play experiences in preschool was mentioned by five teachers in Programs A and B, four parents in Program A, and two in Program B. In Program C, one teacher and no parents described play-based experiences as related to kindergarten readiness.

*Theme 5: Assessments and home/school communications for readiness information.* Both teachers and parents discussed a variety of assessment information that programs provided and associated that information with kindergarten readiness. This included references to kindergarten screening practices and screening results, which participants associated with the preparation children had received in preschool. Fourteen parents reported that they relied on information about day-to-day happenings in preschool to determine their children's readiness for kindergarten, and did not cite formal readiness materials or informational school meetings. Nine parents gave specific examples of helpful home/school communications, such as informal conversations, formal conferences, and assessment information derived from feedback tools. Two parents (one from Program A and one from Program C) stated that they did not receive helpful feedback about their children's readiness. Conferences and conversations were especially important to parents in Programs A and B. One parent's comment (Program B) was a typical response on the importance of personal conversations:

I absolutely loved the daily feedback that I got from [child's] teacher. [The teacher] will tell me if he had a good day or a bad day. ... I would also say that seeing their work immediately the day that they do it, demonstrated on the walls, and [teacher] or [child] pointing it out to me so that I can see what they did and if he's writing his

name or he's doing addition ... so definitely asking her ... seeing the work first hand, those are probably the big thing. ... And the parent-teacher conference, of course, is helpful. (Parent 14)

All teachers felt they provided extensive developmental progress information to families and directly helped families who had kindergarten readiness concerns. Eight of 13 teachers noted the importance of special readiness training, such as workshops or college coursework (see Table 3). Teachers cited personal experiences or visits to local schools to inform themselves about kindergarten readiness expectations, and described the use of specific tools. One teacher in Program C noted the usefulness of their electronically based assessment system (described as a "report card"), and teachers in Program A described the triannual assessment information shared with parents through individual parent/teacher conferences. Program B relied on portfolio-based information as well. As one teacher noted, "We have their [children's] portfolios, and we keep track of their handwriting samples. [Parents] can really see how their drawings have improved" (Teacher 6).

**Table 3**  
Sources of Teachers' Kindergarten Readiness Training

Special Training?	School Information Meetings	Teacher Conferences	Parent Feedback	Visits to Schools	Personal Experiences	Other
9	4	4	5	4	7	3

*n* = 13

Note: Teachers could list multiple methods of training

*Theme 6: Anxiety about kindergarten and children's readiness.* In addition to the themes addressed above, analysis revealed an affective component across participants' interviews: anxiety about kindergarten expectations and children's readiness. Of the 16 parent participants, 11 expressed concern about the upcoming kindergarten experience and whether their children would be ready for the expectations regarding behavior and academic performance that they believed to be part of kindergarten. They voiced concerns about children's academic preparation, social skills, and ability to adapt to school routines, as well as kindergarten program characteristics.

Of the 11 parents who expressed anxiety, all focused on the new tasks and expectations that children would encounter in kindergarten, particularly in regard to reading and literacy skills. In addition, concerns about social maturity emerged among parents. One parent wondered about her child's ability to be successful in the structured kindergarten environment.

I'm most concerned about his following instructions. ... He's more acclimated to what kids want to do, not what the adults want to do. And I can see that hurting him and whenever they need an assignment done or a paper done, I don't think he'll do it. (Parent 13)

Parents and teachers expressed concern about kindergarten expectations for mastery of reading, and at the same time, described the extensive focus on literacy skills in their respective preschool programs. One parent reported:

I'm glad that she's learned her letters 'cause I'm just afraid of the whole reading thing. ... I'm hoping the whole reading and stuff won't overwhelm her when she gets there. I mean, with her syllables and stuff, she's done really good with that. She's done really good counting, so I'm thinking she's ready. I'm just still afraid of the reading. (Parent 9)



Teachers in Programs A and B speculated that parents were anxious about kindergarten literacy expectations, but expressed confidence in their own programs' appropriateness and thoroughness. Teachers described the importance of reassuring parents that children were adequately prepared.

