Psychological Assessment in South Africa

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Local and international research provides considerable evidence that the early years of children’s lives are critical for their future development. Assessment measures can be used effectively to prevent, identify and address barriers to learning and development. Most psychology practitioners would agree that both formal and informal assessment procedures can guide parents, caregivers and educators in establishing a solid foundation for children’s growth, development and potential through the provision of optimal enrichment and learning activities, as well as socio-emotional support.

The primary purpose of school readiness assessment is to predict readiness for school entry and to identify preschool children who may benefit from additional stimulation programmes, learning support or retention. Focus is placed on physical development, cognitive skills and academic readiness, as well as on the child’s socio-emotional functioning. Factors considered in school readiness assessment include the child’s emotional maturity, ability to follow directions, and ability to work cooperatively with peers and adult figures. In addition to early identification and support, a school readiness assessment can also serve the purpose of reassuring parents and caregivers that their child is progressing adequately. In some instances a child may be accepted a year early into school to accommodate his or her need for accelerated learning.

While school readiness assessment is an established field of practice, it has generated a great deal of controversy amongst practitioners and researchers (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Dockett & Perry, 2009; Freeman & Brown, 2008; Goldblatt, 2004; Graue, 2006; Maxwell & Clifford, 2004). It remains a highly contentious issue in South Africa for several reasons. Concerns have been raised about the historical misuse of assessment measures, which have been seen as perpetuating exclusionary practices and an inequitable education system (Kriegler & Skuy, 1996). Some of the intellectual and school readiness assessment tools that have been locally developed have outdated norms (Foxcroft, Paterson, Le Roux & Herbst, 2004). In addition, many were not normed on a fully representative South African sample. Examples are the Junior South African Individual Scales (JSAIS) (published in 1981 and standardised for English- and Afrikaans-speaking individuals) and the Aptitude Test for School Beginners (ASB). The latter is an individually/group-administered school readiness test which was first devised in
1974 (and revised in 1994), to be used from the sixth to the eighth week of the school year. However, an advantage of this test is that it has been translated into nine official South African languages.

In response to the current limitations of locally developed tests and the absence of any new tests, a number of practitioners have relied on internationally developed tests that are not registered by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) (Foxcroft et al., 2004). The decision to make use of unregistered international tests presents practitioners with difficult ethical dilemmas. Concerns have been expressed by clinicians and researchers regarding the use of test instruments that are not normed for the population group for which they are used (Foxcroft et al., 2004; Foxcroft & Roodt, 2008; Nell, 2000; Venter, 2000).

As a result of apartheid, children in this country exist within extremely diverse socio-cultural and socio-economic structures. This confounding factor further complicates the issue of school readiness assessment and, in most cases, contributes significantly to developmental and emotional differences between children. The Situational Analysis of Children in South Africa report (The Presidency, Republic of South Africa, 2009) shows that racial inequality in children’s poverty status, as well as inequalities between urban and rural areas, persists. Education White Paper 5 (Department of Education, 2001a) states that one of the goals for 2010 was to ensure that all children entering Grade 1 would have the opportunity to participate in an accredited reception-year programme. This goal has not been met, and the number of children in Early Child Development (ECD) programmes falls short of the number of children that are within the preschool age range (Department of Basic Education, 2010). Major gaps exist in relation to access and equity with regard to the provision of ECD programmes in South Africa. A staggering figure of 21 per cent of the child population is reported to have one or both parents deceased (The Presidency, Republic of South Africa, 2009). This could be related to the high incidence of HIV/AIDS in this country. In response to some of these issues, some provincial departments of education have imposed an informal moratorium on school readiness testing within South African government schools.

Considering the myriad of factors related to school readiness testing in South Africa, a child deficit model is obviously inadequate. Denying a child the right to begin school at the appropriate age based on this model, without providing a suitable alternative, could be considered both discriminatory and unfair. The objective of this chapter is to propose a more holistic and ecosystemic view of school readiness assessment, based on a critique of approaches and a discussion of developments in this field.

