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Conceptualizing Kindergarten Readiness

*What Does It Mean to Be Ready
for Kindergarten?*



Within the past two decades, an increased interest in kindergarten readiness has emerged alongside a growing body of research literature. Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have attempted to provide greater understanding of this complex phenomenon. Conceptualizing kindergarten readiness has been, and remains, a challenging and often controversial task.

Conceptualizations of school readiness have been influenced by varying and often different perspectives. The complexity of kindergarten readiness becomes more apparent as one tries to establish operational definitions, guidelines, standards, articulations, and timelines. Earlier conceptualizations of readiness suggest that readiness is fixed—determined by specific indicators such as age, ability, or maturation. Other perspectives defined readiness as the acquisition of a certain set of prerequisite skills or proficiencies. Later models assert that readiness is developmental and comprises interrelated factors. One of these models conceptualized school readiness as comprising the social, political, organizational, educational, and personal resources that support the child’s success at school entry. This model takes into account the shared responsibilities that families, communities, and schools have in providing nurturing environments that promote children’s learning (Piotrkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2000).

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998–99 (ECLS-K) sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), conducted a large-scale national study examining kindergartners and their schools, classrooms, teachers, and families. A nationally representative sample of 22,782 kindergartners was followed through their eighth grade year (Princiotta, Flanagan, & Germino Hausken, 2006; Walston, Rathbun, & Germino Hausken, 2008; West, Denton, & Germino Hausken, 2000). The children in the study were enrolled in a total of 1,277 public, private, full-day, and half-day kindergarten programs. The sample included children from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Assessments were designed to measure children’s early academic skills, physical growth, fine and gross motor development, health, social skills, problem behavior, and approaches to learning (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2008; West et al., 2000; Zill & West, 2001).

The ECLS-K study associated poor educational outcomes (such as low achievement/test scores, retention, suspension or expulsion, and dropping out of school) with four risk factors (Zill & West, 2001): low maternal education (having a mother who has less than a high school education); living in a welfare-dependent family; living in a single-parent home; and having parents whose primary language was one other than English. Findings indicated that 46 percent of all four-year-olds who had not yet entered

kindergarten had at least one of these risk factors; 31 percent of these children had two or more risk factors; and 16 percent had three or more. Risk factors were found to be more common among kindergartners from racial/ethnic minorities than among those from white families. Nearly half of those children identified with multiple risk factors scored in the bottom quartile in reading, math, and general knowledge skills. Risk factors were associated not only with children's lower literacy and math skills but with problem behaviors that affect peer interactions and with a lack of task persistence, eagerness to learn, and attention (West, Denton, & Reaney, 2001). Further research indicates that children's cognitive skills and knowledge at the beginning of kindergarten have been shown to be associated with gains in reading and math in later grades and to predict later reading and math achievement (Denton & West, 2002; McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2006). Overall, children who fall behind in kindergarten are still behind in fifth and eighth grade (Princiotta et al., 2006; Walston, Rathbun, & Germino Hausken, 2008).

Concerns that many children from disadvantaged families are insufficiently prepared to begin formal schooling has motivated a greater focus on the importance of early childhood education and readiness for kindergarten. Data from the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) indicates that the proportion of young children living in low-income families is rising. There are more than 72 million children living in the United States under the age of 18, and 65 percent of them live in either low-income or poor families. In 2010, 48 percent of children ages three through five—or almost six million—lived in low-income families (NCCP, 2012). On average, four-year-olds living in poverty have been shown to be about 18 months behind developmentally compared to what is typical for others in their age group. This developmental lag between children from low-income and middle-class families is particularly alarming because it contributes to an achievement gap that persists into kindergarten and far beyond (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Common Core Standards and State Content Standards for kindergarten, which describe what children are expected to learn and be able to do by the end of kindergarten, have become increasingly demanding. The accelerated academic standards and growing expectations for kindergarten students to meet Common Core Standards and State Content Standards demand greater preparedness from children in the years prior to kindergarten entry. Many educators believe that the current kindergarten curriculum resembles what used to be taught in the first grade. There is growing concern about depriving children of play in their early school years by driving them too hard academically. Concerns that children entering kindergarten are unprepared for the challenges that lie ahead, due in large part to the

concern that many children enter school already at risk of failure, have led to an increased interest in kindergarten readiness.

