



# Ready, Set, Grow: Exploring the Readiness and Preparation of Kindergarten Students within a Title 1 School

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## Introduction

While kindergarten is typically thought of as the beginning of a child's formalized schooling, today's students frequently attend some form of learning environment prior to the start of kindergarten. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (2016), approximately 60% of Georgia's four-year-olds are enrolled in public preschools within the state. In addition, over 24,000 children, ages three and four, received funded services in Head Start programs within the state of Georgia in 2018 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018), and many other pre-kindergarteners attend private or public child care facilities. Research constantly confirms that children who enter school with a strong foundation in language development are more equipped to read, while those who enter school with limited language skills are more likely to fall behind in academic achievements (Wasik & Hindman, 2018). Young children who live in poverty are more likely to show deficiencies in critical language skills. Recent statistics show that 34% of all students entering kindergarten are lacking in basic understandings of phonological concepts, thus negatively impacting their abilities to read in later years (Kena et al., 2016; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007). Lottery-funded Pre-K, Head Start, and the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) subsidize child care expenses for many low-income families, allowing young children living in poverty to become better prepared and more equipped for the rigors of elementary, middle, and high school (Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, 2016).

Social and emotional developmental factors are also critical the education of young children. For preschoolers, the acquisition of language allows for self-advancement and greater understandings of others; however, children living in low-income

## Abstract

This article discusses a research study conducted to evaluate whether young students' educational experiences prior to entering kindergarten affects their accomplishments within the content of English language arts and social development. Data from the Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS) and Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) were analyzed in one high-poverty elementary school over the course of a full academic year. Learning more about students' early literacy and development can allow teachers to have a much greater understanding of their students' needs. This, in turn, can benefit all students as they begin their formal educational experiences and as they learn and grow socially, emotionally, and cognitively.

households are more likely to have deficiencies in social, emotional, and linguistic fundamentals (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2013). Economic insecurity and a lack of early literacy skills are both indicators of low social development in children (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2013). Therefore, providing students from low socioeconomic backgrounds opportunities to become engaged in structured social environments prior to kindergarten can enhance cognitive, social, and emotional development. Young children engaged in organized learning environments have occasions to learn social skills through the observation and imitation of educators and peers, and such modeling can enhance necessary foundational understandings (Ormrod, Anderman, & Anderman, 2017).

### **A Review of the Literature**

Basic language and emergent literacy skills are paramount to a child's development and growth. Without such skills, a child is more likely to struggle in language arts and in a wider variety of subject areas as they move into older grades, as early literacy is a critical indicator of success in later grades (Mullis, Mullis, Cornille, Ritchson, & Sullender, 2004). We often fail to appreciate the procedures necessary for student progression, especially in an area as multifaceted as English language arts, and teachers are often "unaware of the challenges" that students face when learning necessary etymological skills (Barone, 2006, p. 8). This is especially true when teaching students of low socioeconomic status. Children do not come to school equipped with the same background knowledge or rudimentary skills when they enter kindergarten, and many are developmentally deficient.

The foundations of language development, especially in oral language, are developed in the first few years of a child's life (Biemiller, 2006). Further research indicates that the initial foundations of reading must be developed well before a child even enters school (Dougherty-Stahl, 2014); therefore, it is pivotal that young children are positioned in environments where literacy is paramount and social learning consistently takes place. Young children who have opportunities to learn in environments where fundamental skills are introduced are more likely to narrow the literacy gap (Barone, 2006).

As critical components of English language arts include reading, writing, listening, and speaking, beginning learners benefit from having meaningful and solid linguistic exposures. Young children, when given opportunities to continually participate in

meaningful conversations with peers and adults, are more likely to have better vocabulary, comprehension, and communication skills in later years (Hart & Risley, 1995). Providing children time to practice speech through everyday conversations is critical in both language and social development (Justice, Jiang, & Strasser, 2018). Furthermore, constant engagement in read-aloud events is a particularly effective practice for developing oral language skills in children, as this enhances both listening and speaking abilities (Straub, 2003). When made habitual, read alouds can demonstrate to young children the importance of the printed word and print concepts and can positively impact student motivation. Collaborative, text-based discussions can allow for greater text-to-self and text-to-world connections and for deeper understanding (Giroir, Romero Grimaldo, Vaughn, & Roberts, 2015).