Approaches to school readiness assessment

Traditionally, the concept of school readiness was viewed through a rather narrow lens, resulting in an oversimplified perception of what it was and what it entailed. Consequently, the content of many school readiness tests reflected this narrow conceptualisation. Increasing evidence, however, highlights the
complexity and multifaceted nature of school readiness. This in turn makes the assessment thereof anything but simple.

Past conceptualisations of school readiness tended to view the issue in one of two ways. Some theorists subscribed to the idea that readiness was a linear, maturational process. In other words, once children had reached a level of maturity that enabled them to sit still, stay focused, interact with others in socially acceptable ways and take direction from adults, they were considered to be ready to begin formal schooling (Meisels, 1998). Proponents of the maturational point of view argued that a child's developmental changes were a result of a natural biological progression rather than of learning or environmental influences. This view stemmed from the work of Arnold Gesell, a psychologist and paediatrician, who had proposed that development follows an orderly sequence and each child's distinctive genetic make-up determines his or her rate of development. It follows from this theory that a child's readiness for school is linked to his or her biological timetable (Scott-Little, Kagan & Frelow, 2006).

In contrast to the maturational view, some researchers and theorists have taken a more empirical standpoint on the concept of school readiness. This approach emphasises specific skills and knowledge that are deemed necessary to achieve success at school. According to Meisels (1998), from this perspective, being ready for school means knowing one's shapes and colours, one's address, how to spell one's name, how to count to ten and say the alphabet, and how to behave in a polite and socially acceptable manner.

The common factor underpinning both of these approaches is the focus on the individual child, and whether or not the child has reached a particular point that constitutes readiness (Dockett & Perry, 2009). In an endeavour to make decisions about whether or not children are ready for school, a plethora of mainly international school readiness and developmental tests were developed and administered to children. These included the Boehm Test of Basic Concepts, the Gesell School Readiness Test, the Brigance Inventory of Early Development and the Metropolitan School Readiness Test, many of which are still used today.

Critics draw attention to a number of problems associated with using once-off testing procedures for the purpose of evaluating a child's readiness for school. Frequently cited is the issue of validity and reliability. Freeman and Brown (2008, p.267) point out that the National Association for the Education of Young Children asserts that ‘by their very nature young children are poor test takers and therefore researchers’ attempts to determine an instrument’s reliability and validity are fruitless’. Other problems include concerns about measuring skills in isolation, and the fact that test results often lead to inappropriate classification and mistaken placements (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Dockett & Perry, 2009; Engel, 1991; Freeman & Brown, 2008; Meisels, 1998; Scott-Little et al., 2006). Freeman and Brown (2008) state that children’s growth occurs at different rates in uneven and irregular spurts, and there is great variability among and within typically performing children. They therefore argue that tests are inadequate for measuring the complex social, emotional, cognitive and physical competencies that children need to succeed in school. These confounding variables are accentuated by the multicultural and multilingual context in which South
Africans exist. Added to this, the complexity of South African socio-political history has impacted on many spheres of life, including the current education system and the delivery of ECD programmes.

It is encouraging to note that over approximately the last two decades there has been a gradual shift in the conceptualisation of school readiness and how best to assess it. In shifting from the traditional linear and empirically (skills and knowledge) based approaches to school readiness, most psychologists now use a holistic approach which addresses the preschool child's physical, developmental, cognitive and socio-emotional functioning. A variety of tools and methods are thus used in the assessment process. In addition to conventional school readiness tests, psychologists also make use of developmental tests, intellectual assessment measures and projective tests. Developmental tests, such as the Griffiths Mental Developmental Scales (GMDS) which has been researched in South Africa and is discussed in chapter 12 of this volume, are often used to assess locomotor skills, eye-hand coordination, language ability and personal-social skills, as well as performance and practical reasoning skills. More psychologists are also making use of information processing models of cognitive functioning and are using tests such as the Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children (K-ABC) and the Cognitive Assessment System (CAS) (discussed in chapters 7 and 8). These tests are purported to be less biased in terms of cultural and language differences. Dynamic assessment measures are also being more widely used today in the assessment of learning potential (see chapter 9 for a detailed discussion).

