

School Readiness in USA, Germany and Finland

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Abstract

The concept of school readiness is a process that encompasses a child's journey of starting school and completing this journey easily and successfully. This concept is generally used for children who are about to start primary school, but it also applies to preschool education institutions attended by younger children. Since being ready for school requires a process, moving within a plan allows children to navigate this process more easily. The school level that children will start at is an important factor that also determines how this process will be planned. A child who is about to start kindergarten, preschool, or primary school needs to go through this process in different ways. Children's readiness for school requires a broader set of skills that is not limited to just academic competencies. Self-care skills such as eating and going to the bathroom independently, gross and fine motor skills to perform certain activities, cognitive skills like perception and attention, and social and emotional skills for social relationships are as important as academic skills in children's readiness for school. Different countries are conducting studies to identify children's readiness for school in various ways, so that they can navigate this process more comfortably.

1. Introduction

One morning during circle time, the teacher was counting the numbers and asking children to repeat. Jakalah suddenly turned his back to the circle and started working on his shoe. He was so engrossed in tying the untied shoelaces that he was neither counting with the class nor listening to what the teacher was saying. The teacher called to Jakalah and asked, "Which is more important?" "Numbers or shoes?" Jakalah answered without

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hesitation, “Shoes!” Seeing the teacher’s skeptical look, Jakalah immediately changed his answer: “Numbers? The teacher confirmed Jakalah’s answer: “Right, numbers. You need numbers in kindergarten!” (Parks, Bridges-Rhoads, 2010).

There are “musts” and “wants.” The “wants” are academic skills, but the “musts” are knowing how to sit, listen, and be ready to learn. If they are ready to learn, we are fine with them, but if they are not, that is where we have a problem (A Primary School Principal in the United States, cited in Comprehensive Report, 2005).

“School readiness” is the state in which every child enters the classroom equipped with the knowledge and abilities necessary to succeed, learn, and gain benefits. Many early childhood educators think that children’s preparedness for school goes much beyond their skill level (Vanover, 2017).

Although each country has its own perspective on the concept of school readiness; it can be seen that all perspectives are actually built on certain foundations. School readiness, which is considered necessary especially for starting primary school, was previously defined as children reaching a sufficient level of physical competence. With the increase in research on early childhood, it has become clear that school readiness should not be limited to physical competence. Although many definitions of school readiness are encountered in books, articles and search engines on the internet today, all definitions have certain common points. The common points of these definitions are that school readiness is not only about the child, but also that the family, the environment and the school have an important place in the school preparation process.

2. School Readiness in United States of America

The United States, by its very structure a multicultural state and governed by a system of states, presents school readiness in many different forms. It is possible to encounter school readiness and reading readiness from preschool education up to the sixth grade.

2.1. School Readiness in the Preschool Period

Preschool education in the United States emerged in 1856, and by the 1920s, some public schools had established kindergarten classes. Since 1986, when the state of Mississippi last recognized preschool education institutions as part of public schools, education has continued at least at the kindergarten level in public schools. After the establishment of kindergartens within state institutions in all states of the USA, topics of discussion have included

whether preschool education should be mandatory, whether it should be half-day or full-day, at what age children should be admitted to these institutions, and how readiness for school should be determined (De Cos, 1997). In 2011, 45 states enacted laws requiring their local school districts to open kindergarten classes, and 19 of them made attending kindergarten mandatory (Bush, 2011).

The widening gap in school readiness between children from wealthy and poor families has prompted politicians to take action since 1990. At The National Education Goals Panel in 1990, it has been aimed that every child starting school by the year 2000 will be ready to learn. The National Center for Education Statistics has conducted a study regarding preschool teachers' thoughts on school readiness, in order to ensure that the concept of school readiness has a common meaning. As a result of this study conducted in 1993, teachers identified three prerequisites for children to start kindergarten: being healthy, being able to communicate, and having enthusiasm and curiosity (Joyner & Theodore, 2011). In the 1997 report of the National Education Goals Panel, the five components that a child should possess for school readiness are listed as follows (National Education Goals Report, 1997, p. 28):

1. Being physically healthy and to have appropriate motor development.
2. Being emotionally healthy and willing to trying new experiences.
3. To have age-appropriate social knowledge and competence.
4. To have age-appropriate language skills.
5. To have age-appropriate general knowledge and cognitive competence.