Parents in Program C were less concerned about their children's kindergarten readiness than were parents in Programs A and B, with only one parent expressing anxiety about the upcoming transition. While teachers indicated less anxiety than parents about kindergarten transition, 5 of 13 teachers had concerns either about individual children's readiness or the rigors of today's kindergartens. However, none of the 13 teachers expressed concern about the developmental appropriateness of their programs or the breadth and depth of experiences they provided to children.

## Within-Program Comparisons

Beliefs among parents and teachers were generally consistent within each program. This is an important finding, as congruency of goals is considered important for optimal relationships between teachers and families (Dockett & Perry, 2006). In each program, teachers and parents described social and emotional skills as being essential to readiness. Teachers and parents generally agreed that literacy skills and school-related routines were important elements in readiness. Parents and teachers had similar positive perceptions of preschools, and shared some anxieties about kindergarten expectations. Teachers and parents also agreed that communication about developmental progress, as related to readiness, was an important part of their programs. Differences within programs among parents and teachers also emerged.

*Program A.* All participants in Program A described the importance of social and emotional readiness and held positive images of the preschool's efforts in kindergarten preparation. While teachers in Program A expressed beliefs that parents expected more literacy skills from their program and were less concerned with social and emotional readiness, parental interviews did not confirm this. While six of seven parent participants did highlight the preschool's successful introduction of literacy skills, analysis of parent interviews revealed that parents did believe the program was providing literacy education, and all parents continued to emphasize social and emotional skills.

*Program B.* Parents in Program B associated literacy skills with readiness, while teachers more often emphasized social and emotional factors. Teachers and parents in Program B were united in describing the practice of *holding back* as a way to help a child whom they feel may not be ready for kindergarten, while no teachers in Programs A or C did so. Two parents in Program B discussed the relative youth of their children compared with other kindergartners. Because parents in Program B reported the highest income and highest educational levels of the three groups (see [Table 2](#)), this finding is consistent with research by Diamond, Reagan, and Bandyk (2000) and Hatcher and Engelbrecht (2006), who reported that highly educated parents are more anxious about school success and more likely to delay kindergarten entry for their children. Most parents and teachers agreed that they maintained close communication about readiness issues. As noted, parent and teacher groups described play as a valued part of their children's preschool experiences, but there was little direct association of play with kindergarten readiness.

*Program C.* In Program C, both parents and teachers emphasized attainment of literacy skills as the predominant goal of readiness. Program C participants also relied on a specific instrument, described as a "preschool report card," as the primary source of readiness information. All five teachers described in detail the work they did helping children to gain basic self-help skills. In contrast, parents discussed literacy and math skills attained in preschool with minimal discussion of self-help skills. Parents described their responsibility in preparing their children for kindergarten,

although teachers did not mention this aspect. This is in contrast to research by Diamond et al. (2000), who reported that parents concerns over readiness were not directly related to in-home preparatory activities.

### **Across-program comparisons**

Programs A and B were both university lab schools but were located in different cultural contexts (rural vs. urban). Responses from participants from Programs A and B suggested that they perceived developmentally appropriate practice and play in preschool to be important to kindergarten readiness, while participants from Program C, a multisite Head Start program, emphasized specific literacy skills and school behaviors. Two parents in Program C, which required family visits, addressed parental responsibility for children's kindergarten readiness, but this was rarely mentioned by other participants. While all groups noted the importance of literacy, parents in Program B and C discussed literacy extensively, particularly citing the need for children to gain early reading skills before kindergarten.

## **Discussion and Recommendations for Practice**

### **Beliefs about Readiness in Cultural Context**

Across geographic areas, participants held beliefs in common about meanings of kindergarten readiness, and the importance of preschool to children's readiness. We speculate that this is likely influenced by highly publicized national-level conversations about early education. Availability of public prekindergarten programs is included in 39 states' early education plans, and the U.S. Department of Education has described opportunities for quality education in the early years as essential to children's later school success. In its 2011 report, [Transforming Public Education](#), the Pew Foundation set out an ambitious and comprehensive plan to include prekindergarten as part of an overall continuum of learning through grade 12. The National Institute for Early Education Research provides [annual summaries](#) of initiatives to establish publicly funded preschools across the United States.