Test results are not interpreted in isolation, but collateral information is equally important in assessing the child’s readiness for school. Other sources of information that are utilised in the assessment process include preschool inventories, parent and teacher rating scales, informal observation and information obtained from parents and caregivers.

Although the concept of school readiness evaluation and the processes used to assess it continue to be viewed through a wider lens, there is still a challenge in South Africa to address the diverse needs of the population in relation to preschool assessment and to develop models of assessment that are appropriate for this context. As reflected in a South African survey, psychologists perceive an urgent need for tests that can be utilised for school readiness assessment and that would account for factors such as socio-economic status and chronological age (Foxcroft et al., 2004). The reality of the South African context is that there are groups of children from communities where parents and caregivers have access to the services of psychologists and other professionals whom they can consult with regard to their child’s readiness for school, while simultaneously there are those who live in dire poverty and who are unable to afford or access these services.

In the latter cases, decisions regarding school readiness are often left to teachers and parents who may not always be fully informed about the most appropriate schooling alternatives for their children. For instance, one solution for the ‘unready child’ is the practice of delaying school entry. Many studies have shown that the process of delaying school entry in itself does not produce substantial benefit for the child (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Dockett & Perry, 2009;
Engel, 1991; Maxwell & Clifford, 2004; Scott-Little et al., 2006). Carlton and Winsler (1999, p.346) argue that the practice of school readiness testing and placement ‘may be creating a type of exclusionary sorting process that results in denying or delaying educational services to precisely those children who might benefit the most from such services’.

This is an important consideration in South Africa, where many children, especially those from lower socio-economic groups, either do not attend preschool because of financial constraints, or attend preschool placements that are simple day-care facilities with limited educational value. Preventing these children from accessing educational opportunities for an additional year would clearly not be in their best interest.

Another common decision amongst teachers and parents is to keep children back an additional year in preschool (Grade 0/R). Studies conducted over the past 70 years have failed to show significant benefits to students of such retention (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). In addition, if not handled sensitively, this may have detrimental effects on the child’s self-esteem and attitude towards school. Some professionals argue that if the retention is handled with care and sensitivity, these children may experience the year in a positive manner, and may gain self-confidence related to enhanced scholastic performance. Unfortunately, an extra year for many children simply means more of the same, and their specific learning difficulties may not be addressed, resulting in limited progress.

Another concern related to the practice of school readiness assessments is the pressure it places on the development of preschool curriculum content. An emphasis on more academically oriented content may be the result of content from higher grades being ‘pushed down’ into preschool years (Scott-Little et al., 2006). Children in preschool are now expected to learn content and develop skills that were previously only expected of Grade 1 learners. Winter (2009/2010) argues that children’s play is seen as less important than teaching basic reading skills to increasingly young children. She further argues that this process is creating an increasing divide between children from lower socio-economic groups and those from more affluent communities. This appears to be the case in some parts of South Africa, where significant differences in expectations exist between government and private schools. A second-language English speaker from a less enriched background may be deemed school-ready in one school and not in another.

Dynamic and creative ways need to be explored to meet the needs of preschool children so that they can cope with the demands of formal schooling and progress to reach their full potential. For instance, the establishment of an enrichment year may serve as a stepping stone to stimulate school readiness skills, and assist with adjustment to the more formally structured schooling environment.

On a global level, there appears to be a growing awareness of the need to protect children from unnecessary and inappropriate assessment and to use assessment effectively to enhance the quality of education for all children (Department of Education, 2001b; Kagan, 2003). Much of the debate about school readiness acknowledges that contextual factors play an important role.
in its determination. In other words, the socio-economic and cultural context in which one lives serves to define and impact upon how school readiness is perceived within families, schools and communities. Contemporary socio-cultural/social constructivist learning theory and modern transactional models of child development offer a broader view of school readiness, and may provide a new theoretical framework for understanding school readiness (Carlton & Winsler, 1999).

