The Social Construction of School Readiness

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School Readiness in a Global Education Context

In recent decades there has been a growing global movement to improve access to quality education. Fundamentally, education is considered a basic human right, protected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1948) and the Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). The international community's declaration for Education for All (World Education Forum, 1990, 2000) explicitly aims for universal access to and completion of basic education, equity, and quality in education.

Countries in the Majority world, such as Kenya, are taking steps towards providing free universal access to primary education, and indeed, around the world, more and more children are enrolling in primary school (Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani, & Merali, 2006). However, in the Majority world particularly, many children enrolled in school are not completing school or are moving through the system without learning the skills schools are expected to teach them (Arnold et al., 2006). Given the importance of education for human development (van der Gaag, 2002), and the significant progress made in increasing access to primary education (Arnold et al., 2006), it is concerning that so many children are falling through the cracks. Are children not benefitting from the education system? Are schools not meeting the needs of children? This discussion brings in the question of 'school readiness', that is, the fit between the child and the school at the very beginning (at school entry).

The notion of school readiness has been explored at length in the Western-European world, including Canada, the United States (U.S.), and Australia. There is significantly less research and conceptual understanding of school readiness in the Majority world, which has fundamentally different socio-environmental and cultural contexts. The global need for indicators of child development and education has propelled attempts to adapt school readiness measures from Western-European contexts to see if they can be made culturally-appropriate for use in other contexts (e.g., Janus, 2007). However, as will be discussed below, these conceptualizations and measures may not be appropriate and relevant in socio-cultural contexts that are very different from the ones in which they were developed. Along these lines, international scholars are increasingly calling for locally conceptualized meanings and measures of school readiness that are culturally and contextually relevant (e.g., Britto et al., 2006).

In light of the global importance of education, and the consequent global relevance of the idea of school readiness, this paper critically examines the mainstream discourse on school readiness and argues that it is grounded in Western-European notions; explores alternate conceptualizations of school readiness constructed in context; and discusses considerations for theory, research, and practice in school readiness.

Shallwani, S. (March, 2009). *The social construction of school readiness.* Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Comparative and International Education Society, Charleston.

Mainstream Discourse on School Readiness

> With few exceptions 'textbook' child development originates mainly in Europe and North America, and mainly within a fairly narrow socio-economic band within these Continents. Theories, programmes and evaluation strategies don't just convey well-researched knowledge about development. They also transmit hidden messages through rhetorical devices, notably about children's 'nature', their 'needs', what aspects of the 'environment' are 'harmful' or 'beneficial' for healthy development. The problem is that much of this rhetoric has as much to do with particular socio-cultural contexts (of the research community as well as of the children they have studied) as with shared features of early human development. (Woodhead, 1998, p. 8)

Discourses have always been constructed within social, historical, political, cultural, and economic contexts, yet current dominant discourses are often viewed as correct, true, self-evident, non-political, and universal across time and space. Indeed, the current mainstream discourse on early child development (ECD) in general, and school readiness in particular, has been constructed in the Western-European world and is dominated by Western-European notions of development and functioning. This mainstream ECD discourse has been increasingly critiqued in recent years, questioning the generalizability of research interpretations, theories, and programmes from primarily Western-European (and primarily middle-class) contexts to very different socio-environmental and cultural contexts, especially in the Majority world (e.g., Woodhead, 1998; Penn, 2004; Burman, 2008).

The mainstream conceptualization of school readiness, though grounded within the larger ECD discourse, has not particularly been subject to similar deconstruction and critique. As discussed below, the mainstream conceptualization of school readiness reflects Western-European assumptions and values in a number of ways, including: the focus on the individual child and the way the child is conceptualized, how child development and school readiness are conceptualized and assessed, and the way in which context is considered.

Conceptualization of the child

Consistent with the mainstream ECD discourse, the school readiness discourse has generally focused on the individual child, that is, the child's readiness for school. Children's readiness for school has been conceptualized as the skills and knowledge that children need when they enter school in order to learn effectively in the school environment (Janus, 2007).

