

American Indian and Alaska Native School Readiness

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THE DEBATE OVER the concept of school readiness has been ongoing for over a century (Kagan, 1990). However, in the past decade, the debate has become even more intense due to the passage of Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994. The National Education Goals panel identified a framework to improve American education and better support students' learning. The first goal focused on school readiness: "By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn" (Section 102). By including school readiness as a part of Goals 2000, lawmakers acknowledged that many American children did not enter school ready and that educators needed to do something to rectify this situation. But, what to do and how to do it are questions still begging to be answered. Other questions arise as well. Does the child have to come to school ready to learn? Should the school be ready for the child? Is there a difference in being ready to learn and being ready for school? What role should the family and community play? Whose responsibility is it to make a child ready for school?

In American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities, the situation becomes even more complicated—should families and communities work together to promote school readiness? In this case, it will be important to remember the history of AI/AN educational experiences with mainstream (i.e., White European) education, where the goal was to *civilize* and *Christianize* the Indian, and to remove young Native children from their communities in order to *educate* them (Adams, 1995). Does promoting school readiness then mean moving away from traditional tribal child rearing practices? What happens when current mainstream developmentally appropriate practices conflict with AI/AN traditions and culture?

Unfortunately, the majority of the aforementioned questions do not have an answer. They simply have yet to be explored. President

Clinton signed Executive Order 13096 on AI/AN education in 1998. This action placed greater emphasis on the need for research about AI/AN education as a whole, but specifically identified AI/AN early childhood education as an area needing further exploration. The purpose of the research agenda resulting from Executive Order 13096, completed in 2001, was to “summarize the current state of research and describe the research topics that should be given the highest priority” (Strang & von Glatz, 2001, p. 1). The purpose of this paper then, is to attempt to answer the following questions in the AI/AN Education Research Agenda:

1. How must early childhood programs be structured so that they foster the fundamental skills that children are expected to have when they enter school?
2. How effective are early childhood programs and activities for AI/AN children in promoting readiness for school?

First, a brief overview of school readiness will be presented. Included in this section will be a general discussion of the effectiveness of early childhood programs in preparing young children for school. Second, a possible way to structure early childhood programs so that they foster skill development in young AI/AN children is presented. Third, the effectiveness of early childhood programs in promoting school readiness among AI/AN young children is examined. Finally, the paper ends with implications for future research and suggestions for investigation.

School Readiness

Researchers, educators, and policymakers continually attempt to define school readiness (see, for example: Bruner & Copeman, 2003; Crnic & Lamberty, 1994; Gredler, 1992; Kagan, 1990, 1994; Katz, 1991; Lewit & Baker, 1995; Maeroff, 2003; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995; National Association of State Boards of Education, 1991; Pianta & LaParo, 2003; Shore, 1998).

However, the search for one universally accepted definition continues because an acceptable definition in one community does not work in another. In the first 5 years of the new century, early childhood educators focused on incorporating language, literacy, and numeracy skills into their instructional practices so that children will be academically ready to enter school. Early childhood programs are to teach children the foundational skills that would promote success in school and prepare children to enter kindergarten. However, preparing children for school is not a sole responsibility of early childhood educators or programs (National Association of State Boards of Education, 1991). Teachers in elementary schools, families, and communities also play an important role in preparing children for school.

The concept of school readiness is difficult to define within the current educational context; nationally recognized standards explicitly stating the concepts and skills that young children must acquire within their first 4 years to prepare for school do not exist. Additionally, there is not a nationally recognized assessment to determine whether children are ready for school. Being ready for school in one school district, state, or tribe may be extremely different from another school district, state, or tribe. Simply stated, expectations differ across the nation.

Although a universal definition for school readiness has not been established, several entities have used specific guidelines to assess the school readiness of the students in their programs. Ten years ago, the National Association for the Education of Young Children ([NAEYC], 1995) released a position statement regarding school readiness. NAEYC recognized children's developmental differences; specifically social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development as important indicators of school readiness. Therefore, school readiness is a compilation of all of the areas in which educators and parents feel are necessary to promote positive learning experiences that translate to successful academic achievement within the school context. School readiness consists of multiple components that are affected by numerous factors: age, health and maturity of the child, family involvement, and social competence, just to name a few. Children who

are involved in stimulating learning experiences related to language, literacy, and numeracy prior to entering kindergarten ought to have a knowledge base on which to build.