2.1.1. Components of School Readiness

Being physically healthy and having appropriate motor development: When we talk about being physically healthy, it should not just mean not having any major illnesses. It should be considered to have sufficient energy to participate in school activities and to be resistant to common infections. Frequent absenteeism at an early age makes it difficult to acquire fundamental knowledge and skills, which in turn creates challenges in gaining skills that require more academic knowledge (Doherty, 1997).

School readiness includes being physically healthy, as well as being able to do the tasks that must be done in preschool. Schools provide for five-year-olds to be able to perform tasks such as being able to hold and use a pencil correctly, and turning pages of books without wasting them. Children who

have not reached these levels in motor development are unable to benefit effectively from activities, and as a result, they fall behind in many learning and practical duties (Doherty, 1997, p. 14).

Being emotionally ready and eager for new experiences: Readiness for school requires self-confidence. Thanks to self-confidence, children embark on new experiences without worrying about the fear of failure. To be emotionally mature, children are expected to try to fulfill the tasks assigned to them rather than seeking immediate gratification (Doherty, 1997, p. 15).

Having age-appropriate social knowledge and competence: Expectations for behavior among children in a specific age group include displaying generally accepted behaviors within society, being able to control own actions, and being able to collaborate with peers while working on a task (Doherty, 1997, p. 15).

Having age-appropriate language skills: For a child to be able to start school, they must be able to understand verbal instructions from adults and peers and be able to express their experiences, thoughts, wishes, and feelings in a way that others can understand (Doherty, 1997, p. 16).

Having general culture and cognitive competence appropriate for age: Just as communication skills are important, general cultural knowledge is equally significant. To fulfill academic duties, children must possess a basic general knowledge appropriate for their age. Being cognitively sufficient has been described as children's ability to receive, organize, and analyze stimuli from their environment. The cognitive competencies necessary for school readiness involve the ability to understand and identify similarities and differences among groups, as well as the ability to recall and convey a specific body of knowledge (Doherty, 1997, p. 17).

2.2. School Readiness for Primary School

Considering that approximately 80% of children in the U.S. attend preschool before starting first grade, there will be a large number of children coming to preschools from different cultures and experiences (Aud et al., 2013). The National Association for the Education of Young Children has argued that the programs implemented in preschool should be more suitable for children's ages and emphasized that more work needs to be done regarding the adaptation of children with individual differences in learning experiences to school (NAEYC Position Statement, 2009).

With the increasing importance of school readiness, determining whether children are prepared has also gained significance. The National

School Readiness Indicators Initiative has argued that being ready for school is not just about reaching certain developmental levels and completing chronological age. Accordingly, families, schools, and society must provide children with opportunities and experiences that support their physical, social, emotional, language, and cognitive development; otherwise, children cannot be ready for school. To determine readiness for school, measurable and easily trackable indicators known as core indicators have been established. According to the “School-Ready Child Equation”:

Ready Family + Ready Community + Ready Services + Ready Schools
= School-Ready Child (Rhode Island Kids Count, 2005).

2.3. School Readiness Equation for Children

The factors affecting children’s readiness for school have been identified as physical health and motor development, social and emotional development, language development and literacy, cognitive development, general knowledge, and learning methods.

Physical Health and Motor Development: Early learning is the behavior that can be acquired through full-life experiences. In academic life, the acquisition of these early learnings is dependent on being physically healthy and having appropriate motor development (Getting a Good Start in School, 1997; Center for Child Health Research, 2004).

Social and Emotional Development: Receiving consistent care at an early age affects children’s social and emotional development. It is expected that children with good social and emotional development will also be more academically successful in school (Nieer Special Report, 2003; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Language Development and Literacy: Language development and early literacy skills (vocabulary, letter recognition, understanding the relationship between sounds and letters) are crucial for starting school and for future academic life (National Education Goals Panel, 1994).

Cognitive Development and General Culture: Cognitive development helps in acquiring a series of skills in early childhood, which in turn aids in developing academic skills such as observation and identifying similarities and differences (Getting a Good Start in School, 1997).

Learning Methods: Children’s success in school is not only dependent on academic skills but also on their habits and learning methods (Child Trends Research Brief, 2001).

2.4. Ready Family

The educational level of the family, the age of the mother at the time of having children, child neglect and abuse, and children cared for by others are factors that influence how prepared families are.

The Education Level of the Family: The education levels of parents play a significant role in the development of their children. It has been observed that children from families with higher education levels are healthier in early childhood, are more prepared for school, and have a greater desire to pursue higher education (Center for Child Health Research, 2004, p. 86).