Research from the Western-European world indicates that children's early school readiness when they first enter primary school is correlated with their academic success in later years. Duncan et al. (2007) explored six longitudinal data sets from the U.S., Great Britain, and Canada. They isolated the effects of school-entry skills and found that children's early skills in math, reading, and attention were strong predictors of their later achievement in math and literacy. Similarly, in Canada, Yau and Brown (2007) found that children's school readiness in kindergarten predicted their academic performance in standardized tests in Grade 3 and Grade 6. However, it has been argued the correlations between early assessments and later achievement are low, such that readiness assessments predict only about 20% of the variability in children's academic performance and 10% of the variability in children's social performance in later school

years (Pianta & La Paro, 2003). Thus, while children's early readiness for school is significant, it is also important to consider other factors.

Other research has suggested that pre-school programmes can improve children's school readiness (e.g., Howes et al., 2008). For example, in North America, the Carolina Abecedarian project (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002) and the High/Scope Perry Pre-school Project (Schweinhart, 2003) have found both short-term and long-term impacts of high quality early childhood interventions. Limited research from the Majority world seems to concur. For example, in Nepal, children who participated in ECD centres were found to be more motivated and sociable when they entered school, and continued to perform better than other children in examinations in Grades 1 and 2. These children also had much lower drop-out rates, and higher promotion rates (Save the Children, 2003). Similarly, in Bangladesh, preschool children were found to perform better than comparison children on some academic and social indicators. However, even then, one cannot ignore the range of other contributing factors:

> Reviews of the evidence suggest that impact is linked with the type and quality of the provision. The low-income children who attended these programmes may do better than other children from their poor neighbourhoods, but most still lag behind middle class children. For example, even in the Perry High/Scope Preschool Project, which is known for its remarkably positive outcomes, nearly one third of the program children were later arrested, and one third dropped out of high school. (Gomby, Larner, Stevenson, Lewit, & Behrman, 1995, p. 14)

The above discussion demonstrates how the school readiness discourse focuses on the individual child, and frames childhood as a time of need and preparation for adulthood. The idea of an individual, separate, and decontextualized child/person has long been critiqued as a construction of Western-European individualistic notions of self. (There is a growing but limited recognition of the importance of context; this will be discussed shortly.) As suggested in this oft-cited passage,

> The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures. (Geertz, 1975, p. 48, as cited in Kağitçibaşi, 1996)

The way the child is conceptualized is also constructed in a particular Western-European context. In particular, the child, which exists in contrast to 'the adult', is framed as less knowledgeable and less 'developed' than the adult. The child is vulnerable and in need of protection, unknowing and in need of preparation for school, at risk and in need of early intervention.

> The concept of early childhood as a *foundation* for lifelong learning or the view that the early childhood institution contributes to children being *ready to learn* by the time they start school, produces a 'poor' child in need of preparation before they can be expected to learn, rather than a 'rich' child capable of learning from birth, whose learning is one part of a continuous process of lifelong learning, no more nor less valid and important than other parts. The language of *school readiness* is also problematic from our perspective. Rather than making the

> child ready for school, it seems to us that the issue is whether the school is prepared for the child. (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, p. 83, italics in original)

Moreover, early intervention programmes to improve school readiness focus on the child's experiences at the micro-level, and ignore macro-level and systemic factors. (This will be discussed more in the discussion on context below.) In these ways, the mainstream conceptualization of school readiness reflects Western-European notions of individual and separate selfhood, childhood as a time for preparation for adulthood, and young children needing to be made 'ready' for school.

Conceptualization of child development and school readiness

The mainstream discourse on ECD reflects Western-European trends of classifying and categorizing, in partitioning child development into categories of development: physical, cognitive, social, and emotional. Children are presumed to progress linearly through development by achieving certain 'developmental tasks'. In the school readiness literature in particular, Janus and Offord (2000) describe five developmental domains: physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge. Other descriptions of the components of school readiness have been fairly similar (e.g., Myers and Landers, 1989; Doherty, 1997). Children's readiness for school is operationalized by tasks they are able to achieve in each of the above categories (e.g., write own name, tell a story, count to 20, follow instructions, climb stairs). This conceptualization is generally reflected in the measures developed to assess children's readiness for school, such as the Canadian Early Development Instrument (EDI, Janus & Offord, 2007).