NAEYC (1995) posited that several factors influence the child and family's readiness for school: life experiences or limited life experience, variations in children's developmental processes, and the level of school expectations for children as they enter school. The variability of children's learning experiences as well as cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development all play a role in children's success in school. Parents and early childhood educators therefore, are to provide children with experiences that will help them succeed within their own learning capacity.

In addition, NAEYC (1995) contended that excuses related to the lack of school readiness (single parent families, lack of materials in the home, minimal health care, education levels of parents, etc.) are no longer acceptable. If the child is not ready for school, then it is the school's responsibility to ready the child. Therefore, early childhood education programs do have a strong role to play in the preparation of young children for school, but family and community members have an equally important role to play as well.

Pianta and LaParo (2003) described the relationships and interactions that a child engages in as significant to their academic achievement. For example, children should be cared for by devoted adults as well as live in a safe environment that follows routines and contains a vast array of stimulating materials. Maeroff (2003) provided examples of how parents or caregivers can offer experiences that encourage learning. For example, literacy materials, such as books, should be displayed conveniently for children's use and read frequently. Computers and field trips, which include trips to the library or museum, can provide children with experiences that promote academic success and broaden their life experiences.

Currently, reform efforts exist to provide young children with the experiences necessary to increase academic achievement and prevent learning difficulties. One of these efforts is the federal Good Start, Grow Smart Initiative (GSGS), begun in 2002. The GSGS Initiative

is to ensure that young children possess the skills needed to be successful when they enter school. GSGS asked states to create content standards related to school readiness that align with state kindergarten through 12th grade standards. These content standards, known as Early Learning Guidelines (ELGs), in development at this time writing, will provide concrete, measurable support for early childhood programs to teach children what they need to know in an effort to foster a seamless transition to kindergarten. ELGs will address early literacy, language, prereading, and mathematics.

More recently, the Department of Health and Human Services (2004) published a booklet, *The Tribal Guide to the Good Start, Grow Smart Early Learning Initiative*. This booklet provided an explanation of GSGS and described the implications of GSGS for AI/AN communities. Due to sovereignty, AI/AN communities are encouraged to follow their state ELGs but are not required to do so. AI/AN communities are also encouraged to design high-quality learning experiences for their young children so that they are better prepared for school. One important factor to consider in the development of ELGs is that only three states have tribal representation on the committees that draft the ELGs.

Many states are attempting to create consistency within early childhood programs as well as between these programs and kindergarten. Maeroff (2003) described a study in which data were collected in the state of Maryland that used an assessment tool to evaluate children's readiness to enter kindergarten. In 2002, just over half of all children were "ready for what awaited them" (p. 3). Most children who were not prepared to learn the concepts and skills required in kindergarten were from low socioeconomic homes in which few books or learning experiences were available. In fact, the children who entered kindergarten lacking the skills and experiences needed to succeed academically were found to have reading scores that were 60% lower than children from higher socioeconomic status.

Additional problems have been identified in early childhood settings, such as the quality of the learning experiences and instruction that children receive. According to Maeroff (2003), the Committee

for Economic Development criticized early childhood programs' lack of appropriate learning experiences provided to children. Pianta (as cited in Maeroff, 2003) believed that early childhood teachers do not build academic relationships with young children through discussions and inquiry-based activities. Instead, children learn basic skills in isolation within a passive learning context.

Young children entering early childhood programs are greatly affected by the type of learning experiences, family support, and teacher they encounter. Additionally, children's home environments tend to be predictive of their performance in school. The implications surrounding young children and school readiness are clear. The question now becomes, can young children be expected to perform successfully upon entering school when standards are continuously becoming more rigorous; when instruction is inconsistent; and when their learning experiences, developmental levels, cultures, and home environments differs greatly.

