

Making the Grade? Kindergarten Readiness In Connecticut

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Table of Contents

I. ABSTRACT.....	4
II. INTRODUCTION.....	5
Research Goals.....	7
Research Questions.....	8
III. THEROETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	9
The Changing Role of Kindergarten.....	9
Benefits of Kindergarten Readiness for K-12 Academic Outcomes.....	10
Connecticut State Policy Increased Kindergarten Academics.....	12
Kindergarten Readiness Disparities in Connecticut.....	13
Connecticut’s Kindergarten Entrance Inventory.....	14
Preschool’s Role in Closing Kindergarten Entry Gaps in Connecticut.....	15
Teacher and Parent Perceptions of Kindergarten Readiness.....	16
IV. HYPOTHESES.....	18
V. METHODS.....	19
VI. DATA.....	21
Data Collection.....	21
Data Analysis.....	21
Evaluation of Pilot Interviews.....	22
VII. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS.....	24
Theme 1: Social Skills and Language Skills Indicate Readiness.....	25
Theme 2: Children Develop Social and Language Skills in Preschool.....	26
Theme 3: Teachers Differ on the Importance of Academic Skills.....	28
Theme 4: Education Policies Have Increased Kindergarten’s Academic Rigor.....	29
Theme 5: Opinions Vary on the Appropriateness of the New Kindergarten.....	29
Theme 6: Curriculum Would Be More Reasonable if Entrance Age Changed.....	30
Theme 7: Views on Whether Entrance Expectations Have Changed Differ.....	31
Theme 8: The KEI is an Accurate Assessment of Readiness.....	33
VIII. CONCLUSION.....	35
Comparison of Teacher Expectations.....	35
Impact of the Changing Nature of Kindergarten on Readiness.....	36
Evaluation of the Kindergarten Entrance Inventory.....	39
Limitations.....	40
Further Research.....	40
IX. REFERENCES.....	42
X. TABLE.....	47
XI. APPENDICES.....	49
Appendix A: Connecticut Performance on the Kindergarten Entrance Inventory.....	49
Appendix B: CT Kindergarten Entrance Inventory.....	50
Appendix C: Interview Questions.....	52
Appendix D: Teacher Pseudonyms.....	53
Appendix E: Strategy for Coding Interview Data.....	54

I. ABSTRACT

In Connecticut, 83% of kindergarteners attended preschool. Despite high preschool enrollment, less than half of these students enter kindergarten consistently demonstrating the language, literacy, numeracy and social skills needed for a successful transition into formal schooling. I interviewed eleven kindergarten and eight preschool teachers to examine factors that could contribute to gaps in school readiness. I compared their opinions on which skills best indicate readiness, whether their expectations have increased with the introduction of Common Core and No Child Left Behind, and whether Connecticut's current readiness assessment accurately indicates preparedness for kindergarten.

The interviews revealed that preschool and kindergarten teachers disagree on the importance of mastering academic skills before entering kindergarten. Expectations at kindergarten entry have not increased but some teachers questioned the appropriateness of the current kindergarten curriculum for certain children. The skills included on Connecticut's current entry assessment accurately indicate preparedness for kindergarten. These findings suggest that increasing communication between preschool and kindergarten teachers could help preschool teachers align their curricula with the expectations of kindergarten teachers. Connecticut could change the cut-off date for entry into kindergarten to increase the appropriateness of the kindergarten curriculum. Furthermore, future readiness tests should incorporate skills similar to those used in the current assessment.

II. INTRODUCTION

For most children in the United States, kindergarten is their entrance into formal schooling and the quality of this experience will influence their future academic success (Claessens, Duncan, Engel, 2009; Duncan, Dowsett, et. al, 2007; Claessens, Engel, Curran, 2014). In 1991, the National Education Goals Panel¹ adopted its first goal that “by the year 2000, all children will enter school ready to learn.” They defined readiness using the following developmental domains: approaches to learning, cognitive skills, emotional-social skills, language and communication skills, and health and physical development (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1998). Despite this goal, only 28% of the children entering kindergarten in 2010 were rated by their teachers as “in progress” or above in one or more academic categories and one or more behavioral categories (Bernstein, et. al, 2014). This apparent lack of readiness is concerning because children who do not meet readiness expectations when they enter kindergarten are less likely to experience success in future schooling.

In 2012, 83% of children entering kindergarten in Connecticut reported attending a preschool program (ConnCAN, 2015). Despite high preschool attendance, less than half of these students consistently demonstrated the language, literacy, numeracy and social skills included on the Kindergarten Entrance Inventory (KEI)², the skills assessment given to entering kindergarteners in Connecticut (ConnCAN, 2013). This is one of the largest readiness gaps in the

¹ The National Education Goals Panel was created after President George Bush and the nation’s governors met at the first National Education Summit and developed six national education goals. This bi-partisan panel monitored progress towards these goals and identified successful educational practices.

² The Kindergarten Entrance Inventory (KEI) was developed by the Connecticut Department of Education in 2007 to assess the development levels and academic skills of entering kindergarteners and to monitor the state’s success in reducing readiness gaps (Goldstein, Eastwood, & Behuniak, 2014).

United States (Malloy & Jones-Taylor, 2013). A possible explanation for this discrepancy could be that the skills being emphasized by preschool teachers do not align with the readiness expectations of kindergarten teachers. Teacher perceptions of the skills and behaviors children should enter kindergarten with affect their curriculum, their classroom management and environment, and their relationships with their students, all of which impact a child's future academic success (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2009). Using semi-structured interviews, this thesis compared the expectations of kindergarten and preschool teachers in Connecticut to determine whether differences exist between the skills kindergarten teachers want children to have before they enter school and the skills preschool teachers believe are most important for kindergarten entry and are therefore emphasizing in preschool.

Learning expectations during the kindergarten school year have also increased (Brown & Lan, 2015). To succeed with a more demanding kindergarten curriculum, it is now even more important that children meet entry expectations. It is possible that children are unprepared because changes to the kindergarten curriculum have raised entry expectations. Therefore, as a secondary component to my research, I examined whether the skill sets required at kindergarten entry have changed because of the implementation of policies, like Common Core³, that increase pressure on teachers to improve student performance.

Previous studies suggest that kindergarten teachers believe social-emotional development is the most important indicator of kindergarten readiness, whereas preschool teachers are more likely to emphasize academic skills (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). However, the

³ The Common Core is a set of clear standards for kindergarten through 12th grade in English language arts/literacy and mathematics. These standards are learning goals for what students should know at each grade level and are designed to prepare students for college and careers. The standards have been voluntarily adopted by 42 states and the District of Columbia (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2012).

literature lacks recent studies that focus on the expectations of teachers in Connecticut. Additionally, education policies implemented since the previous research was published could have influenced teacher expectations. My research will contribute to earlier publications by studying the current differences in kindergarten entry expectations in Connecticut, examining whether entry expectations have changed as a result of education policies, and determining how closely the KEI aligns with teacher expectations.

Research Goals

Dissimilarities found between readiness expectations of kindergarten and preschool teachers could indicate that preschools are not emphasizing the skills and traits that lead to the most success in a kindergarten classroom, contributing to students not being prepared for school when they enter kindergarten. In his State of the Union, Governor Dannel Malloy said that he wanted to “commit Connecticut to achieving universal pre-kindergarten” and passed a law allowing the state to invest an additional \$15 million more in fiscal year 2015, and \$20 million more every additional year until 2024, in preschool expansion (Thomas, 2015). The continued expansion of preschool programs in Connecticut will benefit students, particularly if the expectations of kindergarten teachers match the expectations of preschool teachers. The findings of this study could encourage further communication between kindergarten and preschool teachers to ensure these new programs are developed to teach children the skills needed for kindergarten.

This research also attempted to understand how policies such as Common Core have changed early childhood education, including kindergarten readiness expectations, from the perspectives of kindergarten and preschool teachers. Questions about education policy allowed teachers to indicate whether they believe current readiness expectations are developmentally

appropriate for children.

Finally, this study examined how closely the Connecticut KEI aligns with the values of kindergarten and preschool teachers when assessing school readiness. Connecticut is a member of a seven state consortium developing a new Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) and could use the information from this study to ensure that the views of teachers are represented as the state seeks to improve the current KEI.

