

School Readiness Perspectives In Early Childhood Education In Undeveloped Areas: A Systematic Review

Jiang Zheng, Yasmin Hussain, Diyana Kamarudin, and Hu Xiaojie

Abstract - It has long been recognized that the transition from early childhood education (ECE) to primary school is a crucial time in a child's life. Learning and well-being outcomes in children are positively correlated with children's readiness for primary school. However, numerous children experience discontinuities when they begin formal schooling facing these constantly changing conditions. Due to the disregard and lack of awareness, this circumstance becomes worse in underdeveloped areas. Children who are not adequately prepared are less likely to succeed academically and are more likely to experience behavioural and emotional problems, including truancy, dropout, delinquency, gamble, and other criminal behaviours, which increase the gap between developed areas and underdeveloped areas. The current Early Childhood Educational policy places school readiness at the heart of how to close the achievement gap, break the cycle of poverty, and prepare children for formal learning in Grade one. Nevertheless, different interpretations and contradictions on school readiness lead to significant conflicts between different stakeholders, which could exert a negative effect on children's school readiness in this period. This paper is an attempt to identify the situations of school readiness in poverty areas and factors influencing it. Electronic databases were searched resulting in retrievals of 30 articles from 2018 to 2022. The review of selected studies suggested that school readiness should be viewed through an ecological lens as school readiness is the entire resultant force from children, preschool teachers, primary school teachers, the community, and the government. The selected studies also indicated that children in poverty areas showed lower school readiness level due to several reasons from resources to parental styles. Based on the identified factors, a conceptual framework has been developed. As a consequence of this study, important factors that can be used strategically to comprehensively study school readiness in undeveloped areas can be identified as an avenue towards bringing about future change.

Keywords - school readiness, ecological perspectives, early childhood education; undeveloped areas

I. INTRODUCTION

Transitioning from early childhood education (ECE) to primary school is a crucial point in children's development as it lays the foundation for academic and social achievement (Retnawati, Tairas, & Nawangsari, 2018).

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During this phase, children need to adjust to a multitude of changes, such as social status and identity, corporeal and psychological surroundings, learning objectives, discipline norms, along with relationships with their parents and educators. As a result of these constantly changing conditions, many children experience discontinuities when they begin formal schooling, which could result in fear, anxiety, discouragement, failure in learning, and worse still, the incompetence to engage in social activities. To prevent these discontinuities, children ought to be well-prepared for primary school, pertaining to the terminology "school readiness".

Basically, school readiness refers to a child's ability to succeed in school intellectually, psychologically, and socially (Davies, Cooper, & Bains, 2020). There is evidence suggesting that children have a better chance of making a smooth transition into the first grade if they are able to demonstrate high levels of school readiness. Children who lack sufficient readiness entering primary school are unlikely to achieve academical success, while at the same time, are much more prone to playing truant, dropouts, juvenile crime, and other antisocial conducts. These issues can seriously undermine and threaten societal stability.

School readiness has generally been discussed from a maturationist and developmental perspective, concentrating on an individual child's internal preparedness in certain domains such as body and mental fitness, cognitive abilities, self-containment, interpersonal and communicative abilities, etc. (e.g., Masten & Barnes, 2018; Toran, Aydin, & Ettiier, 2020; Sriprakash, Maithreyi, Kumar, Sinha, & Prabha, 2020). Nevertheless, family, instructors, surroundings, and school amenities, communities are all involved in children's adaptation to a new school setting, according to Rouse, Nicholas, and Garner (2020). Therefore, an ecological perspective is promoted as the linkages and relationships that exist between children, families, schools, and communities also should be in the foreground of children's school readiness. Disparate opinions from different stakeholders could bring about divergent parental and teaching approaches. These discontinuities and discrepancies would emerge as a great hindrance to the transition of children from ECE to primary school (Litkowski, 2017).

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

In preparing kindergarten students for primary school, it is essential to understand how school readiness affects these children's future academic and life skill development, as well as their opportunities for economic and social success (Rouse et al., 2020). Through school readiness, children's skills in particular areas are cultivated, including cognitive

development, physical development, linguistic development, social-emotional development, and learning methodologies (Peterson, Huffman, Bruce, Prata, Harley, & Chamberlain, 2020). It is common for not appropriately prepared children to become disengaged from school through non-participation and devastative activities when they enter the primary school from kindergarten. In many cases, diverse beliefs of stakeholders regarding school readiness contribute to the discontinuity in preparing children for primary school.

