School Readiness and the Transition to Kindergarten in the Era of Accountability

Edited by

Robert C. Pianta, Ph.D.
Center for the Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning
University of Virginia
Charlottesville

Martha J. Cox, Ph.D.
Center for Developmental Science
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

and

Kyle L. Snow, Ph.D.
Center for Research in Education
RTI International
Rockville, Maryland
After substantiating the changing early childhood zeitgeist, with its movement toward greater educationalization and systematization, this chapter examines what is simultaneously the driving force of contemporary educational policy and the source of these trends—the accountability movement. This chapter reviews shifts in how accountability is understood in early care and education and proffers that accountability efforts are necessary but insufficient if not done in a systematic and appropriate manner. The chapter closes with a discussion of one critical and often underaddressed aspect of accountability: the alignment of standards, curriculum, and assessment.

THE EDUCATIONALIZATION OF EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

The educationalization of early care and education is evidenced by a research-driven focus on critical measurements of quality that have traditionally been associated with K–12 education, including teacher certification and quality, leadership, curriculum, and learning standards (National Research Council, 2001; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000). This chapter demonstrates the educationalization of early care and education through a discussion of increased teacher qualification requirements, curricular effectiveness, and rigorous standards. Importantly, as is true in K–12 education, none of these indicators ensure that children will grow academically or that classroom teaching will be of high quality. They do not guarantee high-quality interactions between teachers and children. Rather, the indicators provide structural supports that increase the possibility that teaching will be effective.

Indicators of Educationalization

Within early care and education is a national movement to raise early learning teacher qualifications for both lead and assistant teachers. This movement rests on research that concludes that early childhood teachers who hold bachelor’s degrees (e.g., bachelor of arts, bachelor of science) with specialized training in early childhood education provide better quality learning experiences, which lead to better outcomes, most notably for 3- to 5-year-olds (Barnett, 2003; National Research Council, 2001; Whitebook, 2003). At the federal level, Head Start began raising its standards for teachers by first requiring half of Head Start teachers to acquire an associate of arts degree by 2003; the 2005 reauthorization bill included provisions for half of Head Start teachers to hold a bachelor of arts degree by 2008. At the state level, state-funded prekindergarten programs are now being rated by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) according to 10 quality factors; 4 of the 10 criteria are related to the qualifications and ongoing professional development of teachers (Barnett, Hustedt, Robin, & Schulman, 2004). Given that many prekindergarten programs now have more stringent personnel qualifications, intense debate is taking place about what constitutes appropriate training and credentialing for teachers of young children (Herzenberg, Price, & Bradley, 2005; Whitebook, Sakai, Gerber, & Howes, 2001). Clearly, the need to ensure the best teachers possible in our nation’s early childhood programs has become a central focus of policy makers and researchers alike.

A second indicator of the educationalization of early care and education is the increasing concern with curricular effectiveness, evidenced by the federal government’s Preschool Curricula Evaluation Research (PCER) program. The aim of the program is to use scientifically rig-
rous research to determine whether one or more curricula produce educationally meaningful effects on children’s language skills, prereading and premath abilities, cognition, general knowledge, and social competence. The U.S. Department of Education is investing millions of dollars for research universities to conduct randomized experiments that will provide evidence of the impact that each curriculum intervention has on the children it serves. The interest is not only in impacts at the end of the preschool program but also in the longitudinal impacts on children’s learning through the end of first grade (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Further evidence of the educationalization of early care and education is mounting interest in understanding and supporting the development of children's specific skills, abilities, knowledge, and behaviors. As such, early learning standards—or expectations of what children should know and be able to do—are proliferating across the nation (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003). As of July 2005, 40 states had early learning standards (although 4 had not yet developed or initiated an author implementation plan and 4 more were revising their existing standards); the remaining 10 states were in the process of developing standards, the last of which was scheduled for completion in December 2006 (Child Care Bureau, 2006). Beyond states are national examples of early learning standards: Head Start has developed the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework, which is intended to guide Head Start programs in their ongoing review of the progress and accomplishments of children in their classrooms. CTB/McGraw-Hill (a subsidiary of The McGraw-Hill Companies), using a team of national experts, also developed national early learning standards for 3- to 5-year-olds that are highly regarded for their vignettes, which help to convert behaviorally driven standards into effective pedagogy (Pre-Kindergarten Standards: Guidelines for Teaching and Learning, 2002). These state and national efforts indicate a growing desire to set explicit expectations for children’s learning and development.