Research Questions

This study aimed to examine kindergarten readiness criteria from the perspectives of preschool and kindergarten teachers. Given the influence that expectations have on an educator's teaching style, management of the classroom, and relationship with students, all of which influence a child's attitude toward, and future success in, school, it is important to understand which skills teachers value at kindergarten entry (Birch & Ladd, 1997). This study addressed the question: *Do preschool and kindergarten teachers differ in their readiness expectations for children entering kindergarten in Connecticut?*

This research also attempted to understand whether the kindergarten curriculum has influenced the entry expectations of teachers. Therefore, a second question was: *Have the kindergarten readiness expectations of teachers changed as a result of the increasingly academic nature of kindergarten?*

Because Connecticut is in the process of creating a new KEI, I used this study to examine teacher opinions of the current KEI, including which skills should be added to the new test and which skills should be removed. To determine these results, I asked a third question: *Do teachers believe that the current KEI is an accurate indicator of kindergarten readiness?*

III. THEROETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Changing Role of Kindergarten

Since the late 1950s, when early childhood was determined to be a critical period in a child's intellectual and social development, kindergarten has become increasingly focused on academics (Russell, 2007). President Lyndon Johnson used research demonstrating the importance of early childhood education on a child's development to justify creating federally funded Head Start preschool programs as a way to address early social inequities during his "War on Poverty" (Dombkowski, 2001). Preschool expansion challenged conventional notions about the role of kindergarten. Developmental kindergartens emphasizing social, emotional, and cognitive development were replaced by preschools, while academic kindergartens, teaching specific academic skills and content, emerged (Russell, 2011). From the late 1980s onwards, the kindergarten curriculum expanded to include skills previously not taught until first grade (Dombkowski, 2001).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) put further pressure on schools to ensure their students were academically successful, leading to the implementation of more challenging kindergarten curricula (Tyre, 2006). NCLB emphasized teacher accountability and student mastery of a predetermined set of academic skills (Goldstein, 2007). Although NCLB testing did not begin until third grade, the policy's effects were felt in preschool and kindergarten classrooms. Policymakers stressed that an early introduction to academics would help children reach the expected standards in future grade levels and teachers felt pressured to begin teaching the basic skills being assessed in NCLB testing in younger grades (Stipek, 2006).

In 2010, Common Core State Standards were released for mathematics and English language arts, increasing academic standards for grades K-12. The Common Core created higher

standards that were consistent throughout the United States, providing clear expectations to students and teachers and promoting educational equity across states (Kramer-Vida, 2012; Phillips & Wong, 2010). Currently 42 states and the District of Columbia have voluntarily adopted the standards. Kindergarten standards range from being able to demonstrate command of English grammar when writing and speaking, including using upper- and lowercase letters and forming regular plural nouns orally, to being able to use reading strategies to determine the meaning of unknown words and phrases (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012).

Critics of the kindergarten standards in Common Core argue that the standards are not developmentally appropriate (Berdik, 2015). Common Core supporters defend the standards by claiming that they were created using standards that had already been successfully implemented in other states. Additionally, they are meant to be goals not requirements or a curriculum; teachers and school districts have the freedom to design their own lessons (Kulkarni & Liben, 2015). Supporters also argue that students benefit from more rigorous content in kindergarten (Claessens, Engel, Curran, 2014). Despite the controversy, the Common Core kindergarten standards have contributed to the increasingly academic nature of kindergarten.

Benefits of Kindergarten Readiness for K-12 Academic Outcomes

The heightened focus on academic success has changed discussions about what children need to know and be able to do when they enter kindergarten, while also exposing the negative consequences of entering kindergarten unprepared (Brown & Lan, 2015). A national survey of teachers indicated that only 52% of children experience a successful transition into kindergarten. (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). As kindergarten academics increase, students who do not enter kindergarten with the necessary skills fall further behind their peers (Slaby, Loucks, & Stelwagon, 2005).

Inequitable access to high-quality, early childhood education contributes to a large achievement gap and is often based on race and socio-economic status. This gap begins at kindergarten entry and continues as the child moves through school (Reardon, 2011). Skills and knowledge upon kindergarten entry vary depending on race and ethnicity, poverty level, primary home language, family type, and education the year before entering kindergarten (Denton Flanagan & McPhee, 2009). For instance, around 75% of children from moderate to high-income families are ready to enter kindergarten at age five compared to only 48% of children from poor families (Isaacs, 2012).

These systematic disparities in kindergarten readiness concern parents, educators, and policymakers because children who meet readiness expectations when they enter kindergarten are more likely to experience greater success in future schooling. For example, academic competency in kindergarten was shown to be a strong predictor of children's achievement at the end of third grade (Claessens, Duncan, Engel, 2009; Duncan, Dowsett, et. al, 2007; Claessens, Engel, Curran, 2014). Reading and math achievement levels at kindergarten entry were also found to be statistically significant predictors of reading and math success for 13 and 14 year old students (Duncan et al, 2007). On the other hand, children who are not ready at kindergarten entry are less likely to be successful in grade school, more likely to drop out of high school, more likely to be retained in school, and more likely to be referred for special education (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Furthermore, most children who start school significantly behind their peers never catch up; instead this readiness gap widens as students move through school (Lee & Burkman, 2002).

The transition into kindergarten, which marks a child's entry into formal schooling, is a critical period of adjustment in a child's life that has long-lasting consequences (Gill, Winters, &

Friedman, 2006). Kindergarten readiness is correlated with college attendance, home ownership, earnings, and retirement savings (Chetty et al., 2011). A successful transition into kindergarten influences behavior and coping skills throughout life (Doherty, 1997).

State and federal legislators are attempting to address early childhood education disparities by focusing on implementing high-quality preschool programs for all children. In his 2013 State of the Union, President Obama said that universal, high-quality preschool would ensure that all children have the chance to enter kindergarten prepared for success (Obama, 2013). Initiatives such as Race to the Top⁴ and the strengthening of Head Start⁵ and Early Head Start provide states with federal funding to improve their current early childhood education programs (The White House, 2014).

Connecticut State Policy Increased Kindergarten Academics

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Connecticut passed several pieces of legislation attempting to improve early childhood education. The 1997 School Readiness Act provided funding for Connecticut's most at-risk districts to create quality preschool programs, enabling them to establish accredited preschools with qualified teachers that were open to three and four year olds. The Early Reading Success Legislation in 1998 improved kindergarten education initiatives by providing grants to help school districts implement full day kindergartens, reduce class sizes, and provide after school and summer school literacy programs. In 1999 Connecticut passed the Early Reading Success Institute Act, which created teacher training and a literacy curriculum for children in kindergarten through third grade from high-risk districts. That same

⁴ The Race to the Top Fund is a Department of Education grant given to help states implement innovative education reform. The initiative began in 2009 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

⁵ Head Start programs support the development of low-income children from birth to age five through early learning, health, and family wellbeing. Since 1965 when Head Start was founded as a part of Lyndon B. Johnson's "War On Poverty", the program has served over 30 million children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015).

year, the Education Accountability Act mandated principals and school boards to maintain reading standards. Schools were required to notify parents of children who did not meet the reading standards and help develop a personal reading plan (CT Commission on Children, 2005).

By 2014, Connecticut was one of 34 states requiring public school districts to offer half-day kindergarten programs and one of 16 states mandating kindergarten attendance, although there is an opt-out option for children under the age of seven (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). And, even though it is not required, 143 out of 165 school districts, 13 Charter Schools, and 14 Magnet Schools provide full-day kindergarten, resulting in 94% of Connecticut kindergarteners being enrolled in full-day programs (CT Office of Early Education, 2015).

Kindergarten Readiness Disparities in Connecticut

Despite numerous policies and investments, Connecticut has one of the largest K-12 achievement gaps in the United States, including the widest gap between low-income and non-low income students in all 50 states (Malloy & Jones-Taylor, 2013). These educational disparities emerge as early as kindergarten entry⁶. In 2012, 20% of children entering kindergarten in Connecticut required “substantial instructional support” in language, literacy, and numeracy skills. This number increased to almost 30% of children in Connecticut’s thirteen high need districts (Malloy & Jones-Taylor, 2013).

These gaps persist in future schooling. Although Connecticut has higher proficiency rates in math and reading than the national average, less than half of Connecticut students score at or above proficient in math or reading in fourth and eighth grade; these proficiency rates are even lower for underserved students groups such as students of color and low income students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

⁶ See Appendix A for chart of readiness disparities.

The disparities in kindergarten readiness throughout Connecticut caused the State Department of Education (SDE) to implement the Kindergarten Entrance Inventory (KEI) in 2007 in order to assess development levels and academic skills among entering kindergarteners and to monitor the state's success in reducing readiness gaps (Goldstein, Eastwood, & Behuniak, 2014).