From a social constructivist perspective, school readiness is shaped by children’s communities, families and schools. Vygotsky (1978) views learning primarily as a social process and not an isolated exploration by the child of the environment. From his viewpoint, learning precedes or leads development, and children’s experiences with others and with the environment therefore propel their development forward. This is in contrast to maturational views in which development is seen as preceding learning, and the child’s development therefore cannot be hastened by experience or teaching. The social constructivist view shifts the focus of assessment away from the child, and directs it to the community in which the child is living (Meisels, 1998). It therefore becomes vital to consider the context in which the child is raised and the environment in which he or she will be educated. Because different schools have different expectations of readiness, the same child with the same abilities and needs could be considered ready in one school and not in another (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004). School readiness therefore becomes a relative term. This is a relevant argument within the local context, where vast differences exist between schools as a result of the country’s socio-political history.

Scott-Little et al. (2006) found that early learning standards – that is, specific skills and knowledge deemed important for children’s school readiness – varied according to who was involved in the process of developing the standards, and the context in which the standards were developed. They argued that unique historical, political, institutional and policy contexts can have a significant impact on the way school readiness is conceptualised in different communities. They also found that parents and teachers had different notions about which attributes and skills were important indicators of a child’s readiness for school. While parents and teachers seemed to agree that it was important for children to be healthy, socially competent and able to communicate effectively, it was found that some parents and preschool teachers accentuated academic competencies and basic knowledge more than Foundation Phase teachers did. In South Africa, school readiness assessment is in many instances perceived differently in different community settings. Entry standards and requirements in the range of schools that exist (such as private, inner-city, suburban, township, rural, informal settlement and farm schools) can differ markedly.

If parents and teachers share a common understanding and belief about the important skills and characteristics that are needed to begin formal schooling, then there will be greater congruence between the skills parents mediate to their children prior to school entry and the skills teachers look for as children enter school (Goldblatt, 2004). Goldblatt (2004) investigated South African Jewish and Muslim parents’ and teachers’ perceptions of school readiness, and found
that the parents and teachers in her study had similar expectations regarding school readiness. However, she also noted that this study, unlike many studies conducted in the USA, was limited to middle-class socio-economic groups, thus accounting for their shared expectations.

As existing theories of school readiness have been integrated with each other, there has been a gradual emergence of a broader conceptualisation of the process. Some contemporary theorists view school readiness from an interactionist or bi-directional perspective. This approach incorporates elements of maturationist and empirical theory, and recognises the importance of the social and cultural context, following social constructivist theory. Thus, school readiness does not reside solely within the child, nor is it completely external to the child. Instead, it is an intricate tapestry of the child’s own genetic make-up, skills and abilities, interwoven with the experiences and teachings received from surrounding social and cultural groups.

Considering the complexity of the concept of school readiness, the issue of assessing school readiness becomes a far more complicated matter than just determining whether children have mastered a predetermined set of skills. By redefining readiness in terms of the characteristics of the child, family, school and community, the assessment of readiness adopts a very different perspective. Freeman and Brown (2008) suggest that rather than asking, ‘Is the child ready for school?’, we should reframe the question by asking, ‘Is the school ready for all learners?’ The idea of ‘ready’ schools, and the assessment thereof, is an issue that has been addressed recently by a growing number of authors. Dockett and Perry (2009) argue that ‘ready’ schools are ones in which the necessary support structures are provided, where there is strong and effective leadership, and where an environment of mutual respect between teachers and parents is fostered. The assessment of schools could take the form of reviewing class sizes, determining the extent to which teachers have early childhood training, ensuring the implementation and development of appropriate curricula, and promoting continuity between preschools and formal schooling. This paradigm shift in school readiness assessment is consistent with the policy of inclusive education which South Africa has embraced over the last decade (Department of Education, 2001a; 2001b).

