Beginnings Workshop

some misunderstandings of school readiness

by David Elkind

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The phrase 'school readiness' was, until recently, most often used in connection with a child's preparedness to meet the demands of a first grade classroom. With the contemporary push down of the curriculum, readiness is now taken to mean the child's preparedness to meet the demands of kindergarten. Whether in regard to first grade or kindergarten, this way of thinking assumes that school readiness resides entirely in the child's head. It also assumes that readiness is primarily academic, namely, knowing one's letters and numbers. In addition, readiness is often taken to mean that a child has acquired his or her knowledge of numbers and letters through one or another form of academic instruction. Finally, another interpretation of readiness is that it is a matter of maturation and is related to age. While all of these ideas about readiness are understandable, they happen to be incorrect. They are a misunderstanding as to what readiness is all about.

Readiness is in the child's head

The belief that school readiness exists within the child's head does not stand up when examined a bit more closely. Consider the following analogy. If you are a runner who is trained to compete in a race, you are ready for one kind of race, not all races. If you are a sprinter, you are certainly not prepared to run in a marathon. In this example, readiness is only meaningful if the runner is competing in the race for which he or she trained. Just as there are many kinds of runners and many kinds of races, there are many kinds of children and many kinds of kindergartens. One and the same child may well be ready for one kindergarten, but not for another. Readiness is not in the child's head. Rather it is always a relationship between the child's level of social/emotional and intellectual development and the particular expectations of the program in which he or she is enrolled. Although this problem of the match, between child and the program, has always been with us it has been acerbated over the past few decades. This is primarily due to the widespread acceptance and participation of young children in early childhood education programs. A few decades ago, only a minority of children under the age of six attended any type of preschool program. And such programs, including the half-day school kindergartens, were most often devoted to socialization and play. In contemporary society the predominance of single parent, and of two parents working, families have made out-of-home care a necessity for the majority of parents with young children. Today more than 80 percent of the children under the age of six spend at least some time each week in out-of-home care.

The rapid expansion of early childhood education programs came at the same time as the technological revolution and globalization of the economy. Politicians, educators, and parents have become concerned that to be competitive in today's world education has to be a top priority. There is also a widespread belief, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that education is a race and that the earlier you start the better. These beliefs have changed the quality of our early school programs. First grade, which was once relatively open and flexible to accommodate a variety of pupil preparedness, has become fixed and immutable in its demands for children who have numerical and reading skills. The half-day play kindergarten has become a full-day training program for entering first grade.

The effect of these changes is to reinforce the idea that readiness is in the child's head. Indeed, in many communities we now retain (make repeat kindergarten) up to 30 percent of children who fail to meet the rigid criteria of admission to first grade. In effect we are asking all children to compete in a race for which only some are prepared. And the lack of prepa-

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ration is not due to any failure on the child's part. Indeed, as we will see in the next section of this article, academic skills are not even the most important for success in kindergarten and first grade.

Readiness as the attainment of literacy and numerical skills

Many studies have been looking at the effects of preschool programs on the later academic success of children. Perhaps the most extensive of these was carried out by West and Hasken (West, 1995) for the U.S. Department of Education. These investigators surveyed a representative sample (of the country as a whole) of 4,423 children from three to five who had not yet attended kindergarten. One of their findings was that children who had attended one or another preschool program had attained significantly more pre-literacy and numerical skills (knew most of their numbers and letters) than did children who did not attend preschool. The study also found, however, that the effects of attending a preschool program were reduced when risk factors (low maternal education, poverty, mother's minority language, unmarried mother, and single parenthood) were factored in. The more risk factors in the child's history, the lower the number of skills he or she will attain.

What this finding means is that the mere fact of attending a preschool prior to kindergarten does not insure that the child has numerical and literacy skills. And it is the at-risk children who are most limited in their attainment of these skills and most likely to be retained at the kindergarten level. Put differently, academic readiness cannot be assumed simply because a child has attended a preschool. Unfortunately, the study did not look at the other factor in the equation, namely the quality of the kindergarten program the child was entering. Even a child limited by risk factors might make a lot of progress in a classroom open to children of varying levels of academic preparedness.

Of equal or more importance was the second finding of the study. The researchers compared the conceptions of school readiness held by educational researchers and those held by classroom teachers. While the study identifies emerging literacy and numerical skills as the most important tools for children entering kindergarten, the authors acknowledge that kindergarten teachers do not agree with this assessment. In fact, a survey of kindergarten teachers (Heaviside, 1993) reveals that only a small number of them believe that knowing shapes and colors and having the ability to count and recognize letters are essential for success in kindergarten. Instead they place a great deal of importance upon health, and such skills as the ability to communicate, follow instructions, and to work cooperatively with other children. It seems that educational administrators, who set the acceptance standards, put too much faith in the theories of educational researchers and not enough on the wisdom of teachers with a rich history of classroom experience.