Connecticut's Kindergarten Entrance Inventory

Kindergarten readiness assessments help parents and teachers identify the needs of each individual child, as well as develop a baseline of the child's knowledge and skills upon kindergarten entry. State legislators and school districts can also use readiness assessments to measure the impacts of early learning programs.

The KEI⁷ asks kindergarten teachers to evaluate their students based on three performance levels across the following six developmental domains: language, literacy, numeracy, physical/motor, creative/aesthetic, and personal/social skills. The performance levels are (1) the student demonstrates emerging skills in the specified domain and requires a large degree of instructional support, (2) the student inconsistently demonstrates the skills in the specified domain and requires some instructional support, and (3) the student consistently demonstrates the skills in the specified domain and requires minimal instructional support. The KEI was designed to align with the Connecticut Preschool Curriculum Framework and Connecticut's educational standards, and addresses all of the developmental domains included by the National Education Goals Panel except "approaches to learning" (Malloy & Jones-Taylor, 2013).

In 2013, Connecticut joined Maryland's Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA)

⁷ See Appendix B for Connecticut's Kindergarten Entrance Inventory (KEI).

Consortium. Maryland received a \$4.9 million Enhanced Assessment Grant (EAG) to create a “multistate, state-of-the-art assessment system composed of a KEA and aligned formative assessments” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Connecticut has not yet attempted to implement the new KEA. The KEA was designed to be administered during the first eight weeks of school and would expand on the KEI to incorporate additional domains including science, social studies, and the arts. As opposed to the KEI ranking system, the KEA would train teachers to use multiple assessment methods including observational rubrics, performance tasks, and technical standards (Malloy and Jones-Taylor, 2013). Examining the importance of kindergarten readiness indicators on the KEI from the perspective of kindergarten and preschool teachers could help Connecticut align the new KEA with the strongest indicators from the KEI.

Preschool’s Role in Closing Kindergarten Entry Gaps in Connecticut

Connecticut legislators focused on preschool as a way to improve kindergarten readiness after a 2004 study revealed that 25% of Connecticut children who did not attend preschool did not have the language and literacy skills needed for kindergarten, 30% lacked math skills, 45% lacked social-emotional skills, and 59% lacked fine motor skills (Connecticut Early Childhood Education Cabinet, 2006). This study also revealed that two years of preschool dramatically increased readiness (Connecticut Early Childhood Education Cabinet, 2006). In 2013, Connecticut ranked third in the United States for the highest number of accredited preschool programs, including schools through the Connecticut School Readiness Program which provides full-day, high-quality preschool to three and four year olds (Malloy & Jones-Taylor, 2013).

Despite the high national ranking, disparities in preschool attendance based on income and race still exist in Connecticut. For example, in the 2011 to 2012 school year, nearly 90% of children statewide attended preschool. However, preschool experience decreased to 70% when

only considering kindergarten children from high-need school districts (Malloy & Jones-Taylor, 2013). The difference is preschool attendance correlates with gaps in kindergarten readiness, as children from priority school districts are less likely to consistently demonstrate readiness skills compared to children from the rest of the state⁸ (see Appendix A).

In 2014, Connecticut received the federal Preschool Development Grant to “expand the reach of their high-quality preschool programs in over 200 high need communities, to enroll over 33,000 additional children” (The White House, 2014). The state had already increased funding for early learning and development by 12.36% between 2009 and 2013, which raised participation in School Readiness Programs by 28% (Malloy & Jones-Taylor, 2013). Connecticut is now focused on improving the KEI in order to accurately measure the impact that their improvements to early childhood education have had on kindergarten readiness.

Teacher and Parent Perceptions of Kindergarten Readiness

There does not appear to be a single developmental domain that kindergarten teachers, preschool teachers, and parents agree is most indicative of kindergarten readiness (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000; Hatcher et. al, 2012; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011; Gill, Winters, & Friedman, 2006; Duncan et al., 2007). Kindergarten teachers seem to value social-emotional development more than children having specific academic skills; they consider students who are healthy and well nourished, enthusiastic about learning, and able to verbally communicate needs ready to enter kindergarten (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000; Piotrkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2000).

Surveys distributed to 3,305 kindergarten teachers also provide evidence that kindergarten teachers view social aspects of learning as the most significant indicators of

⁸ See Appendix A for chart depicting disparities in kindergarten readiness in Connecticut.

readiness. The most commonly selected indicators of readiness on the surveys included being able to communicate needs and thoughts, not being disruptive, and following directions. The least important indicators of readiness were naming colors and shapes, knowing most of the alphabet, and counting to 20 or more (Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003). A study of families indicated that their largest concerns about their children entering kindergarten also related to social and behavioral problems (Hatcher et. al, 2012; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011).

In contrast to the views of kindergarten teachers, preschool teachers were more likely to name specific academic skills such as counting and writing their name when discussing kindergarten readiness (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000; Piotrkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2000). Similarly, although their largest concern was social-emotional, parents usually named specific academic skills as indicators of readiness and suggested that their expectations of what children need to know before entering kindergarten have increased in recent decades (Hatcher et. al, 2012; Belfield & Garcia, 2014).

Although previous studies have been conducted on which aspects of kindergarten readiness preschool and kindergarten teachers value (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000; Piotrkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2000; Hatcher et. al, 2012; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011; Belfield & Garcia, 2014; Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003), the increasingly academic nature of kindergarten could have changed the skills that teachers think are critical for a child's success in kindergarten. Additionally, examining how well Connecticut's new KEA aligns with the expectations of the state's kindergarten and preschool teachers could be useful for assessing whether the KEA will be effective or whether the assessment should be adjusted.

IV. HYPOTHESES

1. **Comparison of Teacher Expectations:** My hypothesis was that there were differences in readiness expectations for students entering kindergarten between preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers in Connecticut.
2. **Impact of the Changing Nature of Kindergarten on Readiness:** My hypothesis was that the increased academic expectations for kindergarten students have impacted the entry expectations of kindergarten and preschool teachers.
3. **Ideal Kindergarten Entrance Inventory:** My hypothesis was that preschool and kindergarten teachers would not consider the current KEI to be an appropriate measure of kindergarten readiness.

V. METHODS

I conducted nineteen interviews with eleven kindergarten and eight preschool teachers from New London County in southeastern Connecticut. All of the kindergarten teachers and two of the preschool teachers were from public school systems. The other six preschool teachers taught at private preschool programs. All of the teachers I interviewed were women and they ranged from first-year teachers to teachers with 30 years of experience. The interviews were semi-structured and used open-ended questions to gain insight into why teachers believe certain skills are more important than others. The questions addressed readiness criteria, changes to kindergarten entry expectations overtime, and perceptions of the KEI⁹.

Using purposive sampling, I selected kindergarten teachers from public school districts. Because of time constraints and the busy schedules of teachers, it was impossible for participants to be randomly selected and representative of the entire population of Connecticut kindergarten teachers. I sent emails to superintendents of school districts in Connecticut and received permission from Waterford Public Schools, Preston Public Schools, Stonington Public Schools, and Groton Public Schools. These four towns are similar in wealth and demographics. The median household income in Waterford is \$54,444 and 87% of the population is white. Preston has a median household income of \$67,069 and 91.9% of the population is white. Groton has a median household income of \$51,475 and 64.5% of the population is white. Stonington's median household income is \$70,515 and 95% of the population is white (Data USA, 2014).

Once I received permission from a school district's administration, I emailed all of the kindergarten teachers from that district to ask if they were interested in participating. I decided to only include public schools in my sample because children who attend public schools are more

⁹ See Appendix C for interview questions.

likely to enter kindergarten unprepared (Isaacs, 2012).

The preschool teachers were also purposively sampled. I included preschool teachers from a variety of different programs, including private preschools, public preschools, and daycare programs. I contacted preschools after determining which public school districts would participate to ensure that the preschool matriculated students to the kindergarten teachers in my study. Some of the preschool teachers I interviewed came from within the public school system and required the permission of the superintendent. The teachers working outside of the public school system required permission from the director of the preschool. After receiving permission, I emailed individual preschool teachers to ask if they were interested in participating in my study.

The interviews were semi-structured, asking teachers to describe what they think are the most important skills and characteristics for students to have mastered before they enter kindergarten, as well as how changes in early childhood education policy have influenced their teaching methods and expectations. Interviewing was the best method for determining whether there were differences in readiness expectations between kindergarten and preschool teachers because it allowed for an in-depth comparison of teacher values. Interviews not only helped me generate a list of skills that teachers expect, but I learned why teachers value them and the methods preschool teachers use to teach them. Open-ended questions also allowed me to gain insight into their views on recent policy changes and how those policies have influenced their perceptions of kindergarten readiness.