The Age of Mothers Having Children: Individuals who become mothers at an early age tend to have low birth weight deliveries, experience difficulties in child care, and face financial and social challenges (Center for Child Health Research, 2004, p. 92).

Child Neglect and Abuse: Neglected children or those who have been physically or sexually abused are at a high risk of experiencing problems in cognitive and emotional development. Failure in school can lead to consequences such as frequent grade repetition and becoming a mother at an early age (Dicker, Gordon & Knitzer, 2002, p. 8; English, 1998).

Children Viewed by Others: In order for children's development and growth to be healthy, they must first feel safe. All children seek a safe, consistent care and lasting relationships at home in order to trust adults. Staying in homes outside their own for extended periods can lead to emotional and behavioral problems in children (Dicker, Gordon & Knitzer, 2002, p. 7).

2.5. Ready Society

Children in poverty, support programs for families with children, and the exposure of poor families to lead accumulation and poisoning are factors that affect the preparedness of society.

Children in Poverty: Poverty can negatively affect children's health and development. It is more difficult for these children to be ready for school compared to others. Economic difficulties, the impact of poverty on the social environment, and the lack of education among families are factors that negatively affect school readiness (Center for Child Health Research, 2004).

Support Programs for Families with Children: Programs designed for families and children living in poverty are those that provide support to both the families and the children (Schorr & Marchand, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Lead Accumulation and Poisoning: Children exposed to lead tend to have lower IQs and exhibit behavioral problems. This also leads to failure in academic life and the need for special educational requirements (Barton, 2003; Center for Child Health Research, 2004).

2.6. Ready Services

Health services (healthcare services, low birth weight infants) and educational services (children receiving early childhood education, preschool teacher qualifications, proper child care, access to government assistance for child care) are factors that influence school readiness.

Health Services: Due to the lack of a social state structure in the United States, individuals are forced to obtain private health insurance personally. Some states provide health insurance services for families in poverty. Families with health insurance can have their children's healthcare services provided in hospitals from birth. Families without health insurance are unable to benefit from the very expensive hospital services, leading to prolonged illnesses in children, difficulties in continuing their education, which in turn complicates the child's academic life in every sense (Center for Child Health Research, 2004; Schorr & Marchand, 2007).

Low Birth Weight: Babies born weighing less than 2.500 grams are likely to experience difficulties in their physical development compared to others. Babies born with low birth weight are more likely to have long-term illnesses or disabilities and a need for special education (Barton, 2003; Center for Child Health Research, 2004).

Children in Early Childhood Education: Children who receive preschool education one or two years before starting kindergarten have more advanced academic, social, and emotional development (Center for Child Health Research, 2001).

Early Childhood Teacher Qualifications: Having high-quality teachers in the early childhood period has a more positive impact on children's learning and development (Nicer Special Report, 2003).

Proper Child Care: Quality child care at an early age provides children with a safe and healthy learning experience. Children who receive quality care score better on cognitive and social tests during the preschool period than those who receive poor care (Center for Child Health Research, 2004; Kagan & Rigby, 2003).

Access to Government Assistance for Childcare: Especially low-income families are looking for places where they can safely leave their children in

order to earn money and provide a good education for them. The state's assistance in this matter provides high-quality child care that meets their demands (Kagan & Rigby, 2003).

2.7. Ready School

The number of children per teacher and the number of children in the classroom are factors that affect reading skills in third grade (children who have not learned to read correctly by the time they reach third grade experience academic failures in later years), as well as the readiness of schools.

Number of Children per Teacher: If the number of children per teacher is low, it becomes easier for teachers to identify the individual needs of the children and to engage with them on a personal level (Barton, 2003).

Reading Skills in 4th Grade: The reading skills score in fourth grade is a reliable indicator of children's future academic success and school readiness, as well as a reflection of whether the child's needs have been adequately met by the time they reach fourth grade (Martinez, 2004).

2.8. School Readiness Assessment Tests

Due to the United States' system of governance by states and the authority of each state to make changes to its education system, the characteristics that children should possess before starting preschool education vary across different states in the U.S. Some states admit children who wish to attend preschool institutions without requiring any tests, while other states assess children's readiness for school through tests before enrollment (Stedron & Berger, 2010).

