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Peckham

DEVELOPING
SCHOOL READINESS

CREATING LIFELONG LEARNERS



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UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF 'SCHOOL READINESS'; A JOURNEY ALREADY BEGUN AT BIRTH

THIS CHAPTER WILL

- define school readiness as a holistic process already begun at birth
- consider what school readiness means from the perspectives of early years practitioners, teachers, parents, children and the government
- invite practitioners to critically assess the traditional demand for demonstrated abilities to act as a measure of children's success
- consider instead the need for longer term, deep rooted features of learning.

The degree to which a child is ready for school depends on a multitude of factors that begin to take effect even before birth. Attempts at defining a list of attainable credentials to apply to all children is unfeasible, and efforts must therefore be centred around developing in all children the features required for a lifetime of effective and committed learning. When considering what school readiness is, it is this concept that above all else must remain central whilst remaining mindful of the agendas behind more traditional views and the lessons we can learn from others.

Characteristics of school readiness

Before we know it children are at the age of formal academic schooling and their early years are over. Preparation for this transition has been coined by the phrase 'school readiness'. However with little agreement on how this concept manifests itself in the life of the child, 'school readiness' is used ambiguously with many implications (Whitbread and Bingham, 2012). With no agreement on how, why or

exactly what children should be prepared for, attempts at definition touch on deeper tensions regarding the purpose of the early years and arouses great debate throughout the sector (Whitbread and Bingham, 2012).

The term 'school readiness' features in many reviews of education and statutory guidance. However, the precise characteristics of school readiness and the age of the child to which it applies are interpreted variously by the providers we visited. There is no nationally agreed definition. (Ofsted, 2014b)

SCHOOL READINESS

School readiness could be seen as:

- a culmination of all of the essential social, emotional, cognitive and autonomy building competences that have been developed during the child's early years
- the acquisition of the skills required to ensure that children can progress when starting formal schooling
- including achievements in speech, perception and the ability to understand numbers and quantities
- the skills that will enable children to adapt to the requirements of school, such as attitude to work, concentration, memory and social conduct
- the ability to engage positively and without aggression with other children and to respond appropriately to requests from teachers (Allen, 2011; Stefan and Miclea, 2014).
- including visual-motor maturities, such as the ability to accurately copy shapes, spot simple patterns and integrate information from multiple sources (Feinstein and Duckworth, 2006).
- considering visual perception, manual motor ability and memory skills, along with the temporal and spatial concepts of organisation which if lacking may indicate developmental delays.

However, some may say that laying the foundations for a deeper understanding of more complex skills and problem-solving abilities, such as encoding and decoding, are more beneficial and stand to yield higher gains in school (Feinstein and Duckworth, 2006).

With many differing views of school readiness presenting themselves through a variety of viewpoints, it is helpful to consider the nature of these various agendas and to look closely at where the impetus for school readiness originates from.

Are our current policies, provision and practice based on the lived experiences of young children today, or ideas derived from our own early experiences (Brooker, 2008)? Should school readiness be thought of as a child's status at a point in time,

or is it more entwined with the objectives of family and school, developed and co-constructed by the home and setting (Dunlop and Fabian, 2007)? Or should we be concerned at all? Maybe all children should be permitted to start with a 'clean slate'? Certainly the evidence is clear that children ready to learn on entry to school have greater chances of future success (Wasik et al., 2011), but what attributes once secured could suggest that a child is now ready to embark on a formal academic journey set to last through the next decade? And what can determine this degree of 'readiness' more than the individual needs of the child?

REFLECTION

If not 'preparation for school', what is the purpose of early years provision?

What would you consider to be the most important skills a child can gain throughout the first five years of childhood?

Where and when are children prepared for school?