Early Childhood Programs' Structure To Foster Skill Development

The State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network (SECPTAN), developed to assist policy makers in 17 states access information about effective policies and practices in the area of early childhood education, identified 6 domains of school readiness. These six domains correlate to the NAEYC standards and to the categories associated with the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) and Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) baseline data sets. The identified 6 domains include health and physical development; emotional well-being and social competence; approaches to learning, language development/communication skills, cognition and general knowledge; and other miscellaneous mathematics and scientific thinking (Bruner & Copeman, 2003).

These domains can be used to examine the parameters for the development of early childhood education programs that will foster

the fundamental skills AI/AN children are expected to have when they enter school. Regardless of the populations being served, the 5 general domains for school readiness and the following indicators can be used to effectively structure early childhood programs that will ensure that children are ready to learn when they begin school.

Although these indicators offer a strong foundation for developing an effective early childhood program and are intended to cultivate school readiness, the position statement of the NAEYC (1995) regarding the critical factors associated with establishing a universal design for school readiness must be acknowledged. NAEYC posited that universal school readiness programs recognize and support children as individuals who have various linguistic and cultural differences and needs. The U.S. Administration for Children & Families (n. d.) reported that much of the research that has been associated with the AI/AN children has not always provided benefits for them. The report indicates that AI/AN children have unique learning styles, develop language skills, and are affected by health matters that are different from other races or ethnicities. AI/AN children not only differ from other races or ethnicities, but they also differ from other tribes across the United States. Therefore, as with the NAEYC (1995) position statement, programs and assessments which address the school readiness of AI/AN children must also address the cultural differences of these children. Children who are English language learners, minorities, or come from low-income families, tend to have a culture gap to bridge when entering school (Shore, 1998). When a difference exists between the culture of the school—regardless of grade level—and the culture of the home, teachers need to be cautious so that they do not misinterpret children's abilities or actions (Delpit, 1995).

Early Childhood Programs' Effectiveness In Promoting School Readiness

Knowing what research has shown about the many ways that school readiness can be defined and the lack of national standards

to assess the readiness of all prekindergarten children, regardless of race or ethnicity, the question then becomes how can the effectiveness of early childhood education programs and activities for AI/AN children be measured in order to promote school readiness, especially in the rural context. Assessment of program effectiveness is even more difficult in rural communities, because early childhood practitioners in rural America tend to have less opportunity for continuing professional development and children are more likely to be in informal care arrangements that are not licensed or regulated. Currently, there is no published research to answer the question of how to measure the effectiveness of early childhood programs in the rural setting. However, in an attempt to begin to answer this question, an examination of ECLS-K and ECLS-B baseline data by the National Center for Rural Early Childhood Learning Initiatives ([Rural Early Childhood], 2005) can be used to look for variations in the selected indicators related to child and family health, socioeconomic status of children, and children's readiness for school across all ethnic groups in the cohorts. This data can then be used to understand the specific needs of AI/AN children in relation to their school readiness.

According to the National Center for Rural Early Childhood Learning Initiatives (2005) analysis of the ECLS-B and ECLS-K regarding previously identified indicators of health, socioeconomic status, and school readiness, AI/AN children tend to be significantly different from their Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic counterparts. This analysis does not differentiate between rurality, family poverty, or parental education as key factors in the disparities between ethnic groups.

Upon examination of this data, it is evident that extreme variations exist among people of all ethnicities. Nonetheless, rural AI/AN indicators are significantly different. For example, most indicators are almost double or less than half of the level of non-rural AI/AN children. Strang, von Glatz, and Hammer (2002) reported that AI/AN children do not seem to be as prepared to begin school as compared to children of other racial or ethnic groups. The ECLS-B and ECLS-K data sets provide further evidence to support their conclusion. Based

on this data, it would seem that early childhood education programs and activities are not that effective in preparing rural AI/AN young children for school. At this point, it will be important to remember the difference between being ready for school and ready to learn. AI/AN children may engage in learning activities that are not measurable or valued in a mainstream educational setting.