According to 2020 data, readiness tests for starting kindergarten are implemented in 31 states in the U.S. (<https://nces.ed.gov>). Readiness tests for school and the knowledge areas measured by these tests (such as reading only, reading and mathematics, etc.) vary from state to state. Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS), Bracken, Denver Developmental Screening Test II (DENVER II), and Phonological Awareness Literacy (PALS-K) are readiness assessment tests recommended for use by states (www.phii.org). These tests are not specially designed for preschool, but rather one of the specific tests prepared for preschools, which is the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment-Literacy (KRA-L) test used in the state of Ohio. The KRA-L test has also established early literacy as a criterion for starting preschool. In this test, children are subjected to a 15 minute assessment that includes answering who-what-when-why-how questions, repeating sentences,

recognizing words and rhymes, finding rhyming words for a given word, recognizing letters, and listening to and identifying the initial letters of words.

3. School Readiness in Germany

In Germany, there is generally a compulsory education requirement. Accordingly, every child who has reached the age of six and resides in Germany is required to start school, regardless of their nationality (Aytaç 1979, cited in Kutluca Canbulat & Canbulat, 2012). Starting school refers to primary school, and attending kindergarten is not mandatory.

There is no obligation to attend preschool, nor is it necessary to take a school readiness test to start preschool. Some preschools determine whether children are ready for preschool by using checklists. Most of the time, families implement these checklists and work on the areas where their children are lacking before starting kindergarten.

When children reach the age of six they must start primary school. Every student starting primary school is required to take a school readiness examination which is called “Einschulungsuntersuchung” in German. School readiness is assessed not only by the children’s ages but also by many other factors. These factors are: vision and hearing, height and weight, language, motor skills, drawing and writing, basic mathematics skills and behavior (www.wegweiser-bw.de).

The particular details of school entry health checks are determined by the municipality or city, which is in charge of organizing such examinations. School admission health tests are divided into two parts. In the first section, the doctors examine the kid’s vaccination and preventive check-up booklet to determine whether the child has received all of the essential immunizations and check-ups. Doctors will also assess the child’s weight and height. They assess whether the child can hear and see well enough to follow school lessons; if they find that the child is having difficulty, they may recommend glasses or hearing aids. The child’s motor skills and mental development are also assessed by the doctors. In other words, they look at the following (www.handbook.germany.de):

Social and emotional development: The doctors examine things like the kids’ ability to focus, how they behave among new people and those they know, if they have any curiosity about school, and how confident they are.

Physical and motor skills development: The doctors check the kids’ ability to work with a pen or scissors and to mimic movements, among other things.

Mental Development (Cognitive Skills): The doctors check, for example, if the kids can write their names, recognize colors and forms, speak German fluently, and can tell how old they are. Additionally, the doctors assess their ability to recall information and make connections.

“School medical examination” refers to the second portion of the exam. But this step isn’t usually done; it’s done in the following situations (www.handbook.germany.de):

- The routine physical examination was skipped by the child.
- The preemptive medical examination revealed certain irregularities.
- The child did not go to kindergarten.
- The family is unsure if their child should begin school at this time.

Whether the kid has completed the first or both portions of the examination, the doctors will go over the test results with the family at the conclusion of the visit. The doctors will suggest any appropriate support options if any irregularities are found. A confirmation that the child participated in the school entry health testing will also be given to the family. For the family to register their child in school, these results are required. The child’s future school will also receive the test results from the doctors. But they only provide broad details on the child, such as if they require assistance in a certain area. Information will only be provided to the school with parental permission (www.handbook.germany.de).

4. School Readiness in Finland

The fundamental principle of education in Finland is that every person living in the country has the right to receive high-quality education, regardless of their ethnic background, age, economic status, or the region in which they live. In Finland, schools from preschool education to higher education are free of charge. Starting at the age of six, the state covers the costs of textbooks, school meals, and transportation expenses for students who commute to school during the non-compulsory preschool education and the basic education known as primary education, which spans ages 7 to 16 (Education in Finland, 2012; Taguma, Litjens & Makowiecki, 2012).

Before the mandatory education age of seven, families must send their children to preschool education institutions. The law requires that before starting compulsory school, kids must participate in pre-primary education or other comparable programs for a full year (www.infofinland.fi). Pre-primary instruction is provided without charge. The child will get free food

during the day. The child will receive free transportation if they live far away (more than 5 km) or if the route is challenging. The child may attend early childhood education in addition to pre-primary schooling. The local authorities decide whether pre-primary education is held in a school, an early childhood education and care center, or another appropriate site. For example, pre-primary education may be outsourced by local government from a private early childhood education and care center. Pre-primary education may also be organized by public educational institutions and private basic education providers (www.okm.fi).