With regards to the larger mainstream discourse on ECD, it has been argued that categories of development are arbitrary and not conceptually distinct constructs. For example, in Japanese society, the concept of intelligence includes helpfulness and cooperation (Tobin et al., 1989, 1998, as cited in Woodhead, 2000). Similarly, Kağitçibaşi (1996) describes the Turkish characteristic of uslu, which includes a social or interpersonal behavioural dimension of cognitive competence. Moreover, assessments of child development reflect the individualistic achievement-oriented values of the Western-European world and measure children's ability to accomplish tasks relevant in a particular Western-European society or context. Penn (2000) describes how young children in the United Kingdom are expected to recognize basic colours (e.g., red, blue, yellow) as a result of preschool attendance, in comparison to Mongolian herder children who, by the same age, will have learnt to distinguish about 320 horses through their colouring in different combinations of varying shades of black, white, and grey. Indeed, "the expectations of the level of visual discrimination the children can achieve, and the uses to which it is put, are very different in each community" (p. 10-11). Thus, categories of development and developmental tasks expected to be achieved by children at certain stages of life are not universal, but rather socially constructed and inextricably linked to children's contexts.

The mainstream conceptualization of school readiness has not in particular been as strongly critiqued as the larger discourse on ECD. However, recent research suggests that mainstream measures of school readiness may not be equally valid with different culturally and linguistically diverse groups (Li, D'Angiulli, & Kendall, 2007). More fundamentally however, the notion of what is socially acceptable and desirable in school is a cultural construct (Rogoff, 2003,

as cited in Li, D'Angiulli, & Kendall, 2007). For example, interdependent societies which are structured by social hierarchies may value children who show quiet, respectful behaviour when communicating with adults (Hwa-Froelich & Vigil, 2004, as cited in Li, D'Angiulli, & Kendall, 2007). This behaviour may be misinterpreted as poor language ability in a Western school context. Similarly, being assertive and open are considered positive styles of communication in Western contexts, while similar behaviour may be interpreted as ignorance or annoyance in another context (e.g., Nisbett, 2003, as cited in Li, D'Angiulli, & Kendall, 2007). In this sense, the mainstream way in which school readiness is conceptualized, operationalized, and evaluated, is constructed within the beliefs and values of Western-European contexts.

Considering context

In considering context, the mainstream discourse on ECD has increasingly recognized the impact of social and environmental factors on child outcomes (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Hertzman, 1999). In particular, children's school readiness seems to be related to family and neighbourhood characteristics (e.g., Oliver, Dunn, Kohen, & Hertzman, 2007). For example, Pettit, Bates, and Dodge (1997) found that parental warmth and involvement are linked positively with children's academic performance and social skills in kindergarten. Demographic factors such as low income and low parental education are associated with lower levels of school readiness (Thomas, 2006), possibly through mediating variables such as parenting practices and family environment (e.g., Patterson & Dishion, 1998, as cited in Kağitçibasi, 1996). Similarly, Lapointe, Ford, and Zumbo (2007) particularly found neighbourhood characteristics were significantly related to children's school readiness, especially in the area of physical well-being.

The above research findings are from the Western-European world. However, limited research from the Majority world also seems to indicate that socio-environmental factors impact children's school readiness. In the Philippines for example, the following were found to be positively associated with school readiness: urban residence, male gender, exposure to early childhood education, access to learning materials, and parents' knowledge and activities related to child development (Save the Children, 2007).

An increasing understanding that children exist within and interact with social contexts has also led to an increasing focus on the other side of equation: the school's readiness for the child, including teacher strategies to support the transition. However, significantly less theory and research has explored the readiness of schools for children. In the U.S., the National Education Goals Panel (1998) described "Ten Keys to Ready Schools", describing actions and characteristics of 'ready schools' in supporting children's transition and adjustment. There has been limited empirical research to ground these notions of 'ready schools', mostly focused on the use of transition practices to support children's transition to school (e.g., Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005). Some recent research has found that high-quality classrooms, with integrated social and academic learning, contribute positively to student outcomes in reading and math (Rimm-Kaufman, Fan, Chiu, & You, 2007). There does not seem to be any research from the Majority world on ready schools. However, Myers and Landers (1989) have proposed a general and international conceptualization of the readiness of schools for children, consisting of availability and accessibility (including time, distance, and cost), quality (including teachers and resources),

and recognition of and adaptation to local needs and circumstances (including scheduling, language, and teacher responsiveness).

