

# The Messiness of Readiness

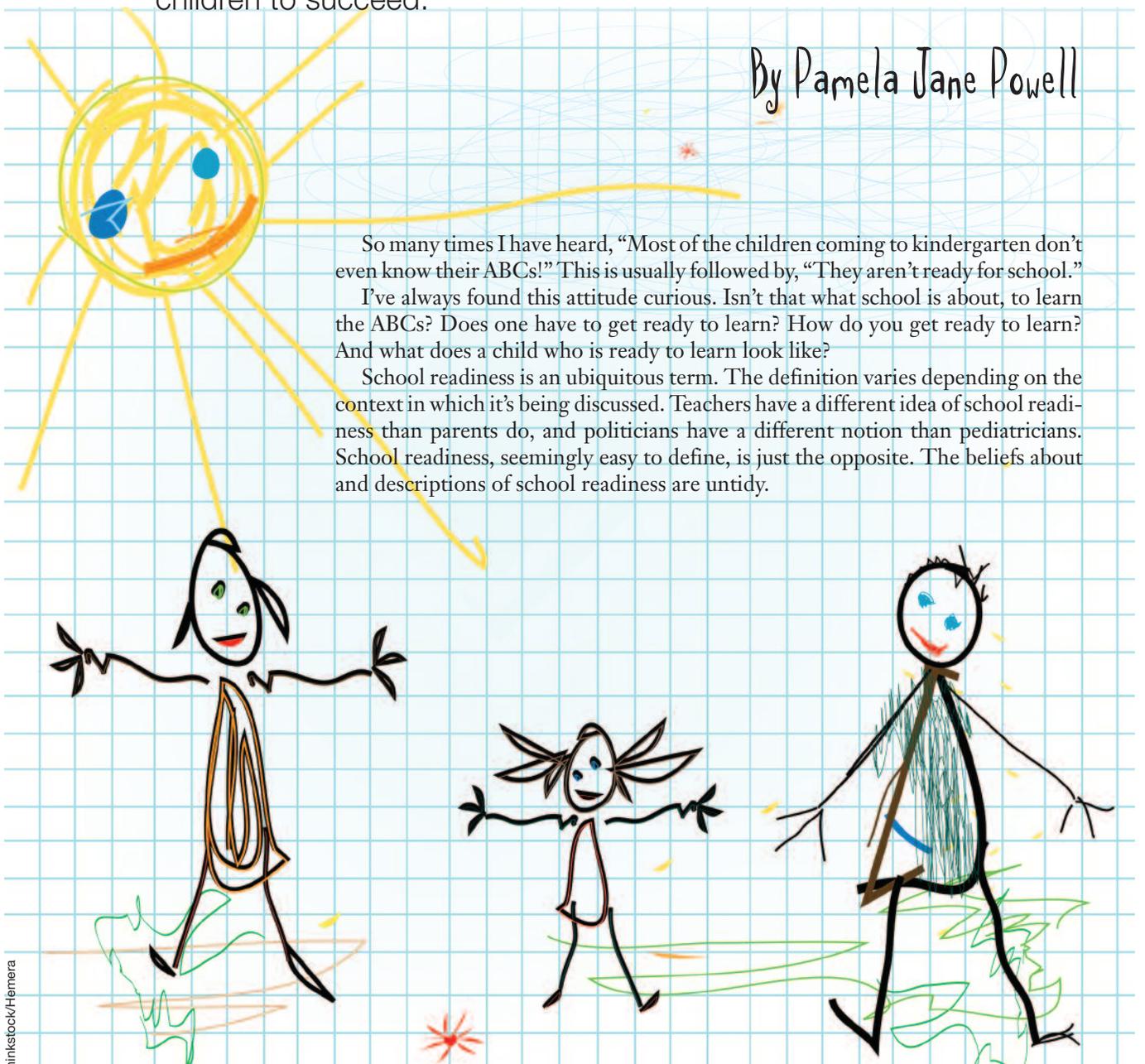
Instead of sorting children into those who are ready to learn and those who are not, schools should provide opportunities for all children to succeed.

By Pamela Jane Powell

So many times I have heard, “Most of the children coming to kindergarten don’t even know their ABCs!” This is usually followed by, “They aren’t ready for school.”

I’ve always found this attitude curious. Isn’t that what school is about, to learn the ABCs? Does one have to get ready to learn? How do you get ready to learn? And what does a child who is ready to learn look like?

School readiness is an ubiquitous term. The definition varies depending on the context in which it’s being discussed. Teachers have a different idea of school readiness than parents do, and politicians have a different notion than pediatricians. School readiness, seemingly easy to define, is just the opposite. The beliefs about and descriptions of school readiness are untidy.



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The problem with “readiness” is that its meaning is hard to pin down. It represents different things to different people and implies a sort-and-classify mentality. It is usually tied to the cognitive and social domains, and the gist of the term insinuates an ethereal threshold separating the haves from the have-nots.

Huey-Ling Lin, Frank R. Lawrence, and Jeffrey Gorrell write that, “Embedded in a sociocultural context, kindergarten teachers’ readiness perceptions are shaped by many factors, including their own experiences as learners and teachers, school structure, school teaching conditions, the expectations of schools for children, social forces, community needs and values, children’s backgrounds, and external societal attitudes toward early childhood education” (2003: 227). When discussing readiness, Elizabeth Graue states, “It is almost always conceptualized as a characteristic of an individual child that develops as the child grows. Different theories of readiness depict a variety of mechanisms for readiness development, but all seem to agree that readiness is something within a child that is necessary for success in school” (1993: 4). It would be reasonable to suggest that it is adults, then, who harbor concepts about readiness, and these concepts are informed by the experiences and expectations of these adults.

