

## RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SUMMARY

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### Steps Toward Increasing Kindergarten Readiness

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This research to practice article accompanies a study involving focus groups of preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers investigating what is meant by the term kindergarten readiness. Participants within this study perceived school readiness as skills that students should exhibit on day 60 of kindergarten that would allow for them to have a successful kindergarten year. Some skills that would be typical on day 60 of kindergarten are that students are: able to control their emotions and understand the emotions of others, understand how to behave in familiar environments when routines and procedures do not change, and are able to discriminate the sound that an alliteration and rhyme make but may not be able to explain the reason for the alliteration or rhyme. This article delves more deeply into the daily practices of early childhood educators while working to better prepare children for kindergarten and beyond and recommends six concrete steps for educators and parents toward reaching this level of preparedness for kindergarten.

*Keywords:* preschool, kindergarten, kindergarten readiness

### INTRODUCTION

This Research-to-Practice article is offered to complement our study investigating how preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers define the phrase “kindergarten readiness”. With the heightened accountability of preschool programs by state and federal lawmakers in today’s education environment, a formal definition of kindergarten readiness is needed. Our study sought to contribute to the literature concerning what it means to be ‘kindergarten ready’ in one state by interviewing experienced preschool and kindergarten teachers who worked with young children each day. More specifically, our study participants were asked to define what a child’s skills and competencies need to be at day 60 of kindergarten for them to be successful in kindergarten and beyond.

Specifically, our study examined the perceptions of experienced kindergarten and preschool teachers in North Carolina to determine the similarities and differences between these early

educators' perceptions of a developmental continuum used throughout our state called the *North Carolina Early Learning Inventory* (NCELI) (NCDPIb, n. d.). This instrument is widely used to measure kindergartners' skills on day 60 of school, the date when the NCELI is administered in North Carolina kindergarten classrooms. It is considered a formative assessment by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's Office of Early Learning and measures students' developmental levels in five areas: social-emotional, math, approaches to learning, language and literacy, and physical development.

While education has been a field often criticized for employing teachers who tend to work in isolation or a specific silo, early childhood is often seen as even more solitary. For example, teachers in secondary schools typically operate through the support of subject area departments and elementary school teachers often work together by grade level, many early childhood environments are less well-defined by structure and some are even standalone organizations or businesses. Our study suggested that an important effort that would be beneficial for practitioners in early childhood education would be to take part in high-quality systems of ongoing professional development and collaboration with colleagues and other ECE professionals to increase knowledge of topics such as kindergarten readiness, ways of reaching it, and ways of measuring it.

### 1. Professional Learning Communities can provide powerful early childhood educator learning opportunities.

Throughout our study that centered around teachers' perception of one particular state's effort (the NCELI) and kindergarten readiness, it was evident that both preschool and kindergarten teachers were experts in their field and were knowledgeable and understood developmental levels of their students. The language that teachers in our focus groups used to discuss developmental milestones was rich and directly related to specific skills a student on the 60th day of school should exhibit. However, many expressed that this was the first time they had been joined with colleagues to compare perceptions of the phrase kindergarten readiness. Both kindergarten and preschool teachers alike shared that they could benefit by taking part in professional learning communities to enhance their knowledge and to provide support to each other so that they are able to continue learning how a young learner develops. As research on learning and the brain and the critical timeframe of early childhood is constantly released, there is an ongoing need for teachers to stay up to date on that research. A framework such as a Professional Learning Community (PLC), widely used now in the K-12 system, would be an example of a supportive system in which these early educators could benefit from collaboration. As Darling-Hammond and Richardson noted, professional development using the PLC model can provide teachers with a variety of opportunities to share their knowledge, examine what they wish to learn and how they wish to pursue these goals, and serve as a support group and thus encourage changes at the school level (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009).