The growing evidence that early childhood experiences are intricately linked to later school success has fueled recent interest in the importance of making sure all children entering kindergarten are ready to learn. Recent research indicates that a high-quality preschool experience is associated with academic achievement in kindergarten and has long-term social and emotional outcomes. Preschool has been shown to benefit all children and prepare them for the transition to the accelerated academic demands of kindergarten (Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Boyd, & Hustedt, 2008; Barnett & Yarosz, 2007; Head Start Bureau, 2005; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007; Marcon, 2002).

In order to renew a federal commitment to improving educational achievement and increasing the country's commitment to students, teachers, and schools, President George H.W. Bush and the 50 state governors established the first National Education Goal in 1989. *Goal One*, referred to as the *Readiness Goal*, stated that by the year 2000, all children in America would start school ready to learn. Although the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) Report on Goal One did not use the word *readiness* (NEGP, 1993), this goal was instrumental in the development of a common language about preparedness for kindergarten and was pivotal in the recognition that all children in this country should start school ready to learn.

Recognizing the wide range of abilities and experiences that influence early learning and development, the NEGP suggested that a child's performance encompasses a wide range of abilities, skills, and individual characteristics. The NEGP's Resource and Technical Planning Groups (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995) drew upon the research in early childhood education indicating that early learning and development are embedded within five interrelated dimensions: physical and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches toward learning, language development, and cognitive development and general knowledge. The NEGP established a multidimensional framework in which to conceptualize readiness, recognizing the interconnectedness of these five domains of early development and learning.

The NEGP multidimensional model of kindergarten readiness, perceived by many as the closest approximation to a national consensus on areas of early learning and development (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2005), articulated that school readiness does not comprise of a single set of skills or proficiencies but a range of variables and proficiencies in different developmental domains, each empirically linked with later success in school (Kagan et al., 1995). School readiness is viewed as a multifaceted construct in which the interconnectedness of many factors impacts a

child's early learning and development. These include the individual characteristics of the child, the child's family, the cultural and contextual variability in each child's early learning and development, and early childhood education programs, schools, and teachers to support children's early learning, development, and competencies (Kagan et al., 1995).