Children of poverty often lack educational resources and are frequently unable to participate in educational experiences at home (Brophy, 2006). During the first few years of life, children develop linguistic, cognitive, social, and emotional skills at a rapid pace, and such resources and experiences are not available in impoverished home environments (Trawick-Smith, 2014; Brophy, 2006). According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (2016), children who receive early learning opportunities are less likely to repeat a grade level and are more likely to graduate from high school later on. In addition, children with early educational experiences are less likely to engage in crime and are more likely to earn more money as adults.

### **A Background of the School Environment**

This study was conducted in an inner-city, Title I elementary school. At the time of the study, the school had a PK-5th grade enrollment of 708 students. In this same academic year, 99% of students were eligible for free or reduced lunch, 97% of the student population was Black, 1% Hispanic, 1% White, and 1% Multiracial. In addition, almost one-third (30%) of students were in the school's Early Intervention Program (EIP), and 10.2% of the student population received Special Education services (The Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2019). This elementary school has been classified as low-performing; with a recent score of 55.5 on the College and Career Reading Performance Index (CCRPI), it ranks much lower than the state average. In addition, school data shows that 61% of students who took the Georgia Milestones assessment during this particular academic year scored at a "beginning" level in English language arts components, and the percentage of students scoring

at a “below basic” literacy rate is far higher than the overall state average. Only 15.1% of third graders and 36.6% of fifth graders were reading on grade level at the time of this study (The Governor’s Office of Student Achievement, 2019).

### Research Objectives

The objective of this research study was to determine if kindergarten students’ schooling experience before entering kindergarten affected their foundational understanding of English language arts concepts, learning approaches, and social and personal development. To accomplish this goal, the data from the Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS), as well as the Student Learning Objectives (SLO) data for kindergarten students were analyzed during a recent academic school year. Eighty-nine students (n=89) were enrolled in kindergarten at this high-poverty, public school setting; information was collected to determine the percentage of these students who had gone to Pre-K, Head Start, or Day Care prior to the beginning of the academic year. The list of students was coded to remove names and protect identities. Spreadsheets were used to focus on three “previous schooling” environments (Pre-K settings, Head Start settings, and Day Care settings) in order to make correlations and comparisons between prior schooling and kindergarten data.

Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS) data and each students’ individual score for the SLO assessment were examined. Because the GKIDS evaluation is a performance-based assessment aligned to the state mandated content standards, teachers are provided year-long data concerning the instructional supports needed for each individual child (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). Student learning objectives are content-specific, grade-level learning goals that are aligned to current curriculum standards. According to the Georgia Department of Education (2019), SLOs allow educators and school systems methods in which to better understand and recognize success within the classroom. It is important to note that for the sake of this research, only a few specific areas were focused upon, as the purpose was look at whether or not different schooling experiences impacted kindergarten scores.

### Research Results

#### Results of Students Who Attended Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K):

Forty-four (approximately 50%) of the eighty-nine (n=89) total kindergarten students attended Pre-K

before entering Kindergarten. Fifteen of these 44 students (approximately 34%) attended Pre-K at the same elementary school prior to being promoted to kindergarten, while the other children attended local, public Pre-K settings within the community. The average Pre-ELA Student Learning Objective (SLO) score for students who previously attended Pre-K was 33.7758861 and the Post score for ELA was 83.1727273. The following table shows the percentages of the students’ abilities, according to the collected GKIDS data. This information displays the percentage of Pre-K attendees who met or exceeded the kindergarten standards by the end of the academic year.