Children are participants in many interlocking 'microsystems', including their home, the homes of extended families, childminders and nursery, all of which have a direct and indirect contribution to their well-being during this time of transition to formal schooling. Through careful planning and preparation, links between familiar environments, routines and expectations, the unknowns to come can be identified and utilised, easing their transition and ultimate developmental outcomes. This period of transition cannot be viewed in isolation, represented by a day on the calendar, but rather as a continuum, aided by the actions of parents and both familiar and new adults. With full participation from the child, information regarding their needs and interests must be transferred and used effectively so that current enthusiasms can be utilised and familiar ideas of learning can be established and held by all those involved (House of Commons Education Committee, 2013).

Preparation for starting school should include experiences of relationships, behaviours and demands similar to those that will be encountered in the classroom, so that the *multidimensional* expectations to come will not be completely new, allowing children to behave naturally (Brooker, 2008; Wasik et al., 2011). Despite being part of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) within England, the reception class is often considered as much a part of formal schooling yet should be established through play-based approaches and playful adult-directed learning (Tickell, 2011) if children are to experience a smooth transition.

It is important to bear in mind that children experience the classroom from their own particular cultural background, identity, learning stance, interests and strategies (Brooker, 2002). When beginning school they will be presented with a range of developmental, individual, interactional and contextual challenges (Margetts, 2013), highlighting again the need for staff and parents to communicate

with each other in order to co-construct transition activities and stimulate socio-emotional development (Fabian, 2002). Children's ability to rely on their inner resources and dispositions to integrate into the learning culture of the classroom successfully and access the knowledge and skills needed to succeed will be impacted further by feelings of self-esteem and well-being. If this environment or way of behaving is not familiar to their earlier experiences or compounded by cultural or language differences, this can have an immediate negative impact on classroom success and will be reflected in any attempts at early testing.

Attempts at measuring children's school success – or the success of the school – by comparing very early assessment of children (within the first six weeks of starting in reception, with later testing at the end of primary) has fuelled concerns regarding *Baseline Assessments*. Currently available from three named providers, the Baseline Assessment is a non-compulsory national testing of reception-aged children. First introduced by the government in 1997, plans were confirmed in 2014 for its use in measuring primary school accountability, to begin from September 2016. Following the reception baseline comparability study (Standards and Testing Agency, 2016) which concluded that results between trial schools were not comparable, this plan was scrapped. Whilst schools are still encouraged to assess children's 'baseline', the government (at the time of writing) does not plan on using these as a school accountability measure (DfE and STA, 2016).

REFLECTION

What are the expectations you have regarding the preparations children need for their first day of school?

Children develop at vastly different rates, with some more ready for school at age 5 than others. Variance in their experiences and the level of support gained from their families are influential, as are children's natural differences including any special educational needs. All have the potential to effect children's rates of development, which demonstrates the highly personal support children need in these formative years of early growth and development, highlighting the *parity* of quality required within children's early years experiences (Whitbread and Bingham, 2012).

In the current UK educational systems of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (see Chapter 3 for their comparative approaches), there are five years for a child to grow in every way from a dependent new-born to being ready for the transition to formal schooling. A transition meaning so much more than a different place to learn: it has knock-on effects that shape children's future development and influences their ongoing school achievement as well as effecting their health and well-being (DfE and DH, 2011).

The five years preceding this transition are therefore staggeringly important, but for all the riches of opportunities available to children, they must not become distracted by demands of stages yet to come. The early years must be

fully understood in their own right, harnessed and utilised before discrete *windows of opportunities* close if we are to establish key features of healthy growth and development.

Different perspectives of those involved

As we continue to establish a sense of what it means to be ready for school we need to remember that definitions of school readiness naturally differ, depending on whose lens the concept is viewed through.

Traditional views of school preparation include developing the competencies connected to the process of learning; approaches to understanding; taking responsibility for one's own learning and development (Margetts, 2013); and the fulfilling of school tasks (Brzeziska et al., 2012), including skills such as reading, writing, interacting with peers and the teacher, independent activity and the skills required for passing the inevitable tests (Margetts, 2013). If we are to assume that 'The skills a child needs for school are part of the skills they need for life' (Tickell, 2011), then we must strongly question the premise that the tasks demanded by the school curriculum are the most conducive to shaping the learners of the future as well as preparing the child to participate in the complex social and informational reality of a future yet unknown and that the process of learning is accurately matched for all children at all times.