Participants in all programs shared a multidimensional definition of kindergarten readiness, citing social and emotional factors as the core of readiness, combined with perceived academic components such as literacy skills. This finding has implications for both preschools and kindergarten. It confirms and justifies the priority given to social skills in many preschool programs. Even in Program C, which emphasized literacy, participants referred to the importance of children's social connections, problem-solving, and self-regulation. Because social interaction opportunities for young children often occur in the context of play, the role of play, in particular center-based and free-play experiences in preschools, remains essential to meeting the social readiness goals most parents and teachers express for preschoolers. Maintaining direct links between social skills, play, and future school success in the minds of parents and the practices of teachers will assist preschools that may be experiencing pressure to align curriculum with K–3 programming and to include more direct instruction of specific academic-based skills. When discussing school readiness, Rafoth, Buchenauer, Crissman, and Halko (2004) argue that one of the signs of a "great" preschool is that it includes at least one hour of play daily. Since play-based learning is not part of new national standards for kindergarten (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010), the challenge to preserve play's place in education is clear. Two of the three programs in this study, Programs A and B, are accredited by the NAEYC, which advocates developmentally appropriate, play-based experiences. Yet, even in these programs, when asked about kindergarten readiness, teachers initially cited literacy skills and cooperation with school

routines. While a few parents cited play as important to preschool experiences, a direct association of play with school readiness was not mentioned in the interviews.

Most participants linked prereading skills and kindergarten readiness. Intense attention has been paid to early literacy and language acquisition in preschool (McClelland et al., 2007). In all three programs, teachers, and parents alike expressed the belief that children should have multiple opportunities for building literacy skills in preschool.

Contextual factors may have influenced different responses across programs. It is noteworthy that families in Programs A and C rarely mentioned "holding back" (delaying kindergarten entry) as an option for children who are perceived to be unready. Program A is in a rural area, with poverty rates for children under 18 ranging from 18% to 27% (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009). In addition, no private schools or bridge programs were available in the area. Program C is a Head Start program designed to serve low-income families whose resources may be too limited to provide children with an extra year of schooling before enrollment in public school. In both of these groups, delaying kindergarten entry may have been discussed less because there were no or limited alternatives to starting kindergarten. Some parents in Program B mentioned the option of delaying kindergarten entry as a means of ensuring readiness. Program B is in a small city with multiple schools and programs. Four of the five participating Program B parents reported incomes of more than \$80,000 a year. These parents might be able to explore other options for delaying kindergarten entry that are not possible or realistic for participants in the other programs. Parents from the two university lab schools discussed play-based learning, in contrast to Head Start parents, who cited specific literacy skills and rarely mentioned play. Geographic location in itself did not appear to be a factor when comparing participants' shared beliefs about kindergarten readiness and the necessity for preparation, reflecting shared across-state images of preschool, kindergarten and readiness (Pew Center on the States, n.d.). No parent participants were unsure about their images of what a kindergarten-ready child should be like. Parents expressed definite beliefs about the importance of gaining literacy skills, the rigor of today's kindergarten, and the key role that preschool plays in helping children to prepare for transitioning into kindergarten. Preschool educators can reasonably assume that parents will have definite beliefs about kindergarten readiness that may be shaping their expectations from their current programs. Teachers can create means for discovering those beliefs, such as purposeful inclusion of discussions and information on kindergarten readiness early in the year prior to kindergarten enrollment in order to plan effective communication and address parents' concerns.