Although these educationalizing shifts—increased emphasis on teacher qualifications, curricular effectiveness, and learning standards—inform all of early care and education, they are perhaps manifest most clearly in the burgeoning prekindergarten movement that is having an impact on all early childhood policies and practices across the nation. Today, there is a widespread national trend to create and expand prekindergarten programs for 3- and 4-year-old children. More than 40 states have at least one state-administered preschool program that serves children during the 2 years before they enter the formal K–12 education system (Barnett, Hustedt, Robin, & Schulman, 2004). Media coverage of stories related to prekindergarten can be found on a daily basis in national, regional, and local newspapers. State investments in prekindergarten programs have grown by nearly $1 billion, from approximately $1.7 billion in 1998–1999 to $2.54 billion in 2002–2003 (Barnett et al., 2004; Schulman & Blank, 1999). Private investments also have grown, with major national foundations establishing multiyear and multimillion-dollar initiatives devoted to expanding prekindergarten for 3- and 4-year-olds. Without a doubt, the trend toward more and bigger state-based prekindergarten programs is prominent and widespread. Although the expansion of prekindergarten has brought many more opportunities for young children to receive services, it also is a potent reflection of the trends toward the educationalization of early childhood education.

The Roots of Educationalization

The educationalization of early care and education has deep roots. At least four significant aspects of K–12 education in the United States have accelerated the trend toward the
educationalization of early childhood education. First is growing concern about issues of equity and access in American society at large, reflected in achievement gaps that exist even as children enter school. Second, the business and corporate world has packaged education as an effective and efficient means to increase the competitiveness of American students in the global marketplace. Thus, American businesses want to gain an educational advantage and, based on early childhood effectiveness data, are committed to fostering it. Third, the ubiquity of and comparatively stable funding for K–12 education have made the notion of preparing children to succeed in school a more palatable frame for advancing an early childhood agenda to policy makers and the public. Fourth, the federal government has exerted a strong influence on state policy to define and measure outcomes of learning, not just for K–12 students but also for young children.

**Educationalizing Accelerator #1: Concerns with Stratification of American Society**  
Racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic gaps in educational achievement have been widely cited throughout the past 30 years and persist today (Education Trust, 2005; Reed, 2001; Schrag, 2003). For example, the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) noted that the white–black and white–Hispanic gaps in fourth- and eighth-grade reading scores have not changed significantly since 1992; similarly, large gaps still exist between the performance of children eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch and children from families with higher incomes (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). These disparities in achievement among different student subgroups led to major policy efforts to address and close these gaps. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (PL 107-110) is perhaps the most ambitious, the farthest reaching, and the most high-profile policy response. Among other things, NCLB requires every school to measure and report annual academic progress for every student from third through eighth grade. States must produce annual statewide and school district report cards that provide disaggregated data, highlighting any achievement gaps among racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and disability groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Schools are now held accountable for the progress of every student.

Policy makers and practitioners alike have focused their attention on achievement gaps among school-age children for the past half century. Recent research, however, shows that sizable gaps already exist by the time children enter kindergarten, and these inequalities among young children have been less documented, less publicized, and less addressed (Rouse, Brooks-Gunn, & McLanahan, 2005). Before even entering kindergarten, children in the lowest socioeconomic groups have average cognitive scores 60% below the scores of children in the highest socioeconomic groups. This gap is often associated with race and ethnicity; in fact, economic status most closely correlates with educational underachievement (Lee & Burkam, 2002). Evidence spotlighting how the stratification of American society can begin early in children’s lives has prompted hearty efforts to confront these disparities, bringing early education to the forefront as a crucial factor that can close achievement gaps.

**Educationalizing Accelerator #2: Business Interests in Effectiveness**

When *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) was published, it sounded the alarm that the dismal state of American education was jeopardizing the United States’ competitiveness in the global marketplace. This report galvanized the business world to become an active and vocal proponent for education reform. Corporate leaders across the nation used their professional interests to apply business acumen to
education. With this clamor from powerful communities and constituents, politicians and policy makers became interested in maximizing and chronicling the competence of all students. They, like their business patrons, hoped that effective interventions would, in the short run, boost America’s meager performance on international tests and, in the long run, preserve the nation’s global economic status. Education became intimately linked with work force development and sustained economic growth.

During the 1990s, business leaders expanded their interests in education to include young children. National business groups such as the Business Roundtable and the Committee for Economic Development created task forces and work groups that generated position statements on early childhood education (Business Roundtable, 2003; Committee for Economic Development, 2002). In the past 5 years, the business community has presented strong evidence about the economic arguments for investing in early childhood education (Currie, 2001). Using cost-effectiveness studies about the economic benefits of education, the business community, led by important players such as Nobel Prize Laureate Economist Jim Heckman (Carneiro & Heckman, 2003) and the Federal Reserve Bank (Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003), points to early education as a dependable means to advance American education. As such, corporate interests have contributed to the educationalization of early childhood education in the United States.