Beyond just support, Professional Learning Communities have been shown to be important in helping educators focus on data and on specific needs of their student group as a whole and also those of individual students. Examining strengths and weaknesses of student performance together allows educators to learn from each other and to have the opportunity to explore avenues outside of their classroom or school. Professional Learning Communities can also provide a venue for

quality coaching experiences that are uniquely specific to each school, grade level, age level, etc. The learning occurring within a Professional Learning Community by focusing on specific performance data has the potential to be of higher quality because it brings together important, relevant stakeholders, and addresses specific needs of the school community along with specific needs that each individual teacher has.

## 2. Kindergarten and preschool teachers need to be properly trained on agreed upon assessments administered in their specialty area.

As Resnick and Resnick (1992) made popular decades ago referencing our K-12 school system, “What you test is what you get.” This statement held true in our study largely because kindergarteners who had attended a state preschool had been tested on specific criteria prior to entering (and being further tested) in kindergarten. It was recognized during the study that preschool teachers tended to score students higher on the criteria accepted for kindergarten students to know and be able to do on the 60<sup>th</sup> day of kindergarten than the kindergarten teachers. Several factors account for these differences.

One factor is that preschool students in our study were shown to exhibit a slight advantage over their peers who did not attend a quality preschool program prior to kindergarten when it came to familiarity with testing. Preschool teachers had multiple experiences with assessing children throughout the year that were more atypical than those of a kindergarten teacher. Perhaps they scored their students higher because the ongoing assessment of development and scaffolding toward the next milestones in early childhood ultimately caused their students to be more successful.

Another factor to be considered may be that of teacher bias and subjectivity when it comes to scoring a formative assessment that relies on observation to gather data on the students. It is important to note that the NCELI assessment (administered in kindergarten) combined with the *Teaching Strategies GOLD*® assessment (an ongoing assessment used in preschool) is an assessment that is based on a teacher’s ongoing perception of whether or not a child has accomplished specific goals. This type of assessment is highly subjective to the view of the assessor. The preschool teachers that partook in the study were trained in assessing students with this instrument using the *Teaching Strategies GOLD*® Interrater Reliability. All teachers within the state of North Carolina that teach NCPREK students must be certified to administer this instrument. Kindergarten teachers, on the other hand, are not required to be certified with this instrument and with interrater reliability. Best practice would be that each assessor (teacher) take the *Teaching Strategies Interrater Reliability* training which is offered online and become certified so that bias and subjectivity will be minimized in measuring what a particular student has achieved.

## 3. Teachers and administrators must not be afraid to advocate for developmentally appropriate practices.

In the long life of the history of school testing, developing assessments for preschool children is somewhat in its infancy. Throughout our study both preschool and kindergarten teachers expressed concern that some skills that were scored on the 60th day of kindergarten using the

NCELI were skills that were not officially taught prior or were not developmentally appropriate to be assessed on the 60th day of kindergarten. In fact, some teachers expressed that some locally made pacing guides did not introduce some of these skills until much later in the school year. If this is the case, then teachers and administrators should advocate for students, especially when it comes to developmentally appropriate practices. If the NCELI assessed a skill that experts agreed should not be assessed on the 60th day of kindergarten, then practitioners should take note. Most of the assessment instruments used in our study are recently developed tools and may still need some tweaking to better serve young students. Experienced administrators and teachers need to use their voices and their expertise when determining developmentally appropriate practices.

On the other hand, not all locally made assessments and pacing guides are always entirely research-based. In other words, there may be room for revision and possible improvement. Educators should pay close attention to research-based practices and consider using assessments and pacing guides other than just those that are locally designed. Then, after evaluating different assessment instruments and approaches, educators should also consider taking a step outside of the classrooms and serving on state or federal initiatives that create such formal documents for their classrooms. An experienced teacher's voice can be extremely important when state or federal agencies are developing and revising assessments and pacing guides that directly impact their daily classroom instruction and leaders should help bring their voices to the decision-making table. They can be the experts in the room since they are often on the front lines of using these important tools.

