

School readiness and the tyranny of merit ^[1]

Author: Haspel, Elliot

Source: Early Learning Nation

Format: Press release

Publication Date: 2 Aug 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online: ^[2]

EXCERPTS:

When you look at a toddler, what do you see? The young child gleefully caroming around a room, grabbing at every object that looks like it might go in her mouth, stacking and restacking blocks like a pint-sized Sisyphus? Or do you see who that child may be as she ages, the elementary schooler studiously following along with her teacher's instruction, the high school graduate, the future doctor? While it may be natural to superimpose our envisioned futures over that child, there is harm in doing so: increasingly, the early childhood education field has embraced ideas of competitive, meritocratic sorting – and nowhere is this more evident than the pervasive concept of school readiness

Linking the benefits of early care and education to later life success is such an article of faith that I don't think we even realize it's happening. Here is President Obama in his 2013 State of the Union address, calling for a major expansion in preschool funding:

"These initiatives in manufacturing, energy, infrastructure, housing – all these things will help entrepreneurs and small business owners expand and create new jobs. But none of it will matter unless we also equip our citizens with the skills and training to fill those jobs.

And that has to start at the earliest possible age. Study after study shows that the sooner a child begins learning, the better he or she does down the road. But today, fewer than 3 in 10 four-year-olds are enrolled in a high-quality preschool program. Most middle-class parents can't afford a few hundred bucks a week for a private preschool. And for poor kids who need help the most, this lack of access to preschool education can shadow them for the rest of their lives. So tonight, I propose working with states to make high-quality preschool available to every single child in America. That's something we should be able to do.

Every dollar we invest in high-quality early childhood education can save more than seven dollars later on – by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, even reducing violent crime. In states that make it a priority to educate our youngest children, like Georgia or Oklahoma, studies show students grow up more likely to read and do math at grade level, graduate high school, hold a job, form more stable families of their own. We know this works. So let's do what works and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind. Let's give our kids that chance."

This rhetoric is echoed by governors of both parties. In 2019, more than half of governors mentioned early childhood education in their State of the State addresses, with many riffing on the sentiments of Alabama's Kay Ivey (R), "For a child to reach their fullest potential later in life, they must first build a strong educational foundation," or New Mexico's Michelle Lujan Grisham (D), "To truly and meaningfully transform public education, we must be proactive, and we must begin at the beginning. The research is unanimous and unequivocal: Children who attend preschool are far better prepared than those who don't. It's really as simple as that."

These may seem like generally unobjectionable statements until you dig a little deeper.

Children as the Unit of Change

First and foremost, the current school readiness rhetoric puts the onus to change on young children. The question is about what the child is learning, what skills he is gaining, what he is prepared to do at the next stage. Little to no attention is paid to the surrounding conditions.

I've touched on this before, but now want to extend and deepen the ideas. I wrote in 2020 that

Modern ideas of school readiness first emerged in 1989 as part of the National Education Goals Panel. Convened by President George H.W. Bush amid growing fervor for educational improvement spurred by the A Nation at Risk report, the panel's first goal stated simply: "All children in America will start school ready to learn." This brief sentence led to much controversy. Early learning luminary Samuel J. Meisels, founding executive director of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute and someone deeply involved in these first conversations, wrote in 1998 of the types of questions which arose:

"Some pointed out that all children are ready to learn from birth. They need not wait until they are five years of age to be 'ready to learn.' Others pointed out that the goal ignores individual differences in learning. It will never be the case that all children will attain the same level of performance at a single culturally defined point in time. Individual differences and variations in development associated with both endogenous and exogenous factors make a mockery of our chronological benchmarks when we try to apply them across the board to all children.

Moreover, the term 'readiness' is conceptually confusing. Is 'readiness' something we wait for? Is it something we impose? Is it a within-the-child phenomenon or something outside the child? Finally, the simplistic or mechanistic interpretation of readiness that can be derived from the goal contains within it the potential for encouraging policies harmful to young children. In an educational world that is oriented toward efficiency and accountability, it is easy to imagine that someone will be penalized if we ... find that some children are not ready for school. Often, the least advantaged in our society are blamed when public policies intended to assist them go wrong."

Meisels was prescient. We have largely lost the essential truth that the great American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner taught us: children develop not in vacuums but in ecosystems. In Bronfenbrenner's words, child development occurs as a dynamic process between the child "and the changing environments in which it actually lives and grows. The latter include not only the immediate settings containing the developing person but also the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which these settings are embedded." These contexts include everything from the parents' financial and relational stability to the broader socio-political stability of the child's nation.

The narrow view of school readiness, which is now dominant, blinkers our thinking. To use an extreme example, helping parents avoid eviction and homelessness will reliably have more influence on a child's academic and psychological development than ensuring that child attends a high-quality preschool program. Yet today, we do not think of an eviction prevention program as a school readiness intervention.

I say "today" because, ironically, the initial development of school readiness measures was far more holistic. We forget, but in the early 2000s there was a major effort between 17 states and several philanthropic foundations called the National School Readiness Indicators Initiative. The Initiative's report, released in 2005, bears little resemblance to our current school readiness discourse. It is worth quoting the introduction at length:

"Families and communities play critical roles in helping children get ready for school. Children from families that are economically secure and have healthy relationships are more likely to succeed in school. Infants and young children thrive when parents and families are able to surround them with love and support and opportunities to learn and explore their world.