## **Attention to Local Contexts**

In contrast to the lack of teacher training directly related to kindergarten transition or readiness found in previous research (Early et al., 2001), 8 of 13 teachers participating in this study described receiving readiness training or relevant information (e.g., articles, books, or having discussions with "alumni" parents whose children had transitioned to kindergarten from the teachers' preschool programs). The four Program C teachers described specific skills needed for kindergarten readiness, but it was not clear whether these reflected their program's requirements or local kindergarten expectations. The majority of teachers expressed unfamiliarity with what local kindergarten programs expected from entering children or what school districts were using as screening/intake instruments. Even in Program A, a rural setting with a single kindergarten option for exiting preschoolers (a public school kindergarten), three of four teachers did not report that they directly connected with kindergarten teachers about that school's expectations. One Program B teacher noted that parents had provided her with information about a local kindergarten "roundup" (screening and orientation), but she had not attended the event. More seamless transitions to kindergarten could be facilitated by broadening teacher training to include specific

connections from preschools to receiving kindergarten programs. This could prove more challenging for preschools such as Programs B and C, which send children into a variety of kindergarten programs.

Participants' awareness of the importance of kindergarten transitions and readiness is most likely a combination of their education (parents and teachers), years of experience (teachers) or personal knowledge of kindergarten practices in their communities (teachers and parents) (see [Table 1](#)). All participating teachers had some form of degree and training beyond high school. Fifteen parent participants had education beyond high school.

Awareness of specific contextual factors that influence parents' and teachers' beliefs about readiness can help administrators and trainers to develop targeted training and communication tools. Teachers in Program A, for example, could capitalize on the fact that almost all enrolled children will attend the same public kindergarten by planning multiple opportunities to connect with the local school or conduct joint training with kindergarten teachers. Knowing that high SES parents often consider delaying their children's entry into kindergarten, teachers in Program B could provide information on the positive and negative consequences of those decisions. Because parents in Program C rely heavily on assessment information to ascertain whether their children are ready for kindergarten, teachers should maintain a priority of regularly communicating assessment results while also including information showing connections between play with readiness.

## **Preschools' Roles in Readiness**

Concern for children's future school success dominated participants' responses, regardless of group location or role. Participants indicated that preschool goals should be consistent with those of kindergarten. This finding implies that parents and teachers are viewing preschool experiences as precursors or "preparatory" programs, not as programs with intrinsic value for children regardless of links to formal schooling. This may reflect the current policies stressing aligning preschool with K-3 programs (Wat, 2010). While this study did not explicitly explore how preschool teachers and families connected with kindergarten programs, teachers and parents cited early acquisition of academic skills, in particular literacy skills, as a function of today's preschools. While preschools can resist the practice of drilling children on isolated literacy or mathematical skills, it is important to acknowledge that today's preschools are expected to provide a foundation for reading, writing, and computation.

Participants noted the importance of school routines. Descriptions of behaviors such as waiting in line, following directions, and participation in large group activities indicate that teachers and parents viewed kindergartens as structured social and academic environments. This finding is consistent with McBryde, Ziviani, and Cuskelly (2004), who found that parents and teachers rated behaviors such as the ability to concentrate and pay attention as key readiness skills. Most definitions of readiness include behavioral indicators related to "meeting the requirements of a structured learning environment" (Bickel, Zigmond, & Strayhorn, 1991, p.105). While preschool teachers should be aware of these expectations, asking young children to wait in line or to spend large amounts of time in whole-group activities is not consistent with developmentally appropriate practice (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

## **Sources of Information: Assessment Tools and Home/School Communication**

Parents from all programs relied on preschool-based assessment information to determine their children's readiness for preschool, in contrast to Hatcher and Engelbrecht (2006), who found that parents relied on informal sources. The programs used a variety of assessment tools, including portfolios, checklists, formal screening instruments, and more structured, program-based "report cards" based on observations and acquisition of specific skills. Parents expected their children's teachers to provide them with information upon which to base readiness for kindergarten. While the participating preschool teachers indicated that they considered assessments to be important, they did not report an understanding of the weight that parents give to teachers' assessments of school readiness. Teachers conveyed that they received some specialized training in the concept of readiness—understanding it, assessing it, and incorporating ideas about readiness into programing. It was not clear from the interviews whether teachers intentionally used this information when talking to parents about readiness or whether teachers felt informed about their local kindergarten expectations. To meet parental expectations for specific readiness information, preschool programs can develop clear and consistent plans for communication, ideally based on a shared vision of readiness based on common beliefs among parents and staff.