For early years providers, concerns regarding the nature of learning, such as number and letter recognition and forming legible marks on the page, social emotional maturity, general knowledge and the ability to use a range of materials and strategies, are often given as factors in school readiness, with pre-literacy skills seen as particularly important in urban settings and by those working with large numbers of children where English is not their first language (Noel and Lord, 2014).

REFLECTION

Do you think that the concept of school readiness is affected by the objectives of the person considering it? As a practitioner, how do your views of how ready a child is for school differ from the parents and teachers that you work with?

For a primary school teacher tasked with logistical class management of September's intake and expectations of results to follow, demands of school readiness may be more likely to focus on children's abilities to engage in activities familiar to the primary classroom (e.g. sitting at a desk, self-managing trips to the toilet and changing for PE) as well as social skills required to engage well with others and respond to requirements of adults. Working in a system of standards, levels and accountability, teacher's may feel pressured to focus on children's development with the meeting of targets playing a central driver, rather than respecting children's right to learn in their own way and at their own pace (Brooker, 2008). Being able to integrate

into the demands of the more regulated classroom is a focus from the beginning. For the parent, concerns may centre on separation anxiety, their child's ability to make a friend and to feel safe and confident within their new environment. For the child, this is a period of great emotional and physical transition – perhaps the first leap into an unknown, with an overwhelming sense of importance – which requires the mastering of new equipment, dress and practices in an environment that holds great yet unfamiliar demands, expectations and realities.

Through all these lenses one thing is clear: if a child is not ready for this transition or it does not go well, this will create obstructions to their own as well as other's learning (Tickell, 2011). In a formal education system where success builds *cumulatively*, a strong beginning enables children to build on initial success whilst disadvantages felt now will only intensify. Whilst there are undoubtedly expectations for physical, social and cognitive abilities within children's healthy development, questions need to be asked regarding the methods, practices and roles used to achieve these desired outcomes. Mindful that behaviours and *pedagogies* will likely differ according to the views of learning and level of knowledge held by practitioners (Karweit, 1998), a wide range of teaching methods and practices will undoubtedly be displayed (West et al., 1993). The understanding held by those responsible for these influential years must be considered and continuously developed if we are to ensure that practices are able to secure a quality foundation for our children.

REFLECTION

What are your own early memories of school? What preparations and experiences would have made this easier for you?

Having recognised that the key to an auspicious school start is the fostering of fundamental personal attributes from the earliest age, the starting place for any debate on school readiness must then be the child. However a school start characterised by effective skills is only secure in a minority of children; the vast majority are not being given the best opportunity for success (Fabian, 2002). Identifying and embedding key abilities, experiences and features into early childhood enables children to harness and utilise these finite years, not only preparing them for this significant transition but also securely laying the foundations to a continual life of enquiry, wonder and learning and establishing the building blocks for successful, healthy adult lives. Recognition of the staggering importance of the *foundation years* and the skilful managing of the years that follow are vital if we are not to disadvantage our children at a time when they have barely begun. All children must receive early experiences steeped in quality that not only secure the best start to formal education but which will also instil in them a love of enquiry and learning fuelled by a belief of their own abilities that will last a lifetime. However, this in itself is open to interpretation.

REFLECTION

How do you think a set curriculum could go about supporting you in preparing all children at all times?

What is quality in early years provision?