There is a general lack of school readiness understanding among teachers and schools in less-developed regions, and parents cannot help create a comfortable environment for children entering primary school. Consequently, economically disadvantaged children have borne most of the burden of the gap in school readiness for transition to formal education. Children who are not adequately prepared for school will have a lower chance of catching up by graduation, as well as experiencing high dropout rates, teen pregnancy, and involvement in juvenile delinquency, contributing to poverty. Children living in poverty need to have their entire networks examined to prepare them for schooling - including their families, communities, schools, and services. A critical approach to smoothing the transition between different educational settings is to establish and strengthen relationships among contexts, such as family, preschool, and elementary school. (Pekdogan & Akgul, 2017).

Research Questions

Current research has found that school readiness plays an important role in children's academic and social life and children in undeveloped areas present a lower level of school readiness. Nevertheless, there have been few studies that have examined the factors affecting school readiness from ECE to primary school in disadvantaged and developing areas. Moreover, no detailed model for different stakeholders to improve school readiness. Additionally, it is rare for studies to compare the perceptions of parents, preschool teachers, primary school teachers, and policymakers on school readiness at the same time.

To find out why most children from low socio-economic areas experience a lack of school readiness and a difficult time adjusting to a formal school system (Pal, 2020), it is crucial to understand the factors influencing school readiness in low socio-economic areas. It is equally significant to probe into the different stakeholders' perspectives on school readiness. For this purpose, this study adopts a contemporary literature review of factors that bring effects on school readiness and how different stakeholders view on school readiness for transmitting to primary school. In response to the stated purpose, the following question will address the current research gap in this area of study.

1. What are the perspectives on the school readiness of different stakeholders in undeveloped areas?
2. What factors influencing school readiness of children are found to be most prominent in the literatures?

III. METHOD

In order to absorb the rapidly growing body of school readiness studies, a systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted as it can provide a comprehensive, holistic overview of relevant research, and offer insight into how inconsistent results arise (Williams, Clark, Clark, & Raffo, 2021). Furthermore, it provides openings for future school readiness research.

Several databases including ERIC, EBSCO, Science Direct, JSTOR, and SCOPUS were searched to select relevant articles. Studies covering the period 2018 to 2022 were examined. A comprehensive review of all available articles, both qualitative and quantitative, was undertaken. In the course of this search, "school readiness", "early childhood education", "primary school", "different stakeholders", "perspectives", "opinions", "poverty areas/regions", and "low socio-economic" are searched as the main key terms. After removing duplication, some articles have been selected according to the sensitivity of search terms. Titles and abstracts of the results presented in all sources were reviewed as a wide range of exploratory means can increase inclusiveness. Once the relevant articles had been identified, the full text was reviewed to identify the relevant studies. Using prescribed inclusion and exclusion criteria, the 30 articles were selected and a comprehensive review was conducted.

IV. FINDINGS

School Readiness

Numerous definitions of school readiness have been published in the research literature for many years, but there remains a lack of consensus concerning what it means as a result of disagreement on the definition of readiness and how it should be measured (Fridani, 2020). Rahmawati, Tairas, and Nawangsari (2018) provided a definition, indicating that school readiness is the ability of a child to engage in school-related learning activities. Actually, school readiness not only concentrates on learning activities. To be school-ready, children must perform well in all domains of learning. As Micalizzi, Brick, Flom, Ganiban, and Saudino (2019) contend, the concept of school readiness describes a child's behaviour, emotional state, and intellectual preparation for school and indicates how they will cope with academic success, employment, and health in the future. Even though there are some differences in these definitions, some similarities are also evident as they have described the importance of the natural process of child development. It has been categorized in the developmental conceptualization, which suggests that children can enter the school once they are old enough and have matured to a certain level (Pan, Trang, Love & Templin, 2019).