4. Once a research-based assessment instrument has been agreed upon and is in practice, preschool and kindergarten instructional focus needs to address the skills assessed in the instrument. (In the case of North Carolina, that would be the NCELI).

Another area in defining kindergarten readiness would be that educators be intentional about what they teach and what specifically is assessed. If both preschool and kindergarten teachers are aware of what their state is assessing, and that those items assessed are an accurate measure of student success in kindergarten, then we need to instruct and assess those goals intentionally. For preschool teachers, this means instructionally pace themselves according to these key items on the instrument; again in our case, the NCELI. These are the main objectives that will determine whether there is a match to see if a student is kindergarten ready. Preschool teachers need to use data sessions within their Professional Learning Communities and monitor each student's growth along the developmental continuum. Being intentional with this instruction will only help educators focus on the important skills a child needs to enter kindergarten.

In our state, kindergarten teachers have a short period of time of 60 days to assess students on their specific objectives. Kindergarten teachers and administrators can track progress on these goals before school even starts. NCPREK students have been assessed using *Teaching Strategies GOLD*© and their growth is documented through the online format. In North Carolina, NCPREK teachers have an obligation to report students' progress during their preschool year to the kindergarten programs that their children will be entering. Kindergarten teachers have access to that information and can investigate their student data to properly understand their students' strengths and weaknesses according to the data they receive before school starts. This information

is a wealth of knowledge and can set the stage for progress monitoring these goals for their students.

### 5. Eyes should be on data, even in early childhood development.

To further address best practices for preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, and administrators in the ECE field, not enough can be said for data. The world of early childhood is rich with data. Not only skills-based data, but developmental data that can help students grow exponentially better than if we just place some focus on skills. An example of this in our study could be the overall agreement that students needed consistency in their environment in order to be successful at this age. The developmental aspect of this is that children at this age are successful with familiar situations no matter what skill that they need to complete. Students were successful in their day to day school life if they were provided consistency between the preschool classroom and the kindergarten classroom. The students were able to complete tasks more independently and with confidence. Teachers and administrators can provide this environment for their students by being consistent with classroom procedures and rules.

These same individuals can also provide new experiences for their students along with the “guide by the side” or scaffolding needed in unique or new situations. Students requiring guidance during new situations was a skill that both kindergarten and preschool teachers agreed upon during this stage of development. Teachers can maintain data that will help them move their children along that developmental continuum. Instruction can be intentional when you truly understand the levels of the students you are teaching. Teachers and administrators can conduct assessments that will help them progress monitor their students and discuss schoolwide and classroom expectations with the particular objectives on the NCELI assessment. Monitoring student data closely will help move students successfully along the continuum.

### 6. We must continue to advocate for preschool services for all children.

It is noteworthy that preschool services in the state of North Carolina are not guaranteed for each child, even though teachers and administrators all agree that a child that has attended a high-quality preschool program such as NCPREK have a big advantage when it comes to kindergarten readiness. Time and time again, throughout the study, kindergarten teachers expressed that students who had attended preschool were able to be more successful in the objectives included in the NCELI than were those who had missed preschool. The kindergarten teachers had to be reminded that the researchers were only assessing typical kindergarten students, not just those that had attended preschool.

Research suggests that early intervention is the key to a child’s successful school career. If that is the case, then we should advocate for universal preschool in the state of North Carolina and in all states. “In 1997, the Supreme Court of North Carolina’s landmark decision in *Leandro v. State of North Carolina* affirmed every child’s state constitutional right to a sound, basic education beginning in early childhood” (North Carolina Early Childhood Coalition, 2023). This was an effort to provide universal preschool for children in North Carolina. It is the year 2023, and we still do not have universal preschool. The state has made great strides to enhance the early childhood experience for all children in North Carolina. Hopefully one day, all children will have

the same opportunities so that they all can be kindergarten ready on the first day of school. Meanwhile, we will continue to work toward improving the field through research and practice. Defining what is actually mean by the phrase kindergarten readiness is one such step.

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