VI. DATA

Data Collection

I conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews to explore similarities and differences between teachers. This allowed me to ask open-ended questions directed at obtaining particular information, while also allowing teachers to expand on or clarify their answers. To ensure that I was able to accurately depict their responses, I recorded each of the interviews and transcribed the recordings directly after the interview. I also piloted my interviews with one kindergarten teacher and one preschool teacher before starting my study to learn what types of responses I could expect, the approximate duration of the interviews, and whether I was asking the best set of questions.

The questions I asked the kindergarten and preschool teachers differed slightly in content. During interviews with kindergarten teachers, my primary objectives were to identify what skills and/or knowledge they want students to have before entering kindergarten, the role preschool plays in acquiring these skills, and whether their expectations have changed because of policies like Common Core. During interviews with preschool teachers, my main objectives were to identify what skills and/or knowledge they want students to have before leaving their programs to enter kindergarten, the methods they use to teach these skills, and the impact education policy has had on their teaching. After collecting the responses to these questions, I created transcripts of the recordings and began my data analysis. To protect the privacy of participating teachers, I used pseudonyms to refer to them in this study¹⁰.

Data Analysis

I used NVivo to analyze the interview transcripts and created codes of common themes

¹⁰ See Appendix D for teacher pseudonyms.

that existed in the teachers' responses¹¹ (see Appendix E for codes). In particular, I sought to find points of agreement and disagreement between kindergarten and preschool teachers regarding readiness expectations and the impact of education policy on entry expectations, including whether they have changed and whether those changes are reasonable for students. To determine the accuracy of the KEI, I analyzed whether the skills teachers emphasized were included in the KEI, as well as their responses when I asked for their opinions on the assessment.

Evaluation of Pilot Interviews

Pilot interviews were conducted with a preschool teacher from Durham, North Carolina and a kindergarten teacher from Waterford, Connecticut. The kindergarten interview was piloted over Skype while the preschool interview was completed in-person. Neither teacher participated in the official study. The goal of the pilot interviews was to improve the quality of the interview questions, determine the approximate length of the interviews, learn the types of responses my questions invoked, and establish new, interesting questions that I had not previously considered.

Based on feedback and responses from the pilot interviews, I combined some of the questions that asked teachers about the skills that indicate preparedness for kindergarten to make them less repetitive. I also decided to specifically address the impact of early childhood education policy on entry expectations, including adding questions about policy changes and how they impact teaching methods, because both teachers mentioned changes to the kindergarten curriculum despite not being directly asked. For example, the kindergarten teacher discussed that kindergarteners need to work cooperatively more than they did in previous years because assignments now often include solving problems in a group and having students explain to others how they addressed a problem. This has required students to enter kindergarten with greater

¹¹ See Appendix E for a list of the codes used in the analysis.

communication skills and social maturity than in previous years. Likewise, the preschool teacher discussed ways in which students are not developmentally ready for what is expected of them in kindergarten. I discussed the changing nature of kindergarten and its potential impacts on kindergarten readiness expectations in my theoretical background. However, because the pilot interviews indicated that it plays a significant role in readiness, I tailored some interview questions to this topic in order to explore the relationship further. Although my primary research question was still whether differences in readiness expectations exist between kindergarten and preschool teachers, I also examined how policy changes such as standardized testing and Common Core have influenced kindergarten readiness expectations.

VII. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Eight themes emerged to inform my research questions¹². Three themes appeared to answer Research Question 1 by demonstrating how preschool and kindergarten teachers compare in their expectations for children entering kindergarten in Connecticut. Theme 1 demonstrates that preschool and kindergarten teachers both perceive social skills and language skills as important indicators of readiness. The second theme explains that kindergarten teachers believe preschool is important for the development of social skills and language skills. Theme 3 is that preschool teachers place a greater emphasis on the importance of mastering academic skills before entering kindergarten, compared to kindergarten teachers.

Research Question 2 addresses the impact that curriculum changes have had on teacher expectations and was answered in Themes 4, 5, 6, and 7, which discuss the changes to the kindergarten curriculum and the influence of those changes on kindergarten entry expectations. Theme 4 reveals that preschool and kindergarten teachers agree that kindergarten is more rigorous because of education policies. Themes 5 and 6 demonstrate mixed responses among both kindergarten and preschool teachers regarding whether the curriculum changes are developmentally appropriate, particularly when there are variations in the preschool experiences and ages of students in the classroom. Theme 7 finds that most kindergarten teachers do not think that entry expectations have changed because of public policy, whereas preschool teachers have varied opinions.

Theme 8 explores teacher opinions on the current Kindergarten Entrance Inventory and answered Research Question 3. Most preschool and kindergarten teachers agree that the KEI is an accurate indicator of kindergarten readiness.

¹² See Table 1 for a table of the results.

Theme 1: Social Skills and Language Skills Indicate Readiness

All preschool and kindergarten teachers agreed that social and emotional skills are the most important indicators of kindergarten readiness. Responses to the interview questions about the skills needed to succeed in kindergarten included social maturity, the ability to appropriately interact with peers and adults, problem solving skills, the capacity to express emotions, and the ability to follow classroom routines. Mrs. Harris, a preschool teacher, commented: “I think the big pieces are the social-emotional, being able to express themselves either emotionally or being able to work socially within a group.” Forming friendships and feeling comfortable around teachers is critical for establishing positive attitudes toward school. Additionally, social skills are important for kindergarten teachers because otherwise “you are wasting a lot of instructional time because you are dealing with behaviors and solving conflicts between students” (Mrs. Wilson). Social skills were seen by many as “guidelines for [a child’s] future in school” and are necessary because “they have to learn how to handle situations before getting into school where they are going to have tons more” (Mrs. Martin).

Language was the other developmental domain stressed by both kindergarten and preschool teachers. Communication skills, including participating appropriately in conversations, listening attentively to a teacher, and following directions were frequently mentioned as important skills for children to have developed before entering kindergarten. Mrs. Smith, a kindergarten teacher, claimed that students “have to have language development in order for social interactions and then for the academic skills.” Language development included critical skills such as the ability to “understand rules and participate appropriately in conversation and just be able to listen to someone” (Mrs. Moore). Preschool and kindergarten teachers agreed that language skills are necessary for success in kindergarten because they contribute to the

development of social skills and academic skills.

Preschool and kindergarten teachers agreed that children entering kindergarten with social and language skills are usually ready to participate in a kindergarten classroom. As Mrs. Thomas, a kindergarten teacher, observed: “Everything else will fall into place if they have the three basic skills of being able to follow a direction, follow a routine, and be able to focus on what is being taught.” Kindergarten and preschool teachers agreed that social skills, such as following a classroom routine and working cooperatively with peers, and language skills, such as participating in conversations and listening attentively to a speaker, are important indicators of kindergarten readiness. When students have developed these skills, the classroom is able to function and it is easier for teachers to teach the academic material.

Theme 2: Children Develop Social and Language Skills in Preschool

Kindergarten and preschool teachers agreed that preschool is important for the development of social skills and language skills. All kindergarten teachers commented on the role preschool plays in social and language development before children enter kindergarten.

“Preschool is for learning how to sit in a group, learning how to wait your turn, learning how to follow a routine, learning how to follow directions, learning how to manipulate tools, learning to share, learning how to play and play fairly, and interact with peers, make friends, develop conversational skills,” said Mrs.

Thomas, a kindergarten teacher.

Many kindergarten teachers mentioned that it is usually obvious which children have attended preschool based on their abilities to follow classroom routines, respond to directions, be independent, and interact with others. For instance, preschool gives children the opportunity to adjust to being away from home for extended periods of time. They “understand the structure of

a school setting more” (Mrs. Jones). Common school routines such as walking in a straight line and raising your hand are habits that must be developed. Mrs. Williams commented: “You can tell the kids who have been in preschool and not, just by the way that they interact with their peers.” Preschool teaches students that the adult’s focus will not always be on them, as well as strategies for working independently and problem solving peer conflicts. These skills are important for a child’s development and if they are not established prior to entering kindergarten, kindergarten teachers are forced to spend time instilling these behaviors rather than beginning literacy and numeracy skills.

Several kindergarten teachers stressed that it is important for children to develop social and language skills during preschool because there is not enough time to devote to them during kindergarten. As one kindergarten teacher stated:

“Being able to follow directions, sit and listen, follow routines. They are things that can’t be taught because the curriculum is so intense with Common Core. They have to have those skills before they come in. When they don’t, they really come in at a deficit because the curriculum doesn’t wait for them unfortunately” (Mrs. Thomas).