Teachers obviously form an essential ingredient in the process of assessing school readiness, and their evaluation and assessment of young learners can form a vital and useful part of this process. It is therefore essential that teachers have access to ongoing professional development and training. This has been set as a priority in South Africa (The Presidency, Republic of South Africa, 2009). Many professionals advocate that assessment should take place in the child’s own natural setting, in a comfortable and nonthreatening way. In addition to this, children should be observed and assessed over an extended period, rather than on a single occasion (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Dockett & Perry, 2009; Engel, 1991; Freeman & Brown, 2008). Teachers need to be trained to assess children’s work in different contexts, using methods such as portfolio systems, observational checklists and the collection of varied examples of their work (Engel, 1991). These kinds of assessment procedures are promoted in the
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current South African education curriculum. Teachers should also help students to produce their best possible work by taking cognisance of their special abilities and interests. This shifts the focus away from deficits to strengths. Teachers also need to be trained to utilise a variety of approaches to teaching and learning, and to tailor their teaching and learning to suit the needs of a diverse range of children. This type of approach eliminates the need to assess children before they enter formal schooling (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). The primary purpose of assessment is therefore for instructional purposes and the development of suitable programmes, rather than for placement.

In order to enable schools and teachers to be ‘ready’, they need to be supported by families, communities and government. An interdisciplinary and collaborative approach is needed to address the many variables that affect children’s school readiness. Dockett and Perry (2009) point out that families can provide an essential foundation in facilitating a positive start to school. Children need nurturing, encouragement and access to rich and varied learning opportunities. Families do not exist in isolation, though. The existence and accessibility of community support structures can determine the extent to which families are able to fulfil these roles (Dockett & Perry, 2009). Such support structures can make a vital contribution in South Africa, especially in addressing the needs of under-resourced and marginalised communities. Children need support to maintain optimal physical and emotional health if they are to achieve academic success (Winter, 2009/2010). Research findings from the fields of medicine, child development, cultural studies, sociology and other disciplines can provide valuable input into the development of strategies for attaining school readiness. Winter (2009/2010) stresses that in order to achieve optimal results, school readiness programmes must begin early on and continue to provide an appropriate level of support throughout childhood.

New and fundamentally different approaches to school readiness assessment are being developed and implemented in countries such as the USA, Great Britain and Australia. This is part of the major paradigm shift that is occurring in school readiness research. Dockett and Perry (2009) believe that the focus on developing community measures of readiness, rather than measures of individual children’s readiness for school, is one approach that is worthy of further consideration. Examples of community measures include the Early Development Instrument (EDI), and an Australian adaptation of this model, the Australian Early Development Index. The EDI was developed at the Oxford Centre for Child Studies and assesses the whole child, by asking developmentally appropriate questions across five dimensions identified in current literature as being important. These include physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognition, and communication skills and general knowledge. The EDI is not used to diagnose individual children, but is administered for the assessment of entire classrooms, communities and school districts. It is completed halfway through the year by the child’s preschool teacher. This ensures that the assessment is conducted by a professional who has had sustained contact with the child and therefore knows the child well. The results are then interpreted at a group or population level, instead of at an individual level. Because the results
are based on all children in a given community, the information gathered from this type of assessment is more suitably translated into practice and policy (Guhn, Janus & Hertzman, 2007).

Such a model of assessment would need to be researched to explore its appropriateness for our local context. It may be a valuable assessment tool, given the range and diversity of schools and communities within South Africa. This type of assessment practice could help to clarify the most important needs within a given community or school, and then goals could be set to address these. In this way, the needs of many would be served, as opposed to the needs of just a few individual children. Given the financial constraints of many schools and parents, the luxury of one-on-one assessment is not an option for most parents. In addition to this, models such as the EDI incorporate multiple stakeholders and this could help to alleviate the excessive burden that is placed on teachers in this country.