Looking at trends observed through a number of populations and types of provision, The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al., 2004) and the subsequent Effective Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) project (Sylva et al., 2014) examined the impact of specific elements of early childhood and their ability to afford children the best starting point. The quality of the provision, with its potential to identify and support all children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with specific needs, was pivotal. Well-trained, committed, consistent, responsive, affectionate and readily available practitioners with appropriate adult-child interactions and the knowledge to deliver developmentally appropriate curriculum were instrumental in this quality (Sylva et al., 2004, 2014) and have a proportionate impact on children's education trajectory (Field, 2010) and their achievements in later life, even if their performance deteriorates during the school years (Whitbread and Bingham, 2012). Integrated, well-funded, socio-educational programmes were also seen to improve the cognitive and social functioning of children, particularly for those at risk, and specialised support for language and pre-reading skills were seen to have benefited where English was an additional language (Sylva et al., 2004, 2014).

REFLECTION

In the paragraph above there are several references to quality and appropriateness. What do these words mean to you in this context? How open to interpretation is this?

The depth of a child's vocabulary on starting school has a tremendous impact on their ability to access the experience and promotes ongoing enhanced learning. In order for children to develop a rich vocabulary, to have the opportunities to practice their speech and rehearse the interplays of communication, they must have an environment rich in language and experience. Where this is provided in the home, high levels of quality childcare is less essential; however, if the child is lacking in these experiences, providing them through other means will have a long-term effect on the child's life chances (Melhuish, 2003). This was seen in the Allen (2011) Report, which recommended 'early intervention' places and was also reflected in the Field (2010) review of child poverty, which considered the importance of improving parenting as a means of ending the *inter-generational* transmission of child poverty.

REFLECTION

What could you do to ensure that home environments are steeped in language?

Messages from around the world

So a picture is emerging of the importance of a highly specialised early years' experience on the life chances of children. Yet many of these play-based practices become lost to the demands of school. Whilst many different cultures and practices can be observed, evidence from across the world suggests that children should not leave the early years curriculum to begin formal teaching before the age of 7–8 (Bruce, 2011b; Hurst, 1997; Woodhead, 1986, 1989; Miller, 2010; Blakemore, 2000). The idea that 'earlier is better' when it comes to formal learning of an 'overly academic curriculum' (Sylva et al., 1999 in Broadhead, 2001) is misguided, with no long-term benefit (Whitbread and Bingham, 2012). Whilst direct instruction of numeracy and reading for some very young children may bring about initial advantages, for many the long-term effects are at best no different and at worse are seen to promote disengagement as children's opportunities to make decisions and self-direct are diminished (Broadhead, 2001). With significant effects on children's enjoyment of reading, as is demonstrated by the amount they actually read, together with potential psychological and social problems (Suggate, 2007; Schweinhart et al., 2005), this is an issue that requires further debate.

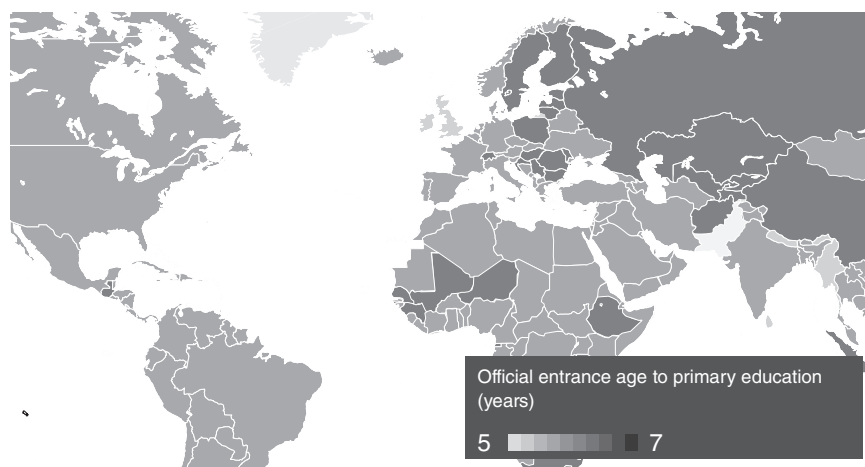


Figure 1.1 Official entrance age to primary education (years) 2011–2015 (World DataBank, 2016)

For children in Norway, Italy, France, Germany and America school starts at age 6, often with a 'preschool' year of informal activities (see Figure 1.1). In Finland, Hungary, Poland and China children do not begin formal education until the age of 7. In the UK, throughout the differing curricula of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the expectation of formal education comes at the earlier starting age of 5, bringing into sharp relief how out of step the UK is with other countries in introducing children to more formal learning in their early life (Sharp, 2002).