With the deepening discussion on this topic, researchers argue it should be noted that school readiness does not only refer to children's inner development, but also to the effect of contextual factors and the way individuals and systems interact (Munnik & Smith, 2019). Kokkalia, Drigas, Economou, and Roussos (2019) confirm that aside from

child-level readiness, family, school, community, and institution appear to be closely linked with school readiness, which should be assorted into the ecological perspectives according to school readiness conceptualization promoted by Rouse, Nicholas, and Garner (2020). School readiness in this study is defined ecologically as the interaction between children, parents, kindergartens, schools, and communities that are designed to assist children to achieve well-rounded development when they enter primary school.

As the educational transition brings on many changes, it is necessary for all stakeholders to be prepared. Research shows that preparation for school ensures students have the best path to success in life (Nisskaya, 2018). Whether inside or outside of the classroom, a good start with school readiness can lead to long-term favourable learning outcomes and well-being outcomes for children (Valiente, Doane, Clifford, Grimm, & Lemery-Chalfant, 2021). Specific to the transition from ECE to primary school, a well-prepared child is more likely to display language proficiency, do better on physical and mental exams, have the greater cognitive ability, and experience a more satisfying emotional development (Jackson, Testa, & Vaughn, 2021).

Influence Factors

According to the ecological approach, school readiness is related both to children's innate characteristics and their interaction with their environment and culture (Rouse et al., 2020). It is mainly classified into three broad categories, which include children's readiness for school, schools' readiness for children, and family and community support for children (Pace, Alper, Burchinal, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2019).

The children's readiness for school is defined as how far they have developed physically and mentally to adapt to a common school curriculum (Nisskaya, 2018). Specifically, according to Pace et al. (2019), it is multifarious and includes physical health, motor development, language development, pre-academic skills, approaches to learning, social-emotional development, and executive function. Self-regulation is also a factor as it addresses children's ability to absorb new information, use that information, and restrains behaviours that interfere with learning (Pan, Trang, Love, & Templin, 2019).

A family's readiness is characterized by parents' investment and involvement in their children's early development and upward mobility as well as their preparation for the transition to school (Palot & Bayındır, 2020). Ensuring an effective investment, resources such as time, medicine, social services, education, and employment that are available to meet family needs should be addressed (Nisskaya, 2018). There has been much research performed examining the relationship between parental income and children's school readiness skills (e.g. Davies, Cooper, & Bains, 2020). A high cost of enrollment in a center-based ECE program contributes to substantial income-based variations in participation. Children from low-income families are less likely to participate in an ECE program than children from high-income families. Children from low

socioeconomic homes typically have a lower level of academic and social ability and do worse in school than children from medium or high socioeconomic homes. The principal reason is the serious family stress which could result in ineffective and punitive parenting (Xia, 2020). Another reason is the lower expectations from the teachers, thus leading to children with low socioeconomic backgrounds feeling underappreciated and losing their self-confidence (Xia, 2020). The family environment could also bring affect on family's readiness. Children's socioeconomic status and school readiness gaps are explained by their parents' responsiveness to the child and the quality of the home-learning environment. It has been found that if parents provide a friendly, humorous, and engaging environment with children, children could produce greater achievement at school admission (Ferretti & Bub, 2017).

As part of schools' readiness, the kindergartens or schools are capable of supporting the transition of children from a previous learning environment to a new learning environment, one that allows for the child's needs to be met and key developmental features to be taken into account (Kartal & Guner, 2018). A playful learning environment where children can make choices safely helps to develop important socioemotional and cognitive capabilities. Curriculum and programme designs are mainly responsible for school readiness (Nisskaya, 2018). An adjustable and consistent school programme should be compatible with all students with different school readiness levels. In addition, Kartal and Guner (2018) argue that schools are supposed to have internal and external physical structures prepared to meet the demand of children. Furthermore, teachers' readiness and their pedagogy can be very consequential for children's cognitive, emotional, and social development in schools. As the Chinese government sticks to push forward the reform of ECE, in order to develop children's school readiness abilities and take their initiative, a developmental pedagogy approach, which puts emphasis on child-centered interactions and cooperation with teachers, has been advocated (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022).