Although some kindergarten teachers disagreed on the inability to develop these skills during kindergarten, there was a consensus that kindergarten academic standards assume students enter with basic social and language skills. Children who learn these skills in preschool have easier transitions into kindergarten and are more prepared to succeed academically.

Preschool teachers also recognized their role in developing these social and language skills in their students. Many discussed their use of play to teach cooperation, sharing, and problem solving and how they focus on teaching their students to listen and to follow

instructions. Mrs. Jackson said that her students leave preschool ready to enter kindergarten because “they are able to sit. They are able to be attentive to what they are asking them. They are able to participate appropriately.” Their emphasis on these skills suggest that preschool teachers think they are important and need to be developed in preschool so that the student is able to learn the academic material in kindergarten.

Theme 3: Teachers Differ on the Importance of Academic Skills

Preschool and kindergarten teachers differed on the importance of academic skills for children entering kindergarten. Preschool teachers expected greater mastery of academic skills compared to kindergarten teachers and were more likely to name an academic skill as being essential for kindergarten readiness. For example, preschool teachers emphasized the importance of numeracy and literacy skills at kindergarten entry. Mrs. Jackson, a preschool teacher, said: “I think they need to be able to master and memorize all 26 letters, know the sounds the 26 letters make, be able to blend letters, identify numbers, and be able to count appropriately using one to one correspondence.” Although expectations varied, all preschool teachers mentioned at least one academic skill when asked what children need to master to be ready for kindergarten. A few preschool teachers also commented that the current preschool curriculum is like the old kindergarten curriculum and that the rigor of preschool academics has also increased. Specific skills discussed by preschool teachers during the interviews included counting, knowing letters, blending sounds, beginning “sight words,” and writing the letters in their name.

On the other hand, although many kindergarten teachers also mentioned beginning numeracy and literacy skills as indicators of readiness, unlike preschool teachers, they did not consider them necessary for success in kindergarten because they are “all skills that can be learned” (Mrs. Thomas). Mrs. Wilson, a kindergarten teacher, pronounced: “I always say that if

they come to me knowing no academic skills, that is perfectly fine with me.... as long as those behaviors are established, and routines and things are established, they will learn the academic material even if they came in with a blank canvas.” The general consensus among kindergarten teachers seemed to be that academic skills, such as knowing letters and sounds, make teaching easier; however, the ability to follow instructions, participate appropriately, and sit in place are the skills that are crucial for success in kindergarten. After all, “they don’t have to have all of the knowledge because that is what we are there for. We are there to teach them” (Mrs. Taylor).

Despite some of the preschool teachers explaining that their curriculum had changed to include many of the academic skills previously taught in kindergarten, most kindergarten teachers indicated that they consider themselves responsible for teaching the academic material on the KEI, largely because preschool is not universal in Connecticut and kindergarten teachers cannot assume that all students are exposed to early literacy and numeracy skills before kindergarten.

Theme 4: Education Policies Have Increased Kindergarten’s Academic Rigor

All preschool and kindergarten teachers agreed that Common Core and other education policies have raised the academic rigor of the kindergarten curriculum. “It puts a lot of pressure on the academics,” said Mrs. Jones, a kindergarten teacher. Most agreed that kindergarten has become the new first grade. Mrs. Miller recalled starting her career 23 years ago as a first grade teacher before moving to kindergarten and said “the curriculum we did in first grade 23 years ago is the curriculum we are doing in kindergarten now.” Preschool teachers also noticed “a big push as of recently” in their own curricula (Mrs. Jackson) and they “agree with kindergarten becoming the new first grade” (Mrs. Martin).

Theme 5: Opinions Vary on the Appropriateness of the New Kindergarten

There were mixed opinions among both kindergarten and preschool teachers about

whether the new curriculum and Common Core standards are reasonable for kindergarteners. A few teachers felt strongly that kindergarten is no longer appropriate because children “are not developmentally ready to do the skills they are asked to do and to sit for that long of a time” (Mrs. Lewis). Others believed that Common Core standards for kindergarten students are challenging but attainable, particularly because most Common Core standards for kindergarten expect students to need some prompting and support from teachers.

Most teachers stated that the new kindergarten curriculum is reasonable for most children, particularly those who are older and have attended an early childhood education center. “I don’t think it is expecting them to know too much at all,” said Mrs. Moore, a kindergarten teacher. “But the ones that haven’t had the preschool experience and my young ones are the ones that struggle the most.” Mrs. Williams, another kindergarten teacher, said the curriculum is reasonable but “it is just hard because preschool isn’t mandatory.” The observation from teachers that children who attend a preschool program are better able to handle the kindergarten curriculum is not surprising given the other results of this study. Children in preschool programs are usually exposed to classroom routines, teacher instruction, and important beginning language and social skills, better preparing them for the academic nature of kindergarten.

Theme 6: Curriculum Would Be More Reasonable if Entrance Age Changed

Several kindergarten teachers who said that the Common Core curriculum is reasonable for most students also emphasized that the entry-age requirement policy in Connecticut contributes to the new kindergarten curriculum being developmentally inappropriate for some children. Current legislation requires public school kindergartens in Connecticut to be open to children who turn five years old on or before January 1st of that school year. This is the latest entry date in the country and creates classrooms with a large age range. “I do think [the

curriculum] would be more reasonable if our age policy were different because most five-year olds are able to attain the skills; four-year olds...not all of them are,” said Mrs. Miller. A few teachers questioned whether four-year olds are physically and emotionally mature enough for the demands of kindergarten. “I think the academics right now are, in my opinion, not always developmentally appropriate, especially when you have four-year olds. They just can’t attend that long,” said Mrs. Johnson, a kindergarten teacher. “[The age policy] results in many kindergarteners being retained because they “are just young and not mature enough,” claimed Mrs. Smith, a kindergarten teacher. Children fall behind academically because they are not developmentally capable of participating in the classroom.

The large age gap within classrooms is also a problem. Mrs. Miller, a kindergarten teacher, said that she has six children in her class that were four when school started, along with six year olds who “had been held back a year, so there is this hug gap because of the entrance age.” This is not only difficult for the teacher and the younger students, but it also can hinder the education of the older students. Mrs. Moore, another kindergarten teacher, believed that changing the age requirement to September 1st would help her older students to “succeed so much more because they were already ready to do stuff that we didn’t get to until November because those four-year olds weren’t ready.”

Theme 7: Views on Whether Entrance Expectations Have Changed Differ

Preschool and kindergarten teachers differed on whether kindergarten entrance expectations have changed because of the increasingly academic nature of kindergarten. Most kindergarten teachers indicated that their expectations have not changed, despite the more rigorous curriculum. Many expressed very low expectations for children entering kindergarten. As Mrs. Smith, a kindergarten teacher, said, “We take them as they come, you know? If they are

eligible in the state, they come.” It is difficult to raise expectations when children have different backgrounds, with different levels of exposure to academic skills. Because the skills needed at kindergarten entry have not changed with the new kindergarten curriculum, kindergarten teachers now have to cover more material than in previous years. “The gap for us to fill in is greater,” said Mrs. Johnson, a kindergarten teacher who did not think that kindergarten entrance expectations have changed.

Some kindergarten teachers stated that, because the expectations have not changed, the increasing rigor of kindergarten academics makes it more important that children arrive with the expected social and language skills. Mrs. Jones said that kindergarten entry expectations have not changed but “if they don’t come in with some of those skills that we think are necessary, then we have a lot more work to do.” Another kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Brown, emphasized the struggles that children encounter if they enter kindergarten without the basic skills, saying: “It is almost like they come in with a deficit, you know? It is almost they have to play catch-up, if they don’t have or didn’t get the foundation or didn’t go to preschool... they make gains but it’s a lot for them to try to meet up with someone who has had years of preschool...you can see a difference.” Many kindergarten teachers stated that the increasing rigor of kindergarten academics do not “necessarily have to affect kindergarten entrance expectations, but I think the general perception is that they do” (Mrs. Wilson). Kindergarten teachers also indicated that there is uncertainty, especially among parents, about what children need to know before coming to kindergarten. This leads to a divide within the classroom where “you get the kids that know everything already or the kids that have no idea,” said Mrs. Williams, a kindergarten teacher.