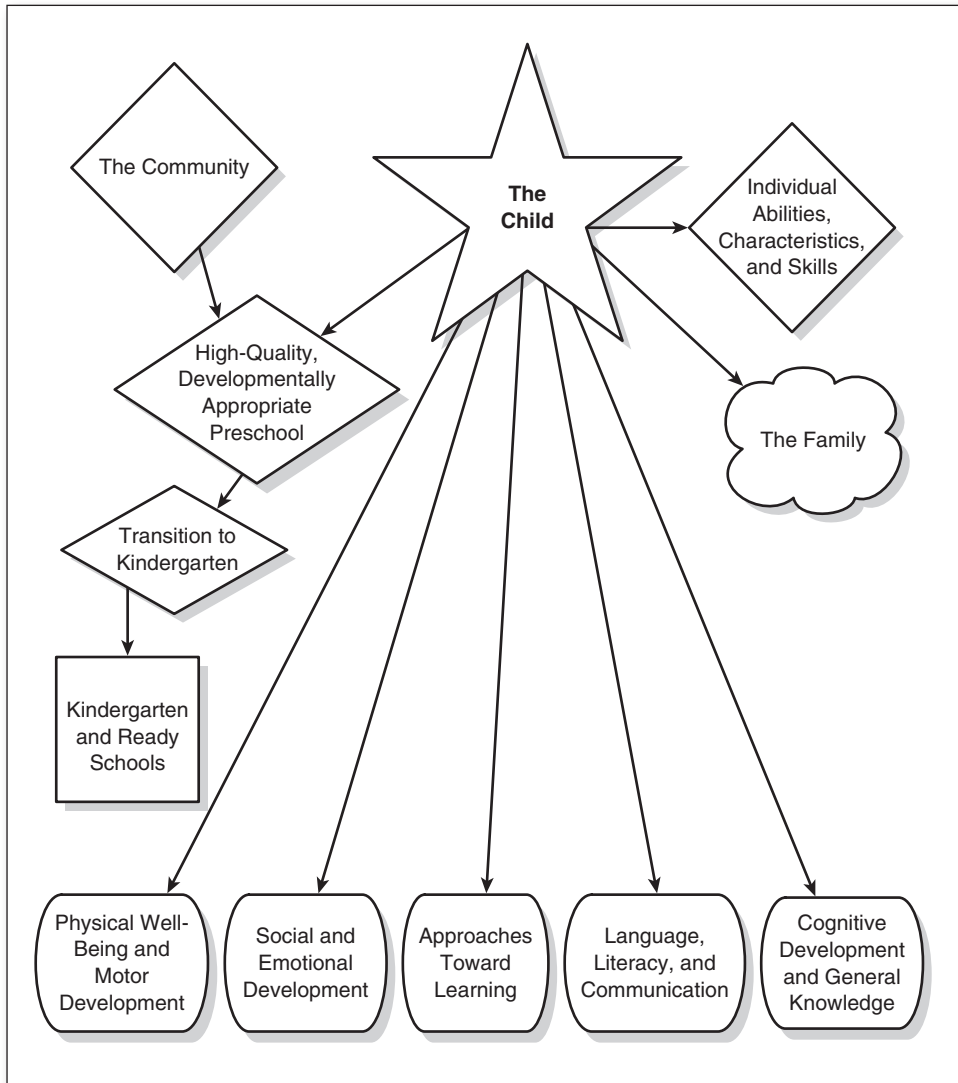
The NEGP established a new model for school readiness by acknowledging that readiness is a collaborative process influenced by many inter-related factors. It established three objectives, suggesting that these critical components interact with and impact a child's learning, development, and readiness for school, and that they are associated with later school success: (1) the availability of a high-quality, developmentally appropriate preschool program; (2) parent participation and support in the child's education; and (3) the child's physical and mental health (Kagan et al., 1995; West et al., 2001).

The NEGP recognized that readiness requires not only prepared children but also the capacity and readiness of the nation's schools to be responsive to *all* children entering kindergarten. In the report, *Ready Schools* (Shore, 1998), the NEGP suggested that policies and strategies be either introduced or expanded to create learning climates optimal for all children. The particular skills, abilities, and knowledge that children bring to kindergarten are not only a function of their experiences prior to kindergarten but are impacted by the "readiness" of the school in which they enroll and the smooth transition between home, early care, preschool, and kindergarten (Kagan et al., 1995; National Association for the Education of Young Children and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE), 2002; NEGP, 1993; Shore, 1998).

CONCLUSION

The NEGP framework, grounded in empirical research in early development and learning, was instrumental in the development of a common conceptualization of readiness, and it helped provide a national framework for education reform intended to ensure equitable educational opportunities and high levels of educational achievement for all students. The NEGP helped define, articulate, and clarify the domains of early learning and development that impact children's readiness for school, recognizing that a child's early learning experiences are associated with later success in school (Kagan et al., 1995; West et al., 2001) and established the foundation for many states' early learning standards in early childhood education. The NEGP framework provides the foundation for this book and the articulation of children's readiness for school.

Figure 1.1 Readiness for School: A Multidimensional Framework



Source: Adapted from the National Education Goals Panel, 1995; Cappelloni, 2010.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Deepen Your Thinking:
 - a. Choose one or more of these individual inquiry topics for group discussion
 - i. What factors impact a child's readiness for school?
 - ii. What components contribute to a child's readiness besides the characteristics of the individual child?

- iii. What are the possible consequences for children beginning school at risk for failure and possibly not being successful in kindergarten?
- iv. What has contributed to recent concerns about kindergarten readiness?

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

California Department of Education <http://www.cde.ca.gov/index.asp>

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
<http://www.naeyc.org>

National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) <http://www.nccp.org>

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) <http://nces.ed.gov/>

National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) <http://nierr.org>

United States Department of Education <http://www.ed.gov>