School readiness in Poverty Areas

Some research has proved that it is poverty that poses the greatest threat to children's development, especially if it is experienced as an early childhood problem (Allee-Herndon & Robert, 2019). In global settings, it has also long been recognized that early children's socioeconomic status influences their school readiness (Pal, 2020). Children whose families have been below the poverty line for at least five years may have poorer academic and social outcomes in primary school (Burchinal, Carr, Vernon-Feagans, Blair, & Cox, 2018). An effective school readiness process can help ensure a child's "right to education" in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1992). Basically, it implies that every child has a right to education and, as a result, should have the best possible chance at a successful life. However, poverty severely hampers educational opportunities and thus young children

who are affected by unequal opportunities in their early years of schooling will generate unequal learning results (Pal, 2020). To be more specific, Children affected by poverty in early childhood show delayed cognitive and social development upon entering school, suggesting that early childhood poverty adversely affects their long-term behaviour and academic performance (Xia, 2020). Although the absolute poverty population has been cleared out, there are still many relatively poverty residents and poor families, particularly in rural, wealth-deficient areas. Under this circumstance, early childhood school preparation abilities between poor and non-poor children are becoming a significant problem overall.

One of the most important negative factors on children's school readiness outcomes has repeatedly been proven to be their socioeconomic position for several reasons (Kay, 2018). Firstly, from the perspective of children's inner development, executive functions and self-regulation skills which are significant factors of school readiness, are found to be negatively associated with the academic achievements of children from poor backgrounds (Allee-Herndon and Roberts, 2018; Micalizzi et al., 2019). A lack of preparation at school can exacerbate disparities in performance and well-being, rather than narrow them. Secondly, in terms of school physical resources, compared to urban schools, rural schools face unique challenges, including inadequate facilities and non-teaching staff, inadequate school infrastructure, and a teacher shortage caused by the unattractive nature of the teaching environment in rural areas (Burchinal et al., 2018). Thirdly, it has been suggested that the low socioeconomic status environment could adversely affect parenting and childrearing (Munnik & Smith, 2019). Economic hardship and lower education levels make it harder for families to provide the necessary support and environment for school readiness. Low-income households have fewer resources and fewer opportunities for access to high-quality child care and education than their more privileged counterparts (Hong & Henly, 2020). A poverty-stricken and unsupportive home environment that is characterized by increased background noise, crowded conditions, disorganization, and lack of regularity, could have a detrimental impact on their readiness to attend school (Micalizzi, Brick, Flom, Ganiban, & Saudino, 2019). In summary, a variety of complex and dynamic mechanisms contribute to the negative association between poverty and low school achievement, including increased risk of mental, behavioural, and emotional problems, internal and external factors, and teachers' and parents' practices that could impair learning. In these circumstances, children living in economically disadvantaged homes are less likely to enter kindergarten proficient for academic success than their more advantaged peers: they may have underdeveloped language and pre-academic skills, fewer social-emotional competencies, an increased likelihood of developing behaviour problems, and a weakened neurobiological system that makes it difficult for them to benefit from education (Hong & Henly, 2020).

Perspectives from Different Stakeholders

Based on ecological construction, individual children's readiness to attend school has a great deal to do with the environment in which they grow and thrive. Children, parents, teachers, and policymakers all have a direct impact on this process (Burchinal et al., 2018). From the body of literature, various stakeholders perceive and expect different things, which leads to inconsistencies and brings adverse effects on children's transition. Among British teachers, socio-emotional abilities rank higher than academic achievement, while parents place more importance on health and interpersonal abilities (Davies et al., 2020). Similar to British teachers, early childhood educators in Australia place more emphasis on preparing students for school socially and emotionally, while school-age sector personnel are more concerned with academic readiness (Rouse et al., 2020). Although they perceive school readiness differently, their perceived disparities in how others perceive it are also problematic. Parents are primarily concerned about this issue, as they are believed to hold divergent perspectives on school readiness. Rouse et al. (2020), for example, assert that early education teachers believe that parents place greater value on academic features, such as literacy and numeracy, which is contrary to parent views. Moreover, there is a difference in the belief on who is responsible for a child's school readiness. There was some evidence that parents paid less attention to children's school readiness, believing that teachers should be solely responsible for it (Fridani, 2020; Rashid & Akkari, 2020).

Children's development and learning are directly related to parents' attitudes toward school readiness and their practices for facilitating it (Fridani, 2020). Some parents in poverty areas are aware that school readiness is important, but they are uncertain about how they can promote their children's school readiness due to the limited knowledge and resources of high-quality education systems (Munnik & Smith, 2019). It has also been pointed out that educators and parents often lack collaborative relationships in economically disadvantaged areas. While stakeholders have recognized the importance of collaboration between them when it comes to school readiness, some chronic environmental constraints make good communication difficult (Peterson et al., 2020). Thus, in order to probe into school readiness situations in one area, an entire understanding of how different stakeholders perceive should be researched.