As can be seen, the mainstream discourse generally maintains its focus on the individual child and considers context primarily in terms of how it impacts child outcomes (such as school readiness). It does not consider how context actually constructs the desirability of certain outcomes, that is, how the meaning of school readiness is socially constructed. As Burman (2008) notes,

> The selection of children as objects of developmental psychological enquiry leads to a failure to theorise the psychological context they inhabit. …. Where the focus moves beyond the individual to consider class and culture, these have frequently, explicitly or implicitly, been treated as responsible for failures of child development or education, while the motivations or resources drawn upon by those who make such evaluations all too often remain unexamined. (Burman, 2008, p. 5-6)

Moreover, research consistently indicates that children of racialized and lower socio-economic backgrounds experience pervasive marginalization in society, including difficulty in adjusting to the mainstream school system (Janus & Duku, 2007; Jencks & Phillips, 1998, as cited in Brooks-Gunn, Rouse, & McLanahan, 2007). It has been consistently found that children from disadvantaged families and neighbourhoods experience challenges in the school system (Hertzman, 1999), and these differences show up early in children's readiness at school entry (Oliver et al., 2007). However, when considering context, the mainstream ECD and school readiness discourse focuses on the micro-level child and family characteristics (such as parenting practices), and ignores the macro-level systemic and political factors which actually marginalize certain groups in society. This depoliticizes the discourse and allows those who engage in it to continue to ignore issues of power and social injustice.[1]

Making Meaning of School Readiness in Context

How school readiness is conceptualized and measured is grounded in particular theoretical and epistemological frameworks (Dockett & Perry, 2002). As Graue (1992) asserts, school readiness is an idea which is entwined with our beliefs about child development and child needs. Only a handful of researchers, and that too in the Western-European world, have examined the meaning of school readiness from the perspectives of those involved in the school transition experience. These researchers have tended to use ethnographic approaches and qualitative methodologies to understanding the views and experiences of children, parents, and teachers with regards to school readiness.

Perspectives from the Western-European world

In the U.S., Smith and Shepard (1988) conducted interviews, observed classrooms, and analyzed documents to understand teachers' beliefs about the development of school readiness. They found that teachers' beliefs about school readiness ranged on a dimension of nativism and environmentalism, and that teachers' beliefs about the nature of school readiness were associated with their retention practices (e.g., "Nativist" teachers, who believed that children generally

became prepared for school according to a biological developmental process, showed greater rates of retention). The researchers further found that teachers in the same school tended to share beliefs about readiness, suggesting implicit (socially constructed) school philosophies.

Also in the U.S., Graue (1992) conducted an in-depth ethnographic study in which she explored the meaning of readiness in three different school communities from one school district. Her findings indicated that the meanings of readiness were different in each of the different communities, which had different resources, different ideas about children and education, and different kindergarten experiences for all those involved. In particular, meanings of readiness were found to be shaped by parents, home-school relationships, school structures, professional relationships, and instructional practice. Indeed, Graue found that the meaning of 'readiness' had more to do with the context than with child characteristics, although children were the most impacted by the conceptualization.

More recently, Dockett and Perry (2002) conducted extensive interviews to understand school readiness from the perspectives of children, parents and teachers in Australia. They found that both parents and teachers talked about issues related to children's adjustment as important, although teachers tended to focus on children's ability to adjust to the school context while parents tended to emphasize children's interpersonal and social adjustment. While children did mention aspects of adjustment, more of them spoke about the importance of knowing rules and the consequences of breaking the rules. Children also often mentioned dispositions, particularly related to the importance of friends. Dockett and Perry argued that the emphasis on adjustment, rules, and dispositions reflects the importance of context in understanding school readiness. They asserted that this is at odds with the popular discourse on school readiness, which generally emphasizes the skills children need to acquire in order to be 'ready for school'.

Perspectives from outside the Western-European world

While the literature is scant even in the Western-European world, there does not seem to be any research at all in other contexts, such as in the Majority world, exploring the perspectives of people on the construct of school readiness.[2] This is despite the rapidly growing movement for early intervention programmes to promote school readiness, and the growing interest in assessing children's readiness at school entry. However, research in related areas may shed some light on alternate conceptualizations of school readiness in different contexts.