Kindergarten Concepts or Students: ELA	% of Students Who Met or Exceeded Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can describe the role of the author and illustrator in a text</li> <li>• Can identify the front cover, back cover, and title page</li> <li>• Recognizes and names both upper and lower case letters adequately</li> <li>• Demonstrates basic knowledge of consonants and vowels</li> </ul>	91%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognizes common types of texts</li> <li>• Actively engages in group reading activities</li> <li>• Can read commonly used high-frequency words</li> </ul>	80%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates appropriate questioning skills</li> <li>• Demonstrates ability to work independently</li> </ul>	70%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can capitalize words and can name ending punctuation</li> </ul>	61%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognizes and produces rhyming words</li> <li>• Orally produces and expands complete sentences</li> </ul>	50%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates ability to use affixes as a clue to word meanings with teacher support</li> </ul>	41%

### Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) Approaches to Learning and Personal/Social Development

GKIDS data revealed that 90% of the students who previously attended Pre-K consistently demonstrated an ability to adjust to changes in routines and environments. In addition, 80% of the former Pre-K attendees demonstrated self-confidence and were able to consistently work cooperatively with others. By comparison, the data found that less than half of the students displayed motivation and enthusiasm for learning, and only 20% demonstrated the ability to use a variety of problem solving strategies.

Kindergarten Concepts or Students: Approaches to Learning and Personal/Social Development	% of Students Who Met or Exceeded Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Constantly demonstrates an ability to adjust to changes in routines and environments</li> <li>Demonstrates respect for self and for others</li> </ul>	90%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Constantly demonstrates self-confidence</li> <li>Consistently works cooperatively with others</li> </ul>	80%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrates ability to follow age-appropriate directions</li> <li>Constantly demonstrates appropriate questioning techniques</li> <li>Seeks help when needed</li> <li>Works independently</li> </ul>	70%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrates the ability to pay attention within the age-appropriate learning environment</li> </ul>	50%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exhibits imagination in storytelling, writing, and drawing</li> </ul>	45%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Displays motivation and enthusiasm for learning</li> </ul>	40%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Displays the ability to use a variety of problem solving strategies</li> </ul>	20%

#### Results of Students Who Attended Head Start:

Twenty-three (n=23; approximately 26%) of the 89 kindergarten students attended a local Head Start

program preceding their formalized education. The average Pre-ELA Student Learning Objective (SLO) score for the students who attended Head Start prior to kindergarten was 32.933325 and the Post score for ELA was 83.2666667. Based on the data obtained from the GKIDS assessments, the following table shows the percentages of the students' abilities. This information displays the percentage of Head Start attendees who met or exceeded these kindergarten standards by the end of the academic year.

Kindergarten Concepts or Skills: ELA	% of Students Who Met or Exceeded Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can describe the role of the author and illustrator in a text</li> <li>Can identify the front cover, back cover, and title page</li> <li>Actively engages in group reading activities</li> <li>Recognizes and names both upper- and lowercase letters adequately</li> </ul>	91%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can read commonly used high-frequency words</li> <li>Recognizes and produces rhyming words</li> <li>Demonstrates basic knowledge of consonants and vowels</li> </ul>	83%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognizes common types of texts</li> <li>Demonstrates appropriate questioning skills</li> </ul>	74%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Activity engages in group reading activities</li> </ul>	60%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrates ability to use affixes as a clue to word meaning with teacher support</li> <li>Orally produces and expands complete sentences</li> <li>Can capitalize words and can name ending punctuation</li> </ul>	43%

#### Head Start Approaches to Learning and Personal/Social Development

According to the GKIDS data, 91% of the students who attended Head Start adjusted well to changes in

routines and environments, and 83% demonstrated consistent respect for others and themselves. Fifty-two percent of these kindergarteners demonstrated motivation and enthusiasm for learning throughout the school year, yet only five of these 23 students were able to use a variety of problem solving strategies in a consistent manner.

Kindergarten Concepts or Skills: Approaches to Learning and Personal/Social Development	% of Students Who Met or Exceeded Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Constantly demonstrates an ability to adjust to changes in routines and environments</li> </ul>	91%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrates respect for self and for others</li> </ul>	83%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consistently works cooperatively with others</li> </ul>	74%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consistently demonstrates self-confidence</li> <li>Demonstrates the ability to seek help when needed</li> <li>Works independently</li> <li>Demonstrates ability to follow age-appropriate directions</li> <li>Demonstrates the ability to pay attention within the age-appropriate learning environment</li> </ul>	61%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Displays motivation and enthusiasm for learning</li> <li>Exhibit imagination in storytelling, writing, and drawing</li> </ul>	52%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Displays the ability to use a variety of problem solving strategies</li> </ul>	22%