Conceptual Model

A thorough analysis of the literature has resulted in some important conclusions for the children's school readiness. On the basis of this review of the literature, an integrated conceptual model has been developed. It will assist researchers in identifying factors which affect the school readiness for the transition from early childhood education to primary school of children in low socio-economic areas and assist in understanding how different stakeholders view school readiness. This conceptual model also determines the relationship between factors and the how these factors work

on children’s school readiness ecologically (see Figure 1).

According to this conceptual model, factors influencing school readiness of children in poverty areas have been proposed. Consequently, it is evident that there are multiple factors that influence the school readiness from ECE to primary school. A review of the literature indicates that the various factors, such as children’s own development, teachers’ teaching method, parents’ socio-economic status, home environment, community educational resources, and interactions between different stakeholders all play a crucial role in determining whether children can make a smooth transition from ECE to primary school.

V. DISCUSSION

Although there are several factors contributing to deter the development of school readiness, the most important component is that the government, schools, and families in undeveloped areas all have serious deficiencies in the early education of rural children, and they do not cooperate to create an environment that is conducive to the coordinated development of children’s bodies and minds (Coddett & Orr, 2020). Specific in China, children in undeveloped areas often lack school preparation education, as illustrated by the following characteristics (Xiao, 2020). Government funding for rural early childhood education is poor as most of the funds are allocated to urban kindergartens and very little goes to rural town centres. Kindergartens and primary schools suffer from a severe lack of teachers and educational resources with the phenomenon of kindergarten teachers teaching primary school curriculum and primary schools barely not taking special measures to help children adjust to life after school. In view of the fact that the parents of rural children usually possess a low educational level and are strongly influenced by traditional educational concepts, parents tend to focus on children’s skills in acquiring knowledge and pay less attention to their development as social and emotional beings. Under the influence of their environment and their individual psychological characteristics, children in poverty areas do not effectively adapt to school preparation in terms of learning style, social development, and other components.

Reforms were initiated in China at the end of the 1970s and the country has since experienced dramatic changes in all facets of economic and social development. With its gross domestic product standing at more than 18% of world output in 2021, China is the world’s second-largest economic entity (Chinese Government, 2022). The Chinese achievements in poverty reduction have gained international recognition as all rural populations living in absolute poverty in China have been lifted out of poverty. Despite widespread income growth, inequality increased due to quicker income growth among high-income citizens than lower individuals, and as the urban-rural income gap widened (Luo & Sicular, 2020). There is a strong correlation between education and income disparities. The trend of extending the income gap between developed areas and undeveloped areas brings about the widening educational gap. However, there is limited research on the school readiness circumstance in poverty-stricken areas in China, leaving a gap for future studies to fill.

The average participation rates in early childhood education programs have been found to be lower in undeveloped areas (Anderson and Mikesell, 2019). The findings from this study indicate that research on the impact of poverty contexts on children’s school readiness should pay close attention to regional differences in the quality and extent of ECE programs. The disparity in ECE participation between developed areas and undeveloped areas is in agreement with other studies that have concluded that children living in low socio-economic areas are likely to lack access to programs and resources necessary for healthy development and mobility. Many articles in this issue