Preschool teachers varied when asked whether kindergarten entry expectations have changed. Overall, preschool teachers were more likely to say that the changing kindergarten

curriculum has raised expectations for kindergarten entry. “We are always constantly changing what we are learning, what we are teaching them which is great because we expect a lot more from the children,” claimed Mrs. Garcia. The variability in their responses indicates that there is uncertainty among preschool teachers about what children are expected to know when they enter kindergarten.

Theme 8: The KEI is an Accurate Assessment of Readiness

All of the teachers agreed that the skills and behaviors included on Connecticut’s current Kindergarten Entrance Inventory (KEI) are accurate indicators of kindergarten readiness. Mrs. Miller, a kindergarten teacher said that the KEI “has most of the big skills that you would expect: literacy, numeracy, physical, communication.” Most teachers had some skills from the KEI that they viewed as more important than others but there were not any that stood out as not belonging on the test. Some teachers added that there should be a few more indicators of social readiness but that overall “it is an accurate assessment of beginning skills” (Mrs. Taylor).

Even though they said that the skills included in the KEI are accurate indicators of readiness, a few teachers questioned whether the measure is useful for educators. Mrs. Miller, a kindergarten teacher, commented: “the kindergarten teachers that I have worked with... this doesn’t provide us any information that is useful for instruction at all. It is a requirement that we do for the state.” Mrs. Jones, another kindergarten teacher, mentioned that when children meet the age-requirement of the state, they are eligible to attend kindergarten despite their results on the KEI. “There are certain parents that are mindful [of the KEI] and give the child an extra year of preschool. That is wonderful if you can afford to do that.”

Mrs. Miller attended a conference that discussed Connecticut’s plan to implement a new Kindergarten Entrance Assessment. She was hopeful it would be developed into a more useful

tool for teachers because “it was adaptive to the kids’ skills so it sounded like you were going to get more individual information rather than us ordering subjectively on the scale. So it sounded like it might actually give us some information rather than us just providing the information to somebody else.”

VIII. CONCLUSION

Connecticut has attempted to address educational disparities with improvements to early childhood education by increasing funding for high-quality preschools, mandating that children attend kindergarten, and working to develop an improved Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA). This study compares the kindergarten readiness expectations of kindergarten teachers and preschool teachers in Connecticut, analyzes teacher perspectives on the influence that education policies, such as Common Core, have had on the skills students need to develop to be prepared for kindergarten, and examines teacher opinions on the current KEI.

Comparison of Teacher Expectations

My hypothesis that kindergarten and preschool teachers differ in readiness expectations was supported for certain skills. Kindergarten and preschool teachers disagreed on the importance of developing academic skills before entering kindergarten. Most kindergarten teachers indicated that, although academic knowledge benefits students, it is not necessary for success in kindergarten because it is taught during the kindergarten school year. Kindergarten teachers emphasized that they can teach academic skills, such as matching letters to sounds and counting with one-to-one correspondence, as long as children have social skills and language skills including interacting appropriately with peers and adults, following classroom routines, and listening to instructions. Preschool teachers on the other hand, were more likely to mention an academic skill as being important for kindergarten readiness. They also commonly discussed academic skills when asked about the strengths of their students, indicating that they are emphasized in the classroom.

In contrast to diverging views on academic skills, both kindergarten and preschool teachers emphasized the importance of social skills and language skills. Almost all teachers

indicated that these are the most important developmental domains for success in school. Preschool and kindergarten teachers also agreed on the important role preschool plays in the development of social skills and language skills.

After examining these results, I recommend that the Connecticut Department of Education, as well as individual school districts and preschool programs, reassess the curricula of preschools to ensure that children are being given the opportunity to develop the social skills and language skills needed for a successful transition into kindergarten. Connecticut should continue to invest in developing, and expanding access to, high-quality preschools, as well as ensure that preschool teachers have the resources and training necessary to help students develop social skills and language skills. These resources and training should emphasize new instructional methods that allow teachers to convey beginning academic skills to their students, such as learning how to count or how to write letters, while simultaneously developing language and social skills.

Connecticut education officials and school administrators should also open communication between preschool and kindergarten teachers through workshops and conferences so that the expectations of kindergarten teachers are clear to preschool teachers. Preschool teachers could use these meetings as an opportunity to receive feedback on the success of their lessons while kindergarten teachers could gain a better understanding of the preschool's curriculum.

Impact of the Changing Nature of Kindergarten on Readiness

I hypothesized that the expectations of teachers have changed as a result of education policies that have raised the academic standards in kindergarten. The evidence did not substantiate this hypothesis for kindergarten teachers and the responses from preschool teachers

were inconclusive. Both kindergarten and preschool teachers agreed that academic rigor in kindergarten has increased because of policies like Common Core. However most of the kindergarten teachers did not think that the new academic standards in kindergarten have resulted in raised entry expectations. They indicated that they do not have many expectations for children entering kindergarten because they know that students come from a variety of backgrounds and are not all exposed to academic material. Instead kindergarten teachers said that they are responsible for teaching the additional material during kindergarten. Because teachers cannot assume that students are entering kindergarten with more knowledge than in previous years, kindergarten teachers feel pressure to cover more content in order to meet the end-of-the-year standards.

Preschool teachers disagreed among themselves regarding whether kindergarten entry expectations have increased. Some said that children now need to master more academic skills in order to avoid entering kindergarten behind their peers. Other preschool teachers indicated that they do not think expectations have changed and, because they teach more than kindergarten teachers expect, their students are entering kindergarten ahead of their classmates. The disconnect between some preschool teachers and the kindergarten teachers, as well as the variability in the responses of preschool teachers, suggests that some preschool teachers are uncertain about what kindergarten teachers expect students to know when they enter kindergarten.

Responses to questions about the academic rigor of kindergarten also revealed trends that I had not considered. Many teachers indicated that they think the increased standards are appropriate for students who attended preschool and for older kindergarteners. Because both kindergarten and preschool teachers emphasized the role of preschool in helping children

develop social and language skills, which both sets of teachers indicated are the most important developmental domains, it is not surprising that children who attend early childhood education programs are more prepared for kindergarten's rigorous curriculum.

However, I did not anticipate that teachers would critique Connecticut's entry-age policy. Teachers expressed concerns that, although the curriculum is appropriate for the five and six-year olds in the class, younger students struggle because they lack maturity, the ability to sit for extended periods of time, and other developmental indicators of readiness. It is difficult for kindergarten teachers to plan lessons when their classes contain age ranges from four-years old to six-years old, particularly because the developmental differences at this age are extreme. When lessons are not developmentally appropriate for all students, younger students can fall behind, become frustrated, and learn to dislike school. Older students are also negatively impacted because they might be ready for more advanced material but are restricted by the knowledge of the younger students. Many teachers believed that changing the cutoff date so more students enter kindergarten when they are five years old would increase the number of students entering kindergarten prepared to learn.

Based on these findings, a sensible policy proposal for Connecticut is to adjust the kindergarten birthdate cutoff in order to reduce the age gaps within the classroom. Connecticut's January 1st age cutoff for kindergarten is the latest cutoff date in the United States and creates significant age gaps. Moving the enrollment cutoff to September 1st would guarantee that children are at least five-years old when they start kindergarten. This would be a significant improvement for students because, according to kindergarten teachers, the kindergarten curriculum is developmentally appropriate for most five-year olds but not necessarily for most four-year olds.

Changing the age policy would require public and private preschools to expand the number of spaces in their programs to include the children who become ineligible to enroll in kindergarten without taking away opportunities for the three and four year olds who currently benefit from preschool. Parents should not be financially impacted, despite needing to enroll their child in an extra year of preschool. To address this problem, Connecticut should increase funding to public school districts to help them establish high-quality pre-kindergarten programs that are available to all children within the school district who want to attend. This provides an alternative to kindergarten without placing an additional financial burden on families, while also allowing young students to have an extra year in preschool to prepare socially, emotionally, and academically for kindergarten.

Evaluation of the Kindergarten Entrance Inventory

My final hypothesis was that teachers would not consider the KEI to be an appropriate measure of kindergarten readiness. This hypothesis was also false. Most teachers said that the major indicators of kindergarten readiness are included on the assessment. Although a few teachers mentioned categories that could be expanded, such as the social-emotional domain, or specific skills that they did not consider important, overall they agreed that the KEI provides a general understanding of a child's preparedness for kindergarten.