In Britain, as in all countries, we have our own clearly defined culture and set of values intrinsic within our eclectic customs and practices, formed through our diverse and growing population. We must be careful not to assume that what works well for others will have the same effect for all, or to try to 'borrow cultures' which is a complex yet common mistake (Wollens, 2000). That is not to say there isn't a great deal to be learnt by looking at the practices of others, not as a wholesale solution to be emulated within very different circumstances but as a well-developed case study. Provided that we look with eyes informed by our own identity and remain mindful of not assuming great insight from brief selected observations. Theories of learning viewed in context can demonstrate the effects of staff autonomy, where working in consultation with families can be seen to enable holistic practices fine-tuned to children's individual needs and curricula used as guidance rather than sets of standards to measure children against on starting school (Whitbread and Bingham, 2012).

Scandinavian countries are well known for offering heavily *subsidised* full-day care (OECD, 2006). With a maternal leave of 36 months (Finland) and a much older age at school entry, 'preschool' is a relaxed, playful environment based on social interaction and individual investigation with pedagogies that extend into early primary (Whitbread and Bingham, 2012). The early years curriculum for children under 6 follows a 'theme of interest' approach through play-based unstructured, semi-structured and structured activities connected with familiar home routines such as dressing, gardening and sharing meals, both indoors and outdoors. The objectives of the areas of learning must be covered (mathematics, natural sciences, historical-societal, aesthetic, ethical, religious-philosophical), but these are integrated so that the learning process is seen as more important than individual core elements. Language is then threaded throughout to support cognitive processes and children's abilities to learn (ECEC, 2004 in Bjorklund et al., 2014).

The ethos of the world renowned Reggio-Emilia setting in Northern Italy was developed by challenging the accepted practices and dominant discourse of the time and reconstructing ideas of children, teaching and curriculum practices; not by dismissing all that was familiar but by looking at practice in a different way, placing an articulated and distinctive vision of the child at the centre. Planning follows collaboration with the child and parents rather than following any pre-conceived goals (Miller, 2010) in a curriculum centred on the child's experiences, interests and choices (Whitbread and Bingham, 2012). Play is integrated

throughout (Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008) and children are celebrated for their abilities to think and act for themselves (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005).

As an alternative view, Eastern cultures can be observed teaching children within their early years to be capable of great feats in numeracy and literacy. In Hong Kong writing and correct stroke sequencing of Chinese characters has been seen for many years as effective preparation for school from three years old. Heavily academic approaches have been forced through correct holding of pencils and excessive print practice (Wong, 2003). With the belief that fluency and mastery will be achieved if enough effort is applied through repetition and hard work, it was believed that this must begin as early as possible. Repeated physical hand holding, testing and completion of daily written assignments was seen by many as effective and appropriate (Wong, 2008). In fact, the Chinese term for learning consists of two characters: 'to study' and 'to practice repeatedly' (Dahlgaard-Park, 2006). However, more recently quality assurance inspectors have questioned the appropriateness of these techniques (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005) and the tide is changing (Wong, 2008).

REFLECTION

Who decides on the attributes that school readiness should contain, and where do we go looking for them?

Is school readiness a defined set of skills mastered (or not) by the child waiting for their first day of school?

Should we be looking at the transition preparations of the school in collaboration with key figures in the child's life?

Or is school readiness tied into the cultural practices and family attitudes shaping the experiences of the child to date?