In the nine-country Value of Children study, parents were asked about desirable characteristics in children. It was found that parents in Turkey, Thailand, Indonesia, and Philippines valued children who obeyed their parents, while parents in Korea and Singapore valued children who were independent and self-reliant (Kağitçibasi, 1982a, 1982c, 1990, as cited in Kağitçibasi, 1996). Kağitçibasi (1996) also cites research describing parents' perspectives on their roles in teaching their children, with mothers of some backgrounds considering it important to provide early stimulation to children, others providing coaching and specific instructions, and yet others considering teaching to be the school's job and not the parents'. Recently, Rothbaum, Nagaoka, and Ponte (2006) interviewed teachers from the U.S. and Japan about their perspectives on caregiver sensitivity. They found that Japanese teachers felt that they held primary responsibility for clarifying children's needs, while U.S. teachers believed children held more responsibility for communicating their needs clearly. In these ways, in different contexts, very

different expectations are held of children, parents, and teachers with regards to different aspects of 'school readiness'.

Indeed, the 'ethnotheories' (Harkness & Super, 1993) about children's development held by parents, teachers, and others in children's lives, are grounded in cultural values, beliefs, and assumptions. These ethnotheories in turn determine how caregivers socialize children and assess their competence and successful adjustment to the school setting. As Kağitçibasi (1996) notes,

> Socialization is for competence. Childrearing is goal oriented, though the goal is often not explicit and may not be consciously formulated. The long-range goal of socialization, by definition, is becoming a competent member of a society, so socialization is designed to accomplish whatever it takes to ensure this goal… Competence in this perspective refers to what is culturally valued and therefore shows variation across cultures. (Kağitçibasi, 1996, p. 35)

As such, school readiness is a socially constructed notion grounded in beliefs about society, its systems, and the roles different members play.

Considerations for Theory, Research, and Practice in School Readiness

Much of the above discussion has emphasized the socio-culturally constructed nature of discourse, conceptualizations, and standards. This is in contrast to the traditional place given to 'culture' in this discourse, and in contrast to the universality claimed by much of the mainstream discourse on child and human development. Miller (2005) notes that cross-cultural research is carried out to confirm the presumed universality of developmental psychology theories, and commonly "yields findings of universality or uncovers patterns in which middle-class European American participants are observed to develop more rapidly or obtain a higher level of developmental competence than participants from other sociocultural backgrounds" (p. 34). In this way, cross-cultural work in psychology tends to validate Western-European theories and privilege Western-European beliefs, values, and practices. Claims of 'universalism' grounded in Western-European assumptions and values are ethically inappropriate and even damaging.[3]

However, a stance of cultural relativism is not always a practical option. As described earlier, education and school readiness are global issues, more today than ever before. Teachers and schools, programme staff, researchers, government bodies, and international organizations increasingly require indicators and standards to understand and improve the state of child development and education. Kağitçibasi (1996) notes that education is a human right, and that, especially in the Majority world, universal literacy and schooling are consistent objectives in the goals of improving human and social development. In this context, broad understandings (in the forms of indicators or standards) of child development and education outcomes are perhaps necessary to both inform and monitor change and progress at micro- and macro-levels.

Nonetheless, concepts such as school readiness are socially constructed. What is needed then is socially relevant and culturally appropriate theories, programmes, and standards. These must be grounded in context and dialogue, and must allow for reflection and change (Myers

2004). Moreover, with an understanding that research and knowledge can never be completely objective or decontextualized, values and assumptions need to be made explicit (Myers, 2004).

Socially relevant and culturally appropriate standards can be developed. For example, a project by the World Health Organization (WHO) brought together local experts in China, India, and Thailand to locally conceptualize and develop a simple culturally appropriate measure to monitor child psychosocial development (Lansdown et al., 1996). These measures were then piloted locally with large stratified samples and local norms were developed. In this way, Kağitçibasi (1996) calls for "basic standards of human development while at the same time being sensitive to culture" (p. 172). She explains that this implies neither cultural relativism nor the imposition of inappropriate standards. Rather, a culturally sensitive stance means "that assessment (evaluation) is done correctly, by utilizing culturally valid and relevant standards of shared attributes that can be applied in a comparative way" (p. 172).

For school readiness, then, (changing) contexts and values must be explicitly acknowledged and incorporated into theory, research, and programming. Such socially relevant and culturally appropriate conceptualizations are critical in developing meaningful and valid understandings and standards in education and human development work.