**Results of Students Who Attended Daycare:**

Twenty-one percent (n=19) of the 89 kindergarteners went to some form of daycare prior to the start of kindergarten. The average Pre-ELA Student Learning Objective (SLO) score for the students who attended daycare prior to kindergarten was 30.291675 and the Post score for ELA was 73.777889. Based on the data obtained from the GKIDS assessments, the following table shows the percentages of the students' abilities. This information displays the percentage of Daycare

attendees who met or exceeded these kindergarten standards by the end of the academic year.

Kindergarten Concepts or Students: ELA	% of Students Who Met or Exceeded Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can identify the front cover, back cover, and title page</li> </ul>	95%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognizes and names both upper- and lowercase letters adequately</li> </ul>	84%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can describe the role of the author and illustrator in a text</li> <li>Demonstrates basic knowledge of consonants and vowels</li> </ul>	63%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognizes and produces rhyming words</li> <li>Recognizes common types of texts</li> <li>Demonstrates appropriate questioning skills</li> <li>Demonstrates ability to work independently</li> </ul>	42%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can read commonly used high-frequency words</li> <li>Orally produce and expand complete sentences</li> <li>Actively engages in group reading activities</li> </ul>	32%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrates ability to use affixes as a clue to word meanings</li> </ul>	21%

**Daycare Learning and Personal/Social Development**

Fourteen of the 19 students (74%) consistently demonstrated that they were able to seek help when needed. Eight of these students (42%) effectively demonstrated the ability to work independently. While ten of the 19 students consistently followed age-appropriate directions within the classroom, only six recurrently displayed motivation and enthusiasm for learning, and merely four of the 19 students (21%) demonstrated the ability to use a variety of problem solving strategies.

Kindergarten Concepts or Skills: Approches to Learning and Personal/Social Development	% of Students Who Met or Exceeded Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Constantly demonstrates an ability to adjust to changes in routines and environments</li> </ul>	84%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Demonstrates respect for self and others</li> <li>● Seeks help when needed</li> </ul>	74%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Constantly demonstrates self-confidence</li> </ul>	63%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Demonstrates ability to follow age-appropriate directions</li> <li>● Consistently works cooperatively with others</li> </ul>	53%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Works independently</li> </ul>	42%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Exhibits imagination in storytelling, writing, and drawing</li> <li>● Displays motivation and enthusiasm for learning</li> <li>● Demonstrates the ability to pay attention within the age-appropriate learning environment</li> </ul>	32%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Displays the ability to use a variety of problem solving strategies</li> </ul>	21%

### Talking with the Kindergarten Team

While collecting data, we had the opportunity to sit down and have an open conversation with the kindergarten teachers. We wanted to hear about their classroom experience with children from different previous schooling experiences. Their comments remained anonymous in the hopes that we would receive complete honesty from each of them. We first asked, “Do you believe that it is easy to access Pre-K in this area?” They expressed their deep concerns on the difficulty of this and the many issues that occur with accessing Pre-K within the community and went on to say that many parents/caregivers desire for their children to be placed in Pre-K classes within the school but there are simply not enough spots for children. The teachers hope that the school will be able to add another Pre-K class to make students’ transition into the rigors of kindergarten easier. They were all

very passionate about this urgent need, and this brief discussion left us with an obvious understanding how desperate this community is for more access to free Pre-K education for its children.

We then asked, “Do you see a difference in the children that went to Pre-K, Head Start or Day Care?” The teachers all agreed that students who went to Pre-K before coming to their class could be spotted immediately. The previous Pre-K students were not only advanced academically, but in their self-confidence and the ability to follow the structure of a school day. It was enlightening to hear the teachers express their thoughts on the Head Start program; most felt that there is a need to improve the program so that the transition into kindergarten will be a more positive one for students. We found this to be extremely interesting, as there was not a significant difference in scores between the students who attended Pre-K and those who attended Head Start, and the ELA Post score for students who attended Head Start was even slightly higher than that of the students who attended Pre-K. The kindergarten teachers also stated that daycare programs may be more easily accessible than the other options, but that does not mean that all daycare facilities have quality curricula set in place.