**Educationalizing Accelerator #3: Framing Early Care and Education as School Readiness**

Education for children in kindergarten through 12th grade is an assumed right for all children in the United States, even though compulsory school age and requirements for school districts to provide kindergarten vary from state to state (Education Commission of the States, 2004). Federal and state funding for K–12 education is also assumed to be a given. Debate is never heard from state legislatures on whether to maintain fourth or eighth grade as guaranteed parts of a child’s education. Public education in the United States is viewed as a universal right and, therefore, a durable system available to all children. Because most children will enter this universal system, there is an inherent interest in ensuring that all children are well equipped to thrive and succeed in school. As such, early childhood advocates and policy makers strategically began viewing school readiness as a promising frame through which to earn public support for, and investment in, early childhood programs. The underlying logic is that developmentally appropriate education early in life leads to better education outcomes later (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). In other words, the early childhood field leveraged the ubiquity and relatively stable public and fiscal support for the institution of public education to further its efforts on behalf of children during the preschool years. If support for K–12 education is widespread, why should similar support not exist for the essential education and learning that occur prior to kindergarten?

This logic is nowhere more evident than in the work of the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP). Convened in 1989, the NEGP’s first goal was that “by the year 2000 all children in America will start school ready to learn” (National Education Goals Panel, 1991). Since then, school readiness has become synonymous with national intents for early care and education. The school readiness focus has advanced a radical shift in how early care and education is viewed, from its earlier image as a support for working parents and children’s development to a fundamental necessity to ensure that children are ready to succeed in school. Early care and education is no longer seen primarily as a means to care for and nurture children while their parents are at work; neither is early care and education seen as merely the “right”
choice to make to nurture children’s learning and development. Indeed, recent polling data even suggest that the terms prekindergarten, pre-K, and early learning are more effective than the term child care in building public support for early childhood education efforts (Communications Consortium Media Center, 2005). Thus, both in nomenclature and in emphasis, child care and services for the young are taking on an increased educational orientation.

Educationalizing Accelerator #4: Federal Interest in Outcomes Recent federal accountability and standards-based policy, according to some scholars, has been the most significant educational reform of the last half century in American education (Goertz, Duffy, & Carlson-LeFloch, 2001). NCLB (PL 107-110), already noted for its attention to achievement gaps among racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic subgroups of students, serves as the cornerstone of the federal government’s investment in and vision for accountability in K–12 education. Child or student performance accountability has manifested itself in NCLB and subsequent state-level educational legislation by requiring performance standards, assessments, and their alignment; by calling for the documentation and aggregation of measured results; and, in some cases, by calling for the dispersal of rewards or sanctions on the basis of those results (Barton, 2002; Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004). No longer can program requirements or expenditures be the standard of success, no longer is America satisfied with episodic testing, and no longer are test results shrouded from public review.

So all-encompassing is the federal press for outcomes that it not only is manifest in K–12 education but also is permeating early care and education. Similar to its impact on elementary and secondary education, child or student accountability is affecting both thought and practice related to early childhood education. Some early childhood practices, conventionally regarded as heretical, are becoming standard (Hatch, 2002; Seefeldt, 2005). This sea change—the setting of child-based learning standards, the administration of formal assessments, and the use of results to help children—emanates from diverse policies. First, and actually predating NCLB, the 1998 federal reauthorization of Head Start launched the dissemination and use of the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework, a document that defines 100 specific expectations for children’s skills, abilities, knowledge, and behaviors. As further evidence of the federal interest in outcomes, in 2002, President George W. Bush announced his administration’s Good Start, Grow Smart early childhood initiative, which requires states to develop “voluntary early learning guidelines” (Good Start, Grow Smart, 2002) in language and early literacy skills in order to receive Child Care Development Funds (CCDF). So pervasive are these policies and so confounding are their manifestations that a National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force has been established to render clarity and guidance for the field.

These trends—the influence of business to promote the importance of early education for economic competitiveness; the frame of school readiness that positions early care and education as a critical precursor to K–12 schooling; and the federal push to define, measure, and report academic outcomes—have converged to promote the educationalization of American early care and education.

THE SYSTEMATIZATION OF EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

At the same time that early care and education is becoming increasingly educationalized, it also is becoming more systematized. This is evidenced in increased efforts to institutionalize and formalize partnerships, practices, and policies that support a more comprehensive
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