END NOTES

[1] The mainstream ECD / school readiness discourse is depoliticized by ignoring or choosing not to address the following: (1) that the child and family exist in and cannot be separated from a particular socio-political and historical context, which includes patriarchy, racism, imperialism, heterosexism, and neo-colonialism; (2) that certain groups are systematically and constantly oppressed in the above context; and (3) that the privilege of some groups rests upon the deprivation of other groups. In this way, the privileged (whose privilege rests upon the marginalization of others) are the 'normal', and the marginalized are the 'abnormal', in light of Western/European, white, middle class norms. Moreover, the way context is understood determines the kinds of solutions sought (e.g., early interventions to provide 'stimulation' to children whose parents or home environment don't 'stimulate' them, rather than income redistribution policies and social inclusion), and how the success of these solutions is evaluated (e.g., children's ability to achieve Western/European norms, rather than equity and social justice).

[2] My doctoral research explores the perspectives of children, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders in a community in Pakistan on the notion of school readiness – what it means and what impacts it.

[3] On the *'universal human'*:

Edward Said (1978, as cited in Young, 2004; 1994) has criticized 'Orientalism' as a Eurocentric imperial approach to dealing with 'the Orient', serving to maintain a contrasting superior position of the Western world. He asserts that that Orientalism attempts to divide human reality and experience, and he appeals rather to the 'humanistic' values of a general human experience, human history, and human community. Robert Young critiques this suggestion, arguing that the very idea of 'the human' which Said opposes to the Western representation of the Orient is itself derived from the Western culture—the same culture which constructed Orientalism and the racist ideology of the superiority of the Western world. Young cites Sartre's argument (from the Preface to The Wretched of the Earth, as cited in Young, 2004) that the concept of humanism occurred at the same time and in fact was deeply complicit with the ideology and violence of colonialism. Through a Eurocentric approach and an imperialist ideology, humanism posited notions of a universal human nature and mind, and as a result, 'dehumanized' various colonized peoples. Young argues that there is a complicity between humanism and both physical and hegemonic colonialism; he further asserts that humanism is essentially anti-humanist due to its necessary production of the 'non-human'.

While the theoretical concept of a universal humanism is appealing at an emotional level, Eurocentrism disguised as 'universal humanism' serves mainly to dehumanize non-Europeans and maintain the racist ideology of Western/European

superiority. In the field of 'human development', the concept of 'human' has clearly been based on a very Western Eurocentric conceptualization and experience. What has been conceived as the process of 'human development' has been based on decades of Eurocentric research, theory, and practice, with no acknowledgement of it as such, but rather with assertions of its universality.

An example: A researcher recently spoke about a study on children's social cognition. The research study looked at English-speaking and Cantonese-speaking children in a Canadian urban context, and the findings indicated that Cantonese-speaking children were 'delayed' in the development of their social cognition. However, the conceptualization of social cognition, as well as the measures and norms that had been developed with regards to it, have been based on completely Western research and constructs. Moreover, the researcher's plan to move forward involved continuing this line of research with only monolingual English-speaking children (presumably to eliminate the 'noise' of culture). In this way, Western/European research participants are conceived of as the 'basic', the 'normal', the 'culture-free', the 'universal', the 'human' and other cultures are perceived as the 'deviations', the 'delayed', the 'abnormal', the 'sub-human'.

As Young asserts, "every time a literary critic claims a universal ethical, moral, or emotional instance in a piece of English literature, he or she colludes in the violence of the colonial legacy in which the European value or truth is defined as the universal one" (p. 163). Indeed, Western/European notions presented as universals are severely damaging and de-humanizing to 'humanity'.

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The Social Construction of School Readiness

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CIES Conference – March 25, 2009

Shallwani, S. (March, 2009). *The social construction of school readiness.* Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Comparative and International Education Society, Charleston.