A pre-primary education group may have up to 13 students if there is just one teacher present, or up to 20 students if there is another properly educated adult in the group in addition to the teacher. If there are no students in the group enrolled in compulsory education, then pre-primary education can usually only be given by qualified kindergarten teachers and class instructors (www.okm.fi). Pre-primary schooling lasts for approximately four hours each day. Children enjoy playing and discovering new things. In the context of pre-primary education, parents play a crucial role. They encourage their child's education. Every child has a customized curriculum created by the teachers. When the instructors are creating the plan, parents can help (www.infofinland.fi).

According to the national core curriculum for pre-primary education, the learning areas have been divided into five entities (www.opf.fi):

Rich World of Languages: Enhancing children's language development and linguistic identities is the goal of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Children's interest in and curiosity about languages, literature, and cultures are strengthened by ECEC. Encouraging a child's language development is linked to their multiliteracy development. It is linked, among other things, to transversal competencies related to kids' intercultural communication and skill development. The children's growing language abilities give them new opportunities to influence and actively engage.

Diverse Forms of Expression: One of ECEC's responsibilities is to assist children in developing goal-oriented musical, visual, craft, verbal, and physical expression in addition to acquainting them with a variety of artistic mediums and cultural legacies. A child's culture has a big role in defining their identity. Children get the chance to view and interact with a variety of art forms and cultural experiences thanks to ECEC. Providing the kids with musical experiences and fostering their interest in and connection to music are the two main goals of musical expression. Developing children's relationships with visual arts, other visual cultures, and cultural history is the aim of visual

expression. Children can take pleasure in drawing and using art to capture beautiful moments. They are also encouraged to express themselves verbally and physically, through play, dance, and drama, for instance. The exercises and games are meant to give kids the chance to express themselves verbally and physically as well as communicate in a variety of ways.

Me and Our Community: As they start receiving ECEC outside of their families, children's living environments grow. Children encounter a variety of thought and behavior patterns in addition to the customs, operating models, values, and worldviews of their homes. ECEC aims to enhance children's comprehension of the local community's variety and provide them with opportunities to participate in it. This subject is tackled from the viewpoints of worldviews, ethical reasoning, the media, the past, present, and future of the neighborhood.

Exploring and Interacting With My Environment: The ECEC's job is to give kids the ability to notice, evaluate, and comprehend what they are in. The kids are led to investigate and engage with the constructed and natural environments. ECEC fosters children's positive attitude toward maths and helps them develop their mathematical thinking. Technology and environmental education are also included in ECEC. Children learn about causal linkages and grow as thinkers and learners through firsthand observations and interactions with learning environments. Children become more multiliterate as their ability to name things and use several concepts grows.

I Grow, Move, and Develop: I Grow, Move, and Develop is a learning area that has objectives pertaining to health, safety, food education, and physical activity. All year round, it is advised for kids to play outside and be physically active. Children are guaranteed lots of opportunities for autonomous physical activity every day, both indoors and outdoors, in addition to supervised exercise. The purpose of food education is to encourage flexible and healthful eating practices as well as good attitudes toward food and eating. In ECEC, health and safety-related issues are taken into account alongside the children. The ability of children to take care of their personal hygiene and health is encouraged. Children are taught the importance of relaxation, exercise, and positive interpersonal interactions for their overall health and wellbeing.

5. Conclusion

School readiness is a multifaceted concept that extends beyond academic skills, encompassing physical, emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions. This chapter has highlighted the diverse approaches adopted by the United

States, Germany, and Finland, reflecting each country's unique educational philosophy and societal priorities.

In the United States, school readiness is strongly influenced by its multicultural and decentralized education system. Efforts such as readiness assessments and initiatives to reduce socio-economic disparities underline the emphasis on preparing children comprehensively for academic and social success. Germany's structured approach, with mandatory health and developmental screenings before primary school enrollment, underscores the importance of holistic development, ensuring children meet minimum physical, cognitive, and emotional thresholds. Meanwhile, Finland exemplifies an equitable and inclusive model, where pre-primary education is universally accessible and tailored to individual learning needs, fostering an environment of cooperation between families and schools.

Despite their differences, all three countries converge on the idea that school readiness is a shared responsibility among families, schools, and broader societal systems. These cases emphasize the importance of early interventions and a supportive educational ecosystem in preparing children for successful transitions to formal schooling. By understanding these varied frameworks, educators and policymakers can draw valuable insights to enhance school readiness strategies globally.

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