Communities are vibrant when they provide social support for parents, learning opportunities for children, and services for families in need. Schools can improve the readiness of young children by making connections with local child care providers and preschools and by creating policies that ensure smooth transitions to kindergarten.

Children entering kindergarten vary in their early experiences, skills, knowledge, language, culture and family background. Schools must be ready to address the diverse needs of the children and families in their community and be committed to the success of every child.

Children will not enter school ready to learn unless families, schools and communities provide the environments and experiences that support the physical, social, emotional, language, literacy, and cognitive development of infants, toddlers and preschool children."

The report authors go on to posit a "ready child equation": Ready Families + Ready Communities + Ready Services + Ready Schools = Children Ready for School

Sit with that for a moment. The child's development here is now the output of the equation, not the input. Instead of demanding that children clear a certain bar—and implicitly or explicitly declaring those who do so "ready" and those who do not "unready"—this equation demands the ecosystem surrounding children be set up to succeed. It still accepts that children will need the building blocks for important advances like learning to read, but their clumsy fine motor skills no longer have to set up the tower.

As a first step, then, we should reclaim this broader view of school readiness and take the load-bearing weight off toddlers and preschoolers. Yet, even so, the concept is still haunted by the specter of meritocracy.

The "Race of Life"

"So let's do what works and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind. Let's give our kids that chance."

Obama's line, applied there directly to early childhood education, embraces an inherently competitive view of American society. It is part and parcel of what philosopher Michael Sandel calls the "Tyranny of Merit." Sandel writes that "Morally, it is unclear why the talented deserve the outsize rewards the market-driven societies lavish on the successful," given that many skills (such as raw cognitive processing power or working memory) are mainly inborn as opposed to earned. Yet, he continues, our society makes winners of those who can navigate our education system versus "those who may be equally hardworking but less endowed with the gifts a market society happens to prize."

Sandel further suggests that those who put education and so-called merit on a pedestal not only miss this key point, they "also ignore something more politically potent: the morally unattractive attitudes the meritocratic ethic promotes, among the winners and also among the losers. Among the winners, it generates hubris; among the losers, humiliation and resentment." Merit is even tyrannical for the winners, because it fuels a relentless need to prove one's worthiness through achievement.

While we see the tyranny of merit most active in K-12 and higher education, school readiness is the Trojan horse through which it has breached the world of early childhood.

Consider again the very concept that a child either has or does not have the skills, knowledge and behavioral foundations to be "ready" for kindergarten. As Samuel Meisels suggests, any early childhood educator—or parent who has watched multiple children develop on radically different timelines—can tell you this is a continuum and not a binary. Yet it is presented all too often as exactly that.

For instance, in 2019 data was released in Florida showing that 42 percent of the state's pre-K students were "not ready" for kindergarten. Governor Ron DeSantis issued a statement declaring that "a 42% failure rate is simply not defensible and certainly not good enough for

Florida’s youngest learners,” while the state’s education commissioner pledged “we must have a real accountability measure for all our school readiness programs.” This is not partisan; similar stories can be found in many blue states.

Already, then, by the time children are five years old, they are being sorted in categories of failure and success. A race, after all, has winners and losers.

It is worth noting that these ideas have been lurking beneath—and at times above—the surface for some time, at least when it comes to poor children and children of color (one cannot go far in a discussion about early childhood within reckoning with classism and racism). When President Johnson announced the Head Start program in 1965, he stated:

“Five- and six-year-old children are inheritors of poverty’s curse and not its creators. Unless we act these children will pass it on to the next generation, like a family birthmark.

This program this year means that 30 million man-years—the combined life span of these youngsters—will be spent productively and rewardingly, rather than wasted in tax-supported institutions or in welfare-supported lethargy.”

This tyranny of merit drives a vicious cycle. If children are “failing” to be ready for kindergarten and already headed for the abyss, then surely the solution is more academics, more “accountability.” The downward pressure from a hypercompetitive college admissions process — with a bachelor’s degree increasingly seen as the only reliable path to prosperity—has arrived. Contrast this again with the Indicators Initiative comment that “Children entering kindergarten vary in their early experiences, skills, knowledge, language, culture and family background. Schools must be ready to address the diverse needs of the children and families in their community and be committed to the success of every child.”

We have already seen tremendous changes in kindergarten itself. Researchers are clear that by the 2010s kindergarten had become “the new first grade,” with teachers devoting “more time to advanced literacy and math content, teacher-directed instruction and assessment, and substantially less time to art, music, science and child-selected activities.” For children who tend to struggle more with academics, they thus encounter a higher and higher wall earlier and earlier.

I want to be clear here that I am not suggesting there is no place for assessment. Assessments are useful tools for educators, and from a policy standpoint some commentators rightly warn of an “honesty gap” in not wanting to acknowledge that some children perform at different levels than others. My point is that the tyranny of merit twists that fact into a logic where the answer is merely to try and boost as many kids as possible over the wall, regardless of the fact that some significant number will remain trapped, waiting for someone to open a door instead, for years and years, often until they simply give up on thinking they are worth anyone coming to fetch.

A question, too, remains hanging over all of this: what’s on the other side of that wall?

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: school readiness ^[4]

early childhood development ^[5]

social determinants ^[6]

Source URL (modified on 3 Aug 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/22/08/school-readiness-and-tyranny-merit>
Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/22/08/school-readiness-and-tyranny-merit> [2] <https://earlylearningnation.com/2022/08/school-readiness-and-the-tyranny-of-merit-part-1/> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8976> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/early-childhood-development> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/social-determinants>