### Analysis of the Collected Data

Overall, the data did not show an extremely substantial difference in success based upon the different schooling experiences prior to kindergarten. This data does show that Pre-K and Head Start students did perform higher than those who attended daycare. Both the Pre- and Post-ELA Student Learning Objective of students who attended daycare prior to kindergarten was points lower than those who attended Pre-K or Head Start. In addition, those who attended daycare had more difficulty working independently and adjusting to changes in routines that those who attended Pre-K or Head Start.

We did see some areas that few kindergarteners consistently demonstrated ability; in English language arts, most of these students, regardless of previous schooling, struggled in the use of affixes to understand word meaning, and few students were able to demonstrate mastery of problem-solving techniques. As this research progresses in the future, it is our hope to follow these students for the next three years in

order to more deeply analyze the long-term impact of pre-schooling as the students move on to higher grade levels. Because the process of assessing the GKIDS data is left more to the teachers' and administrative discretion (Georgia Department of Education, 2019), we would also like to know more about the process by which they choose to assess the standards, allowing us to better understand the system that is used.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this research was evaluate whether the type of schooling impacts students' readiness for academic success. The data show that high-quality learning environments are imperative for all students, and perhaps especially for students of poverty. Young children benefit, both cognitively and socially, from early learning environments. Students who are in such settings are able to develop a beginning sense of self and of personal initiative, as well as a greater academic foundation (Bakken, Brown, & Downing, 2017).

From this research, we learned that not all pre-kindergarten settings are exactly alike. We also determined that while students who attended Pre-K had higher skill percentages, other programs can be effective in preparing children for kindergarten. The environment itself may not be the most important factor; instead, teachers continue to be the most significant influence in a child's educational journey, and students who have passionate early-care educators who understand child development are more prepared for school (Bakken, Brown, & Downing, 2017). High-quality, effective teachers who have high expectations of students are more likely to make an impact in high-poverty schools (Barone, 2006). Whether in Pre-K, Head Start, or in a daycare environment, children learn, grow, and develop best with they have supportive caregivers who help them flourish.

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## GALA Membership Application

Fill out the form below and mail it with a check for \$20 (\$10 for students and retirees), payable to Georgia Association of Literacy Advocates. Do not send cash.

Send form to: Dr. Beth Pendergraft, 269 Sugarcreek Drive, Grovetown, GA 30813

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## GEORGIA JOURNAL OF READING CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

The Georgia Journal of Reading is a peer-reviewed journal of the Georgia Association of Literacy Advocates. The Georgia Journal of Reading is published in the fall and spring of each year and is sent to educators across Georgia and surrounding states. The Journal publishes articles that address topics, issues, and events of interest and value to teachers, specialists, and administrators involved in literacy education at all levels. We invite those interested in improving reading and language arts instruction at all levels to submit manuscripts for publication in future issues. Please view our website for more information at [www.gala.org](http://www.gala.org) Information can be found under the link "publication."

### Submission Guidelines:

Articles should deal with research, current issues, and recent trends in reading or literacy programs. Appropriate topics for the Journal include project descriptions, research or theoretical reports that address pedagogical implications or issues in reading education at the local, state or national level. Preference is given to articles focusing on topics that impact Georgia's students and surrounding states. Manuscripts should be submitted electronically in Microsoft Word, double-spaced, and the format should conform to the guidelines presented in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th Ed.).

■ Manuscripts should not exceed twenty double-spaced typed pages.

■ The author's name, full address, telephone number, email address, and school/affiliation, and a brief statement on professional experience should be submitted on a separate cover page.

■ The author's name or any reference that would enable a reviewer to know who the author is should not appear on the manuscript.

■ Manuscripts will not be sent out for peer review until this information is provided.

■ All manuscripts will undergo a blind review by at least two members of the editorial board.

■ Decisions will be made within 8-12 weeks of publication of the journal for which the submission was made. Only electronic submissions will be accepted.

Questions may be addressed to [georgialiteracyadvocates@gmail.com](mailto:georgialiteracyadvocates@gmail.com)