Readiness and early academic training

The belief that early academic training benefits young children and gives them a head start is widespread and growing. It is aided and abetted by a number of commercial educational systems for very young children. The advocates of these systems argue that young children have tremendous potential which is being missed by the traditional play-oriented early childhood programs. Both the Kumon system (Kumon.com) and Glenn Doman's renamed Institute for the Achievement of Human Potential (formerly The Better Baby Institute) have been around for decades. Yet neither one has provided any systematic research regarding the long-term effects of their systems. Recently these advocates for early academic training have been joined by large companies, like Leap Frog that provide educational programs via electronic media. Many of the claims for these products, like those for the Kumon and Doman systems, are made with no research to support them.

The research that has been done does not support the assertion that early academic training is more conducive to long-term academic achievement than is the traditional developmental early childhood program. Hirsh-Pasek (1991), for example, in summarizing the results of her study of the effects of attending an academic preschool in comparison to attendance at play-oriented preschool concluded: "Highly Academic Environments have very little benefit for children's academic skills, may dampen creative expression, and may create some anxiety."

Contrarily, other research suggests that for young children play may provide better preparation for later academic learning than an academic curriculum. Israeli psychologist Sara Smilansky demonstrated the value of early childhood play for academic as well as

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social emotional learning. She summarized her studies of American and Israeli young children in the following way:

"Socio-dramatic play activates resources that stimulate social and intellectual growth in the child, which in turn affects the child's success in school. We saw many similarities between patterns of behavior bringing about socio-dramatic play experiences and patterns of behavior required for successful integration into the school situation. For example, problem solving in most school subjects requires a great deal of make believe, visualizing how the Eskimos live, reading stories, imagining a story and writing it down, solving arithmetic problems and determining what will come next. History, geography, and literature are all make believe. All of these are conceptual constructions never directly experienced by the child" (Smilansky 1990).

Accordingly, there is little evidence to support the view that school readiness is a product of an early introduction into academics. In fact the evidence points in the other direction and suggests that play may provide the most solid grounding for the later attainment of literacy and numerical skills.

Readiness and maturation

Yale pediatrician Arnold Gesell (1940) and his gifted colleagues Louise Bates Ames and Frances L. Illg did some of most extensive and comprehensive studies of child development of their era. Gesell and his colleagues interviewed and took motion pictures of children from birth to 16. In the process they developed a set of measures to assess children's development. The Gesell Scales were widely used to assess the child's 'readiness' for formal education. Gesell and his colleagues provided an extraordinarily valuable service in pointing to the importance of children's level of maturation as an important variable in assessing readiness for school. They argued that children who were below the developmental level necessary for school entrance needed to be granted the 'gift of time.' Gesell and his co-workers regarded readiness as primarily a matter of maturation that was related to age.

The Gesell concept of readiness, as primarily maturational, has contributed to the belief that this disposition is in the child's head. Gesell and his colleagues failed to acknowledge the importance of the program the child was entering. Today, we recognize that maturation is only one aspect of development and that environmental input is also of great importance. As we saw in the last section of this article, the evidence suggests that the most effective early childhood programs are those adapted to the child's level of intellectual, social, and emotional development.

Conclusion

Readiness, then, does not reside in the child's head. Likewise, the skills a child needs to succeed in most kindergartens are not knowing numbers and letters, but rather being able to communicate, follow instructions, and work cooperatively with other children. These skills seem to be best acquired in preschools that are developmentally and play oriented. Finally, while maturation plays a role in the attainment of schooling skills, the child's experience is also an important contributor. A true assessment of school readiness, therefore, must always take account of the child's level of intellectual and social/emotional development, his or her experiential background, and the classroom expectations the child will encounter.

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Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht

Do teachers misunderstand school readiness?: Elkind poses this interesting question that deserves our consideration. Find out by asking teachers to give their definitions of readiness. Then, work with the definition of readiness in this thought-provoking article to align and calibrate teachers' understanding of readiness. Facilitate a discussion based on faculty members' experience, then tie the discussion back to the article.

It's not just teachers: Families have misconceptions about readiness, too. Develop an open-ended questionnaire to ask parents and family members to share their views of readiness.

Talking to families about readiness: Talking to families about readiness is a challenge for many teachers. Using the information in this article, role-play talking to families about readiness. Practice until teachers feel like they can tackle the important task of talking knowledgeably and effectively about school readiness.

Put it in writing!: Ask for volunteers to take this article and rewrite it for parents and other family members. Publish it in your school newsletter.