Overview

- Introduction: School readiness in a global education context
- Mainstream discourse on school readiness
- Alternate approach: Making meaning of school readiness in context
- Implications for theory, research, and practice

School readiness in a global education context

- Growing global movement to improve access to quality education
- Steps towards universal access to primary education
- School system failing many children, especially at early primary grades
- ‘School readiness’: the fit between the child and the school at the very beginning (at school entry)
- Need for early education interventions and indicators → attempts to export conceptualizations of school readiness from Western/European contexts to other very different contexts

Discourses

- Discourses: constructed within social contexts
- Mainstream child development discourse → Western / European notions of development and functioning
- School readiness discourse

Mainstream conceptualization of school readiness

- Mainstream conceptualization of school readiness reflects and perpetuates Western / European values and assumptions in a number of ways:

1) Conceptualization of the child

2) Conceptualization of child development and school readiness

3) How context is considered

1) Conceptualization of the child

Individual decontextualized child

- School readiness as “children’s readiness for school”; focus on child characteristics
- Relating child’s early characteristics to long-term outcomes
- Context considered usually in relation to child outcomes
- Western/European discourse on child as individual separate self

Childhood as a time of need and preparation

- Child is incomplete, lacking, and needs to be made ‘ready’
- Focus on ‘changing’ early child characteristics; programmes to promote children’s readiness for school
- Western/European discourse on childhood (child vs adult)

2) Conceptualization of child development and school readiness

- Linear development
- Categories of school readiness (and child development)
  - Social, emotional, cognitive, language, physical
- Developmental tasks
  - School readiness assessments
  - Individualistic, achievement-oriented

- Categories of development and developmental tasks expected to be achieved by children at certain stages of life are not universal, but rather socially constructed and inextricably linked to children's contexts.

- Goals and conceptualizations of child development and school readiness → reflect Western / European world and values
  - What is socially acceptable and desirable in school (e.g., styles of communication and social interaction)

3) Considering context

- Discourse maintains focus on the individual child, considers context primarily in terms of how it impacts child outcomes.
  - Correlating factors in child's immediate environment (e.g., parenting practices, family SES status, neighbourhood cohesion) to children's readiness for school
  - Increasing recognition of importance of other side of equation: schools' readiness for children

- Discourse ignores the macro-level systemic and political factors which actually marginalize certain groups in society. This 'depoliticizes' the discourse and allows those who engage in it to continue to ignore issues of power and social injustice.

Mainstream conceptualization of school readiness

- Focus on individual child, categorization, developmental tasks, context is considered in relation to child outcomes

- Positivist approach → one truth
- Quantitative methodology
- Top-down

Alternate approach: Making meaning of school readiness in context

- Multiple truths
- Qualitative methodology
- Grounded in perspectives of those engaged in experience

Alternate approach: Making meaning of school readiness in context

- Our ideas of school readiness are entwined with our beliefs about child development and child needs.
- What does school readiness mean from the perspectives of those involved in the school transition experience?

Perspectives from the Western / European World

- Smith & Shepard (1988)
  - Teachers' beliefs about school readiness
    - ranged on a dimension of nativism and environmentalism
    - associated with teacher practices
    - tended to be shared in schools
- Graue (1992)
  - Meaning of readiness in three different school communities (different resources, different ideas, different experiences)
    - Meaning of 'readiness' had more to do with the context than with actual child characteristics, although children were the most impacted by the conceptualization.
- Dockett & Perry (2002)
  - Perspectives of children, parents, and teachers on school readiness
    - Focused on social aspects of transition (adjustment to school context, interpersonal and social adjustment, rules & dispositions)
    - Importance of context in understanding school readiness

Perspectives from Outside the Western / European World

- Meaning of school readiness?
- Related research…
  - Parents' perspectives in 9-country Value of Children study: children valued for obedience vs. independence & self-reliance
  - Parents' perspectives on their roles in teaching their children (parent's role vs. teacher's role)
  - Teachers' perspectives on caregiver sensitivity – teacher's vs. child's responsibility to clarify needs

Making meaning of school readiness in context

- In different contexts, very different expectations are held of children, families, teachers, and schools with regards to different aspects of ‘school readiness’.

- School readiness is a socially constructed notion grounded in beliefs about society, its systems, and the roles different members play.

Implications for theory, research, and practice

- Claims of ‘universalism’ grounded in Western/European assumptions and values are ethically inappropriate and even damaging.
- Is cultural relativism a practical option?
- Global importance of education → need for standards or indicators
- Need socially relevant and contextually valid theory, research, and policy/practice – which explicitly acknowledge (changing) contexts, values, and assumptions.