The ECLS-B and ECLS-K baseline data also highlight an interesting child care phenomena in AI/AN settings, which is the percentage of rural AI/AN children not participating in a center-based child care program. Almost half of rural AI/AN babies were in no care outside the home (44.2%). A higher percentage of rural AI/AN babies (42.5%) received care by a relative (not a parent) than did rural White babies (26.9%) or rural Hispanic babies (13.9%). Additionally, only 5.1% of rural AI/AN babies were cared for by a non-relative. Further, rural AI/AN children (10.6%) in the ECLS-K were far less likely than rural White children (35.3%) to have attended a center-based prekindergarten program.

Approximately 560 federally recognized Indian tribes and Alaska Native villages exist in the United States today. Of these, approximately 500 receive Child Care Development Funds (CCDF) directly or through a consortium to support their early childhood education endeavors (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2004). As of December 2001, the AI/AN Program Branch of Head Start reported funding 145 Head Start and 40 Early Head Start programs and serving over 23,000 AI/AN children. Of these children, 3,400 speak an AI language or language other than English or Spanish in their homes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2003). Both CCDF and Head Start funds can be used to provide child care through centers or homes. In the reports that tribes and villages must submit to CCDF and Head Start for funding, they must identify how the monies are being spent, both in centers or homes and on the activities being provided. The reports are approved, the funds are distributed to tribes and villages, and then the services are provided. However, plans can change, reports

can change, and services can change, thus, providing a very limited understanding of what actually happens in tribal child care settings (L. Kills Crow, personal communication, Jan. 12, 2005). The early child care practices used by the tribes who do not access federal funds have not been publicly identified.

Given the three factors of (a) the inexistence of a universal definition of school readiness, (b) a limited reporting system on information related to early child care practices from tribes receiving federal funding, and (c) the lack of information on early child care practices by other tribes, it is not possible to present an accurate assessment on the state of school readiness or the effectiveness of early childhood education programs for AI/AN children at this time. Research in these areas is needed to provide the data needed for effective decisions to be made.

Implications for Future Research

After attempting to answer questions regarding how early childhood programs are to be structured so that they foster the fundamental skills that children are expected to have when they enter school and how effective are early childhood programs and activities for AI/AN children in promoting readiness for school, it would seem that there is more unknown about the structure and effectiveness of early childhood programs regarding school readiness for AI/AN young children than is known. This dearth of accurate data presents a variety of options for future research. Possible topics for investigation are presented below.

1. How is school readiness defined within AI/AN communities? Does school readiness mean the same thing for all tribes and villages? How can that definition be incorporated into mainstream educational settings to show that AI/AN children enter school ready to learn?
2. Longitudinal data focusing on all AI/AN children (not just on the 10-12% in Bureau of Indian Affairs contract and/or

grant schools or Tribally-controlled schools) needs to be collected to determine the type and effectiveness of their early care experience and subsequent success in school.

3. Surveys of AI/AN early childhood programs and providers could be administered to determine what educational activities are being undertaken to prepare young AI/AN children for school. In addition, information regarding teacher attrition, teacher education levels, family involvement, health care and other services available to AI/AN children could be included to help policy-makers, educators, and researchers understand what happens in tribal child care settings.
4. In what ways do mainstream developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) and traditional child rearing practices conflict? Is it possible to bridge these two concepts so that AI/AN children benefit from DAP and traditional child rearing practices? How?
5. Are the early childhood education services available to AI/AN children different depending on where they live (i.e., on or off a reservation)? What services are available to AI/AN children who live on a reservation? What services are available to AI/AN children who live off of a reservation in a town or city? Are the unique characteristics of AI/AN children considered when services are provided to them?
6. In what ways are AI/AN families involved in the early education of their young children? In what ways can AI/AN families be supported so that they play an active role in the education of their children?

This list of possible research topics is only a beginning; there are many topics in need of exploration in regard to AI/AN early education, care, and development. The scarcity of research surrounding AI/AN early childhood education has been already been well-documented. Regardless of the research project undertaken, the research must be conducted with tribes and villages, not on them. Additionally, the research must focus on success and respect tribal practices and

culture (Marks, Moyer, Roche, & Graham, 2003; Strang & von Glatz, 2001; Strang, von Glatz, & Hammer, 2002).

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