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has attempted to unpick the concept of school readiness by considering it from various points of view. It has invited debate on the key attributes required by children and has suggested that these must centre around the characteristics of the individual child, forming part of an ongoing continuum of development that has already begun at birth.

By looking at the effect of early childhood experiences on the future lives of children, the chapter has focused on the importance of ensuring that these experiences are of the highest quality and is fully understood by those delivering them.

Ten Key Concepts

- 1 A strong school beginning has the potential to affect the child and their endeavours well into adulthood. (Brooker, 2008)
- 2 Children need to be viewed holistically. To ensure their well-being we must consider the various aspects of family, setting, culture and home life, making sure to establish and nurture these links. (Tickell, 2011)
- 3 Transitions to reception will be aided by practices that fully embrace learning through play during this continuing phase of the foundation stage. (Grauberg, 2014)
- 4 School readiness needs to stem from the needs of the child. (Claxton, 2008a)
- 5 The greatest gift we can give our children as they prepare for starting school is a love of learning and a belief in their own capabilities. (Ramey and Ramey, 1998)
- 6 Views of school readiness will differ depending on the role of the person giving them; to understand what is needed by the child we must look to the child. (Wasik et al., 2011)
- 7 Skills needed for life are embedded in the experiences afforded during the early years. (Dombey, 2010)
- 8 Deeper rooted skills and abilities of children must be recognised, valued and celebrated. (Whitbread and Bingham, 2012)
- 9 Dispositions towards enquiry and investigation must be nurtured and developed. (Rayna and Laevers, 2014)
- 10 The knowledge and skills of the adults in the lives of our young children are key. (Nutbrown, 2012)

IDEAS FOR PRACTICE

Practical Project

Gain an understanding of the beliefs and expectations held with regard to school readiness by seeking out the opinions of early year's practitioners, teachers, parents and children.

Future Activities

Establish a forum where these views can be shared, exchanged and understood. This could be achieved through a PTA Group, a notice board or an online blog.

(Continued)

(Continued)

Work-based Tasks

Establish your own rationale and suggested plan for school readiness with reference to the importance of developing the long-term characteristics of children. Sensitively bearing in mind existing opinions, communicate your intentions to those who will be affected by it.

FURTHER READING

Boivin, M. and Bierman, K. (Eds.) (2014) *Promoting School Readiness and Early Learning: Implications of Developmental Research for Practice*. New York: Guilford Press.

Through developmental knowledge and research this book considers what school readiness entails and the skills and practices required for improving it.

Brown, C.P. (2010) 'Balancing the readiness equation in early childhood education reform', *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 8 (2).

This American study looks at the difficulties of trying to define the school-ready child within a standards-based educational system, calling for a balanced view of school preparation that considers not only academic skills and knowledge but also the abilities of families, schools and communities to prepare children for school success.

Evans, M. (2011) 'What does "ready for school" mean?', *Nursery World*, 111 (4255): 10–11.

This article discusses the concerns raised by the phrase 'readiness for school' in government and policy documents and the lack of clear definition of the term when children are to be assessed with new readiness for school measures at the age of 5. The disparity between Great Britain and the rest of Europe in starting formal education is also discussed.

Kirkup, C. (2016) 'Baseline assessment', *Research Insights*. Available at www.nfer.ac.uk/schools/baseline-assessment.pdf (accessed 21/6/16).

This discusses some of the big questions raised regarding the introduction of Baseline Assessment. The press release following the comparability study can be found at www.gov.uk/government/news/reception-baseline-comparability-study-published (accessed 22/6/16).

Ofsted (2014) *Are You Ready? Good Practice in School Readiness*. Manchester: Ofsted. Available at www.gov.uk/government/publications/are-you-ready-good-practice-in-school-readiness (accessed 22/6/16).

Observations of how differently the concept of school readiness is viewed and prepared for through practicing settings achieving good and outstanding inspections.