The Early ON School Readiness Project is another community-based model that has emerged recently. It is based on an ecosystemic approach and requires the involvement of various stakeholders. It focuses on community awareness, parent education, professional development for childcare environments, and transition to school. The development of the model was initiated by the US government in collaboration with non-profit agencies and a university. Studies suggest that this emerging model shows promise for increasing children’s developmental skills and abilities associated with school readiness (Winter, Zurcher, Hernandez & Zenong, 2007).

It is clear that a tremendous shift has taken place over the past few decades in the conceptualisation of school readiness. This, in turn, has had a significant impact on how school readiness is assessed. Nonetheless, ‘readiness, it turns out, cannot be assessed easily, quickly or efficiently’ (Meisels, 1998, p.21).

Research trends

In the international literature there are three main bodies of research that inform the understanding of school readiness (Rimm-Kaufman, 2004). The first consists of large-scale surveys that explore the perceptions of stakeholders, such as preschool teachers and parents, of school readiness. The second body of research focuses on definitions of school readiness by studying the relative importance of variables such as cognitive skills and chronological age. The third examines the outcomes of early educational experiences and family social processes in relation to school readiness and performance.

Examples of research conducted in the last few years include La Paro and Pianta’s (2000) meta-analytic review, which indicates that preschool cognitive assessment predicts about 25 per cent of the variance in cognitive assessment in the first two years of schooling. While their findings support the importance of cognitive indicators, they also indicate that other factors account for most of the variance in early school outcomes. On the other hand, in South Africa, Van Zyl (2004) found that there was a highly significant correlation between perceptual development as part of school readiness using the ASB, and Grade 1
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children’s performance in literacy and numeracy. The sample in this study was 137 Afrikaans- and English-speaking children from average to above-average socio-economic backgrounds.

Winter and Kelley (2008) conducted a comprehensive analysis of several large-scale studies spanning a period of 40 years, which showed the importance of high-quality home and preschool environments for improving children’s school readiness. The longitudinal studies that they reviewed indicated that children who had participated in high-quality early development programmes or learning environments were more likely to have better cognitive and language development than their peers. Positive outcomes for children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds were reported, especially where programmes provided individual child-focused early intervention in conjunction with comprehensive family support services. Ramey and Ramey (2004), after reviewing evidence from randomised controlled trials, also argued in favour of the positive effect of high-quality early intervention programmes on high-risk groups of children from economically poor families. This is of particular relevance to South African communities where a high level of poverty places children at risk in the formal schooling system.

Teacher professional development, behaviour and practice have been related to children’s social and behaviour skills. Winter and Kelley (2008) state that there is a need for more research into the effects of early childhood programmes on these aspects of children’s functioning. They also suggest that studies in third world and developing countries will expand on ways of enhancing school readiness in contexts where there is a scarcity of resources.

Conclusion

Although school readiness testing has a fairly long history in South Africa, there is a paucity of local research in this field (Goldblatt, 2004; Sundelowitz, 2001). This, together with the fact that there have been no new developments in school readiness testing for more than two decades, places practitioners at an impasse. Research and examples of best practice based on educational experience need to be documented in order to design a framework for school readiness assessment that is most suited to our unique context, and that addresses the needs of our diverse population of preschool children.

Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001b) advocates that responsibility be placed on schools, and the education system as a whole, to provide adequate support structures to accommodate a range of children and to promote optimal learning and development. This is consistent with the shift towards an interactive, bi-directional, context-appropriate concept of school readiness (Dockett & Perry, 2009; Freeman & Brown, 2008; Goldblatt, 2004; Maxwell & Clifford, 2004; Meisels, 1998; Scott-Little et al., 2006). There is a definite place for the assessment of individual learners in the interest of early identification of problems and provision of intervention and/or support, and therefore government expenditure on education should prioritise the
development of early childhood programmes, the upgrading of ECD facilities and the improvement of teacher training. This will assist in addressing the current challenges faced by the education system, and provide children with better opportunities to reach their full potential.

References