Despite agreeing with the skills included on the KEI, some indicated that the metric does not provide kindergarten teachers with information that is useful for instruction; instead they complete the assessment because it is a requirement for the state. Other teachers reminded me that public schools in Connecticut are not allowed to deny entrance into kindergarten regardless of the results on the KEI. Therefore, it seems important to ensure that the new assessment tool includes similar skills to the KEI, but is conducted in a manner that benefits teachers and allows

for individualized assessments. Teachers should be able to use the assessment to inform their lesson plans and methods of instruction to help student in areas where they are behind.

The Connecticut Department of Education should continue to develop the new KEA. Because teachers indicated that the skills included on the KEI are appropriate measures of readiness, the KEA should contain similar skills and developmental domains as the KEI. It should be a comprehensive method of examining a child's preparedness for kindergarten and should include multiple methods of assessment that result in a more substantial understanding of a child's mastery of a skill. This will provide meaningful data to teachers about specific ways that students struggle so that the KEA can be used for instructional planning in addition to providing statewide data.

Limitations

My sample for this research was heavily influenced by the responses of school district administrators, directors, and teachers, resulting in selection bias. Because the interviews were voluntary, it is possible that the schools, and the teachers within each school, that responded to my interview requests had strong opinions about readiness expectations, recent education policy, or the KEI that might not be shared by those who chose not participate. Additionally, time constraints limited my ability to interview a larger number of teachers. Small sample sizes make it difficult to determine whether differences exist because of real differences or whether they are a result of the types of teachers that responded to my interview requests. Because my sampling methods did not produce a random sample, and because the sample size was small, my results cannot be generalized to all teachers in Connecticut.

Further Research

Implementing this study with a larger sample of preschool and kindergarten teachers

would increase its potential impact. My model of research could be expanded to a larger sample of teachers and could be translated to other states. Although school curricula vary between states, education policies have likely increased the academic rigor of kindergarten nationwide and the readiness expectations of teachers could be consistent across state lines. These additional studies would improve the reliability and validity of my results and could be used to improve preschool curricula throughout the country.

My results also indicate a need for more research on how to make kindergarten assessments useful to teachers. Connecticut's new KEA is supposed to include multiple methods of assessment compared to the KEI ranking system. This should create a more informative and accurate account of how prepared a child is for kindergarten, as well as give teachers an opportunity to measure the child's progress throughout the year. Further research should be conducted on teacher reactions to the new KEA to ensure the assessment tool is meeting their needs. Teachers also need to be included in the development and design of the KEA.

Finally, further research is needed to determine why readiness gaps persist in Connecticut despite improvements to early childhood education. The alignment of readiness expectations between kindergarten and preschool teachers, the impact of raising standards in kindergarten, and the accuracy of the readiness assessment should all be explored in more detail to further assess their impact on readiness. One way of doing this is to analyze the changes that occur after the implementation of my policy proposals. There are many other possible explanations that were not included in this research study including race, income, and parental levels of education that should also be studied to answer the question of why readiness gaps occur.

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X. TABLE

Table 1: Results

<u>Questions</u>	<u>Theme</u>	<u>Interview Questions Used to Inform the Theme</u>
Do preschool and kindergarten teachers differ in their readiness expectations for children entering kindergarten in Connecticut?	Preschool and kindergarten teachers said social and language skills indicate kindergarten readiness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does kindergarten readiness mean to you? • Which skills are most important for children to have mastered before entering kindergarten? • What skills are least important? • What are some of the greatest strengths your students have when they leave preschool?
	Preschool and kindergarten teachers agree that children develop social and language skills in preschool.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What skills do you believe are gained during preschool? • If there were a skill you would want preschool teachers to emphasize, what would it be? • What are some of the greatest strengths your students have when they leave preschool?
	Preschool teachers value academic skills as indicators of readiness more so than kindergarten teachers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which skills are most important for children to have mastered before entering kindergarten? • What skills are least important?
Have the kindergarten readiness expectations of teachers changed as a result of the increasingly academic nature of kindergarten?	Preschool and kindergarten teachers agree that education policies have increased the academic rigor of the kindergarten curriculum.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have early childhood education policies affected your teaching?
	Teacher opinions on the whether the new kindergarten was appropriate varied.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have early childhood education policies affected your teaching? • Do you think the changing

		<p>expectations at kindergarten entry are reasonable?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you think young children learn best and how do you incorporate that into your classroom?
	<p>Kindergarten teachers agree that Connecticut's age requirement for kindergarten eligibility contributes to the curriculum being unreasonable for some students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think that education polies have impacted kindergarten readiness expectations? • Do you think the changing expectations at kindergarten entry are reasonable?
	<p>Kindergarten teachers do not think kindergarten entrance expectations have changed; preschool teachers vary.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think that education polies have impacted kindergarten readiness expectations? • Do you think the changing expectations at kindergarten entry are reasonable?
<p>Do teachers believe that the current KEI is an accurate indicator of kindergarten readiness?</p>	<p>All teachers viewed the KEI as an accurate method of assessing readiness for kindergarten.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on Connecticut's current KEI, are there any readiness indicators that are missing and/or indicators that are currently used but are not as important for a child's academic success?

XI. APPENDICES

Appendix A: Connecticut Performance on the Kindergarten Entrance Inventory

<u>Domain</u>	2012 KEI Results: Percent of Children that...					
	Need substantial instructional support		Inconsistently demonstrate skills		Consistently demonstrate skills	
	13 High Need Districts	Statewide	13 High Need Districts	Statewide	13 High Need Districts	Statewide
Language	29%	22%	43%	40%	28%	38%
Literacy	29%	22%	42%	39%	29%	38%
Numeracy	27%	19%	44%	41%	29%	40%
Physical/Motor	13%	10%	44%	40%	42%	50%
Creative/Aesthetic	14%	11%	46%	40%	40%	50%
Personal/Social	21%	16%	45%	42%	34%	42%

Malloy, D. & Jones-Taylor, M. (2013). Early Learning Challenge. *Connecticut Race to the Top Application for Initial Funding*

*The high-need districts include Bridgeport, Danbury, East Hartford, Hartford, Meriden, New Britain, New Haven, New London, Norwalk, Norwich, Stamford, Waterbury, and Windham.

Appendix B: CT Kindergarten Entrance Inventory

Fall Kindergarten Entrance Inventory

The following Performance Level (PL) Literals describe the characteristics of a typical student at each performance level. These will be used to rate each student on each of the six domains.

Performance Level 1: Students at this level demonstrate emerging skills in the specified domain and require a large degree of instructional support.

Performance Level 2: Students at this level inconsistently demonstrate the skills in the specified domain and require some instructional support.

Performance Level 3: Students at this level consistently demonstrate the skills in the specified domain and require minimal instructional support.

Directions: The indicators listed below each domain are examples of the skills a student should be able to demonstrate at the beginning of the kindergarten year; however, these are not the only skills to be considered. Rate each student in your class on each of the six domains. Use the Performance Levels (PL) above and all available and pertinent information when rating a student.

Domain:	At what level does the student:
Language Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Participate in conversations• Retell information from a story read to him/her• Follow simple two-step verbal directions• Speak using sentences of at least 5 words• Communicate feelings and needs• Listen attentively to a speaker
Literacy Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hold a book and turn pages from front to back• Understand that print conveys meaning• Explore books independently• Recognize printed letters, especially in their name and familiar printed words• Match/connect letters and sounds• Identify some initial sounds• Demonstrate emergent writing
Numeracy Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Count to 10• Demonstrate one-to-one correspondence while counting (e.g., touches objects as he/she counts)• Measure objects using a variety of everyday items• Identify simple shapes such as circles, squares, rectangles, and triangles• Identify patterns• Sort and group objects by size, shape, function (use), or

	<p>other attributes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the sequence of events (e.g. before, after, yesterday, today, or tomorrow)
Physical/Motor Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Run, jump, or balance • Kick or throw a ball, climb stairs, or dance • Write or draw using writing instruments (e.g., markers, chalk, pencils, etc.) • Perform tasks, such as completing puzzles, stringing beads, or cutting with scissors
Creative/Aesthetic Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw, paint, sculpt, or build to represent experiences • Participate in pretend play • Enjoy or participate in musical experiences (e.g., singing, clapping, drumming, or dancing)
Personal/Social Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in self-selected activities • Interact with peers to play or work cooperatively • Use words to express own feelings or to identify conflicts • Seek peer or adult help to resolve a conflict • Follow classroom routines

Connecticut State Department of Education. (2007). *Fall Kindergarten Entrance Inventory*. Hartford, CT

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Interview Questions for Kindergarten Teachers

1. What does kindergarten readiness mean to you?
2. What skills are most important for children to have mastered before entering kindergarten?
3. What skills are least important for children to have mastered before entering kindergarten?
4. What skills do you believe are gained during preschool?
5. If there were a skill you would want preschool teachers to emphasize, what would it be?
6. How have early childhood education policies affected your teaching practices?
7. Do you think they have impacted kindergarten entry expectations?
8. Do you think the changing expectations at kindergarten entry are reasonable?
9. How do you think young children learn best, and how do you incorporate that philosophy into your classroom?
10. Based on Connecticut's current KEI, are there any readiness indicators that are missing and/or indicators that are currently used but are not as important for a child's academic success?