## **Anxieties about Readiness and Kindergarten Transition**

Woven throughout the interviews was an overall sense of anxiety about preschoolers' upcoming kindergarten experiences. In qualitative research, it is often appropriate to note what is missing from interview responses; in this case, what was missing was the eager anticipation of kindergarten. Analysis revealed images of kindergarten as a place of high expectations and task-oriented assignments. This was consistent with results in Hatcher and Engelbrecht (2006) that described negative feelings about today's kindergarten classrooms. Graue (2010) confirms this image of kindergarten as a place where children spend most of their days engaged in reading and math activities, at the expense of play. The prevalence of anxiety among parents across all three programs may be related to self-selection; the study's focus may have encouraged participation by parents who already harbored concern about kindergarten environments.

Early identification of teacher and parent goals for preschool children, frank discussion of upcoming transitions to kindergarten, and prioritization of specific parent/teacher readiness communication prior to kindergarten enrollment may help to alleviate anxieties and bolster positive images of kindergarten. As described by Goldstein (2007), kindergartens are often places with rich, engaging learning experiences, with supportive, nurturing teachers who skillfully embed learning experiences and required standards in developmentally appropriate ways. Teachers' reinforcements of the idea that kindergarten experiences will be positive could enable parents to feel confident about preschool approaches to kindergarten readiness and to develop a more positive general image of kindergarten.

Such nurturing environments, however, may not be typical of the receiving kindergartens in the locations highlighted in this study. Parents may be responding realistically to their personal knowledge of local programs' expectations and rigor. Graue (2010) describes the current culture of kindergarten, noting that "children spend 4–6 times as much time on reading and math activities as they do in play. ... Public perception is that kindergarten is what 1st grade used to be" (p. 29). It is significant that one group of parents (Program C) did not associate kindergarten readiness with play-based activities. This is not to suggest that preschools abandon an emphasis on play and social development, yet awareness of what could be markedly different approaches to learning in

kindergartens can be essential to preparing children to enter school. Recognition of the demands children will face in kindergarten may further reinforce preschool teachers' beliefs that preschools must provide the types of play experiences children need that may be disappearing from kindergartens.

With the growth of participation in preschools in the United States, identifying and clarifying teachers' and parents' beliefs about kindergarten readiness can help inform contemporary preschool programming. Parents' and teachers' perspectives will continue to be relevant in local settings even as national education goals, priorities, and policies affect what is expected and required of children entering school. Amid sweeping changes in national early education policies, voices of teachers and parents should continue to be essential in the discourse about kindergarten readiness.

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## Appendix A Questions Asked of Parents

1. What does the phrase "ready for kindergarten" bring to mind?
2. As you think about your child and kindergarten, what are your thoughts concerning his/her readiness for kindergarten?  
**Follow up:** What things have shown you that your child is/is not ready?
3. In what ways do you believe your children's current preschool program prepares your child for kindergarten?  
**Follow up:** Is there anything about kindergarten readiness that you feel the current preschool program is not providing?
4. What kinds of information from this preschool program will you use to determine your child's readiness for kindergarten? Can you give an example?
5. Is there anything else about kindergarten readiness and young children that you would like to add?

### Prompts used during interviews

- What do you mean by...?
- Tell me more about...



- Repetition or restatement of a phrase

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## **Appendix B**

### **Questions Asked of Teachers**

1. What does the phrase "ready for kindergarten" bring to mind?
2. What are your thoughts about your current group of students and their readiness for kindergarten?
3. In what ways do you believe your teaching and your preschool program prepare children for kindergarten?  
*Follow up:* Is there anything about kindergarten readiness that you feel your program is not providing?
4. What kinds of information do you use to evaluate children concerning readiness? Can you give an example?
5. Is there anything else about kindergarten readiness and young children that you would like to add?

#### **Prompts used during interviews**

- What do you mean by...?
- Tell me more about...
- Repetition or restatement of a phrase