Readiness differs from eligibility for school entrance. Eligibility is straightforward, a date on a calendar. Readiness, on the other hand, implies something that resides within the child. Readiness is also tied to the concept of age-graded schools.

### **THE QUANDARY OF BEING READY**

The way our schools are organized contributes to the confusion about readiness. And now, with many children in day care and preschool, the age-graded structure is an issue as well. Age-gradeness organizes children into age cohorts with a birthday cutoff date, thus ensuring at least a one-year chronological span in most classrooms. However, children in even a one-year age span can be vastly different. When you total other factors, such as being overage for grade, being young for grade, being small for grade, being socially immature, and a myriad other variables, the pursuit of “readiness” becomes even more muddled.

A classroom of preschoolers or kindergartners varies widely because of students’ cognitive abilities and their socioemotional functioning. Those who perform well across domains are the ideal incoming students. But those who have difficulty may not be welcomed in classrooms already overtaxed with the pressure of large class sizes, understaffed centers or classrooms, and the need to make Adequate Yearly Progress.

But even if schools had clearly defined “readiness” criteria, that static goal still could be dynamic because there still would be children who wouldn’t be “quite as ready” as others. In other words, the range of abilities still would be there.

**Teachers have a different idea of school readiness than parents do, and politicians have a different notion than pediatricians.**

Through various assessments and observations, children may be deemed ready (or not) to enter a school. There are proponents with various assessments to determine if young children are ready, and there are also detractors. But it is troubling that some assessments could be used to prevent school entry at the normal age. We can’t account for all the differences that might affect the score on such assessments, and it might not be just to permit or deny entry to school on the basis of such assessments.

However, the ideas behind these threshold assessments seem reasonable. That is, children “need” certain skills to succeed in school. Therefore, if they don’t have them, school will be a struggle. The question that must be posed, though, is who will struggle: the child, the teacher, other students, all of them? Does the struggle ensue because of an erroneous notion that we can somehow package what “ready” looks like?

Perceptions about readiness, fueled by conventional wisdom, also add to this messiness. A self-fulfilling prophecy may begin as the young-for-grade, small-for-age, clinging child walks through the doors of a kindergarten. The not-so-uncommon phenomenon of a child being booted out of preschool may be a current example of those deemed “not ready.” But teachers, caregivers, parents, and the public may be part of the problem because they are unaware of what is developmentally appropriate.

All children do not have the same experiences and opportunities, and comparing children to children is an unreasonable comparison when you consider the vast variations between them. Comparing the child with himself or herself, based on growth over time, seems more logical.

Looking for growth does not deny the excellence of academic achievement. In fact, it may spawn more academic achievement because children will be succeeding within their own learning frames. Excellence, then, can be based on individual achievement and can be rooted in the mastery of many skills and, if you like, standards. Instead of lamenting the supposedly low levels of some children, accolades may be given to children for their steps forward.

The National Association for the Education of

Young Children (2009) calls for a definition of readiness to be “flexible and broadly defined.” This includes all the domains that reside within the child. Furthermore, teachers of young children must be proficient in assessing the needs and being able to meet the needs of children where the children are, not where they’re expected to be.

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### READY SCHOOLS

Some states and organizations understand that ready children must be paired with ready schools. One example is North Carolina’s Ready Schools Initiative, which states:

A ready elementary school provides an inviting atmosphere, values and respects all children and their families, and is a place where children succeed. It is committed to high quality in all domains of learning and teaching and has deep connections with parents and its community. It prepares children for success in work and life in the 21st century. (Smart Start and NC Ready School Initiative 2007)

Ready schools understand that children are at different places at different times. They expect them to be. Ready schools are schools that meet children where they are and help them grow. Ready schools understand the importance of teachers being steeped

in child development and how that can affect teaching and learning. Ready schools open their arms to every child with the expectation that all children will learn. Ready schools understand that children may have different learning styles/preferences and thus provide multiple opportunities for growth. Ready schools have teachers who are professionals and know what to do for children’s growth. They understand the importance of assessment and its ability to inform instruction. They are accountable and can meet the needs of children through various means. Ready schools are keenly aware that one size does not fit all. Ready schools are about the success of all children.

### THE ILLUSION OF READINESS

The truth is that we will never be able to have uniform readiness in an age-graded system. Children are living organisms, and education is not what we do to them, but what we do with them. Defining readiness is akin to trying to catch the wind. Readiness exists in the minds of adults, not in the minds of children, who are ever curious and always ready to learn.

Education is the right of every child. Children are perpetually ready to learn, and we have the responsibility to provide rich opportunities for them to do so. Let’s provide opportunities for them to succeed.

We can do this by engaging entire communities in the pursuit of helping children succeed. We need to exchange competitiveness for collaboration and educate cities and communities about the needs and the stages of children. Strategic and purposeful planning to engage parents, children, and other community members in enhancing the foundation for young children can ultimately strengthen the citizenry of communities, states, and the nation as a whole. ■

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*“And in closing, the class of 2010 wants to thank you for the milk and cookies.”*