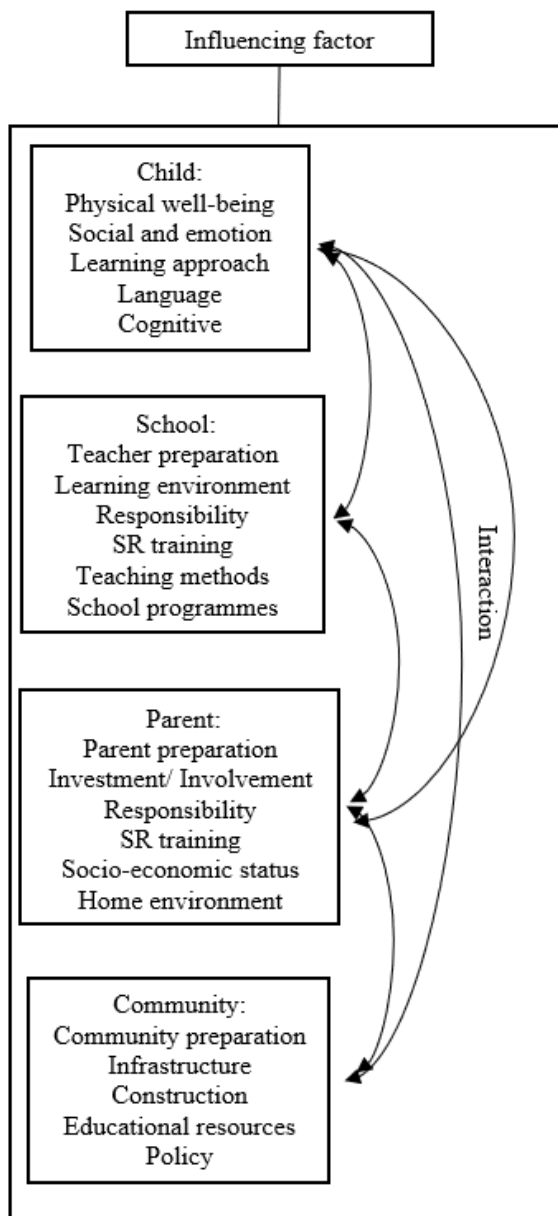


Figure 1. Children’s School Readiness Influencing Factors

examine rural-urban disparities in a range of services and resources aimed at supporting children, as well as how rural context impacts elementary, middle, and high school educational outcomes (e.g., Bowen, Sinikka, Annie, 2022; Morton, Ramirez, and Meece, Demetriou, & Panter, 2018). Therefore, a comparison of the geographical differences in various stakeholders' perspectives is necessary in the future research.

The gap between students from a poor and wealthy families can be reduced in schools by implementing high-quality pedagogy and curriculum, along with nurturing and supportive environments that take the stress off developing brains. Researchers have observed that enriched preschool experiences may have long-term benefits by helping children develop their social-emotional skills and self-regulation, rather than enriching their academic knowledge (Hong & Henly, 2020). Globally, Head Start is one of the most famous school readiness programs, with the goal of lifting children out of poverty by ensuring they are prepared for school, thus setting them up for a more positive development trajectory which allows them to maximize the benefits of subsequent educational experiences. Under this programme, children are provided with services in various settings, including child care centres, family child care facilities, and residential settings. Additionally, it focuses on building positive relationships between parents and other key family members. Other early education intervention programmes such as Getting Ready for School (GBS, Gennetian, Marti, Kennedy, Kim, & Duch, 2019), is through the enhancement of the home and classroom environment to encourage preschool-aged children to develop proficiency in literacy, language, mathematics, and self-regulation. By embracing this framework, stakeholders will have to rethink their approach to working with others to improve young children's school readiness. However, there are barely any innovative early childhood intervention programmes in China to help children with economic difficulties get better prepared for school.

VI. CONCLUSION

Through a holistic review of all relevant research, factors influencing school readiness circumstance in poverty areas and stakeholders' opinions have been addressed by synthesizing previous work. The purpose of this study is mainly to examine the influencing factors contributing to school readiness for the transition from early childhood education (ECE) to primary school in undeveloped areas with regard to ecological perspectives. Because eco-continuity in transitions promotes children's learning and well-being outcomes over the long term, it is vital to understand what different stakeholders believe is necessary in order to assist children in becoming better prepared for primary school. On the basis on these factors, daily and operational practices which are aligned among different stakeholders to enhance children's school readiness in less developed areas could be promoted.

A future study should explore the comparison between developed areas and undeveloped areas about different stakeholders' perspectives on school readiness. The

continuation of additional short- and long-term studies on perspectives on school readiness will allow educators to make informed decisions about emerging practices and policies for early childhood and elementary classrooms based on research. There is a growing understanding of how different stakeholders in poverty areas perceive school readiness, what suggestions are encouraged, and how to most effectively support school readiness in economically disadvantaged children who need it most. Furthermore, not only the early childhood education system and the early elementary classroom, but also parents and children themselves are able to gain benefits from concrete research findings and growing evidence that outdated school readiness policies can be revamped to increase equity and achievement for students in poverty.

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