Interview Questions for Preschool Teachers

1. What does kindergarten readiness mean to you?
2. What skills are most important for children to have mastered before entering kindergarten?
3. What skills are least important for children to have mastered before entering kindergarten?
4. What are some of the greatest strengths that your students have when they leave your school to enter kindergarten? What areas do you feel that, collectively, they struggle with the most?
5. How have early childhood education policies affected your teaching practices?
6. Do you think they have impacted kindergarten readiness expectations?
7. Do you think the changing expectations at kindergarten entry are reasonable?
8. How do you think young children learn best, and how do you incorporate that philosophy into your classroom?
9. Based on Connecticut's current KEI, are there any readiness indicators that are missing and/or indicators that are currently used but are not as important for a child's academic success?

Appendix D: Teacher Pseudonyms

<u>Kindergarten Teachers</u>	<u>Preschool Teachers</u>
Mrs. Smith	Mrs. Jackson
Mrs. Johnson	Mrs. White
Mrs. Williams	Mrs. Harris
Mrs. Jones	Mrs. Martin
Mrs. Brown	Mrs. Garcia
Mrs. Davis	Mrs. Lewis
Mrs. Miller	Mrs. Clark
Mrs. Wilson	Mrs. Lee
Mrs. Moore	
Mrs. Taylor	
Mrs. Thomas	

Appendix E: Strategy for Coding Interview Data

<u>Final Codes</u>	<u>Meaning</u>	<u>Examples</u>	<u>Initial Codes</u>
Age Policy	When teachers discuss the age requirement at kindergarten entry or some children not being ready for the academic material because of their age. Used to inform research Question #2.	<p>“It would be more reasonable if our age policy were different because most 5-year olds are able to attain the skills”</p> <p>“The academics right now is, in my opinion, not always developmentally appropriate, especially when you have four year olds.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrance age • Developmentally inappropriate for age
Changing Expectations	Used to indicate when teachers discussed whether kindergarten readiness expectations have changed because of public policy. Informs Research Question #2.	<p>“What I notice actually is that when they go to kindergarten, they start on a pretty basic level. I don’t think that has changed”</p> <p>“I think the general perception is yes, they have really upped the standards, they need to know so much going into kindergarten in order to meet the standards”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy changes readiness expectations • Students need to know more • Readiness expectations have not changed
Current KEI	Used to describe teacher responses to the current KEI, including whether there are skills missing or that should be removed. Used to inform Research Question #3.	<p>“It is an accurate assessment of beginning skills”</p> <p>“I would think more personal social things should be put on there.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits of current KEI • Changes needed to KEI • Teacher support of KEI
Gained in Preschool	Kindergarten teachers talking about the importance of preschool and/or the skills children gain in preschool. Used to inform Research Question #1.	<p>“The number one thing gained in preschool is just the social skills and then school routines.”</p> <p>“When they go to preschool, is they understand the structure of a school setting more, a school day.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits of preschool • Skills developed in preschool • Role of preschool teachers in kindergarten readiness
Language Skills	Used to describe communicate skills, including oral skills, listening skills, and	<p>“They have to have language development in order for those social interactions”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in conversation • Retell information from a story

	comprehension skills. Primarily used to inform Research Question #1	<p>“That oral language piece is a very large piece of kindergarten readiness”</p> <p>“Following directions, simple directions”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow simple directions • Speak using sentences • Communicate feelings and needs • Listen attentively to a speaker
Learn Best	How do teachers think young children learn best and how do they incorporate into the classroom. Informs Research Questions #1 and #2.	<p>“And I think through repetition, lots of visual support especially, well repetition is big. “</p> <p>“They like to be creative. They like to make things. So hands-on is very important to them”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hands-on • Play • Worksheets • Kinesthetic activities • Cooperative work
Literacy Skills	Describes beginning reading and writing skills that teachers think are important. Used to inform Research Question #1.	<p>“I like them to know what letters are. They may not know what every letter is but to know letters and I especially like when they know how to write their name and how to identify the letters in their name.”</p> <p>“How to do those pre-reading skills of looking at a picture and telling a story on your own and making up a story.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold a book and turn pages from the front to the back • Understand print has meaning • Explore books • Recognize letters • Match letters and sounds • Identify sounds • Beginning writing
Motor Skills	Used to determine whether teachers think fine motor, gross motor, and other physical skills are important for kindergarten. Used to inform Research Question #1.	<p>“Fine motor. They need to know how to hold their pencils. Once they are in kindergarten there is going to be a lot more writing umm so fine motor is a big one. Gross motor, they need to be able to control their bodies, is another huge one”.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fine Motor • Gross Motor • Running, jumping, balancing, etc. • Climbing stairs, kicking balls, etc. • Using writing instruments • Performing tasks with scissors, beads, etc.
New Kindergarten Reasonable?	Do teachers think that the changes to kindergarten are developmentally appropriate and reasonable for students? Used to inform Research Question #2.	<p>“I think the academics right now is, in my opinion, not always developmentally appropriate, especially when you have four year olds. They just can’t attend that long.”</p> <p>“Most kindergarteners are capable of rising to the Common Core State</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First grade curriculum for kindergarten • Students cannot attend for long periods • Not reasonable for some students • Not developmentally appropriate • Reasonable for

		Standards but not all of them are there”	kindergarten students
Numeracy Skills	Describes beginning numeracy and math skills as important for beginning kindergarten. Used to inform Research Question #1.	<p>“Identify numbers, be able to count appropriately using one to one correspondence”</p> <p>“They should be able to count to 20 and count to 10 with 1 to 1 correspondence.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counting • One-to-one correspondence while counting • Measuring • Shapes • Sorting and patterns • Sequences of events
Policies affecting teaching	Describes if public policies like Common Core have changed the way they teach. Used to inform Research Question #2.	<p>“There is not a lot of room for creativity. Most of the curriculum is scripted and because of the influx of testing and meeting benchmarks to the curriculum.”</p> <p>“There are so many resources too and PD stuff and if everyone follows the Common Core”</p> <p>“It doesn’t hinder anything that we are doing, it just helps to mold our curriculum in a way that is more beneficial to the children.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing teaching methods • Resources to teachers • Less flexibility • More pressure on academics • Clearer guidelines
Preschools Should Emphasize	Kindergarten teachers talking about which skills preschools should focus on. Used to inform Research Question #1 because it indicates which skills kindergarten teachers think are most important.	<p>“I would say teaching them to be independent and assertive. Problem solving always tends to be a problem.”</p> <p>“If they stressed more on letters and numbers it would make it a little easier for us because here we have to just in right away to reading so it makes it hard.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preschools should teach _____ • Students lack a skill despite going to preschool • Preschool is important for learning _____ skills
Skills Kids Don’t Need	Used to indicate skills that preschool or kindergarten teachers have said are less important for kindergarten	“They don’t have to have the sounds associated. I mean if they have it, great but they don’t have to have their sounds. They don’t have to know all of their shapes, they don’t have to be able to be good printers,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not an indicator of kindergarten readiness • Not as necessary as other skills • Taught in kindergarten not preschool

	readiness. Helps to inform Research Question #1.	and they don't have to be able to be great cutters. That is all skills that can be learned."	
Social Skills	Used to describe skills needed to communicate and interact with others. Primarily used to inform Research Question #1.	<p>"Being able to express themselves either emotionally or being able to work socially within a group"</p> <p>"Asking for help when needed"</p> <p>"Being able to play cooperatively with their peers"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in activities independently • Interact with peers • Express feelings and identify conflicts using words • Seek peer or adult help to resolve conflicts • Follow classroom routines
Strengths of Preschool	Describes what preschool teachers believe are the greatest strengths of their students. Used to inform Research Question #1 because it indicates which skills they emphasize and think are most important.	<p>"I think their social skills are top notch; I think their academics for the most part are top"</p> <p>"They all have their own different, unique strengths that they bring, not one of them is the same, but all of them have their letter skills and things like that which is remarkable."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greatest strengths • Reasons they are prepared for kindergarten • Skills preschool teachers emphasize the most