

**We Just Want to Do a Good Job with Them: A Multilevel Approach to
Kindergarten Readiness**

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ABSTRACT

This study reveals that there are factors at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels that influence how children are differentially prepared, which helps explain how social inequality begins to manifest before children enter school. This work represents a contribution to the literature because it pinpoints several multidimensional factors that shape children's kindergarten outcomes depending on a parent's social location. Because most of these factors extend beyond the control of parents, I argue that our policies must shift to improve the lives of all 0-5 year olds. These types of interventions are vital to the fabric of society because these children will eventually be the main contributors to our country.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The kindergarten transition marks the beginning of an educational pathway in which children can form new relationships among teachers and classmates, explore their talents and interests, and maximize their academic potential. For parents, this time in the life course can be equally sentimental being that their child will begin to understand about how to navigate the world independently. Indeed, the first day of kindergarten is monumental for the entire family because they have spent a considerable amount of effort and resources preparing their child for this major transition. The reason why families are so invested in the preparation process may be because kindergarten achievement typically indicates how well a child will do in later grades and when obtaining employment as an adult. Even though parents largely believe that it is solely their responsibility to prepare children for kindergarten, the early education literature suggests that there are many factors beyond parenting that influence this critical transition. For instance, poverty status, health, neighborhood context, child care program exposure, and much more have been proven to impact school readiness; however, there are still great strides left to be made in better understanding how children are prepared for school. Therefore, I conducted a community comparison study that answers the following research question: How do community- and family-level social advantage and disadvantage shape school readiness? We must learn more about how to improve school readiness among all children because they will eventually become the decision makers that our nation will depend on.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Are schools equalizing or not?

There is a great debate about whether or not the education system is a leveling institution, and the proponents on either side of this argument are technically correct. Reproduction theorists argue that the education system creates and perpetuates inequality by best serving those in the top echelons of society. For instance, one of the most influential qualitative studies ever done to support this idea was when Lareau (2011) demonstrated that middle-class parents tend to practice the child-rearing strategy of concerted cultivation which is disproportionately rewarded by school faculty. Concerted cultivation is an intensive approach to parenting because parents will actively develop their children's lives by pushing them to participate in several extracurricular activities, teaching them how to effectively deal with bureaucratic situations, and guiding them to challenge authority (Lareau 2011). Meanwhile, working-class and poor parents tend to execute the accomplishment of natural growth, which is a hands-off approach to parenting that equips children with a different skillset that is less valued within the school system. Lareau (2011) showed how upper- and lower-class children experience the education system unequally, which eventually translates into unequal outcomes as adults. There are several quantitative studies that frame the education system as a great "unequalizer" as well. Phillips, Crouse, and Ralph (1998) explained that black children are one-half of a standard deviation behind white children in most academic subjects during the first grade, a disparity that grows to a full standard deviation by the time these

children graduate high school. Nevertheless, there are two sides to this education controversy.

Downey, Hippel and Broh (2004) found that the entire education system does not necessarily exacerbate inequality, but rather the growing education gap is due to factors that occur outside of school. For example, they pointed out that inequality in academic achievement grows sharply during the summer months but shrinks during the academic year. Thus, they concluded that schools are in fact leveling institutions since children who are enrolled in the same school learn at relatively equal rates during the academic year than during the summer. Still, socioeconomically advantaged children typically attend better schools with more resources than do disadvantaged children, which implies that socioeconomic status (SES) largely determines unequal experiences within the education system. In addition, children begin to acquire reputations and written records as soon as they enter the school system, which could shape how they are perceived and treated by current and future faculty members (Zill 1999). When we weigh both sides of this debate, we see just how complicated this institution can be. Therefore, it is important to clarify the differences between the education system and schools as individual entities. In other words, the education system and its bureaucratic tracking processes serve as a great unequalizer; however, individual schools are typically leveling institutions since children within the same school learn roughly the same amount of information. To make matters even more complex, we must now turn our attention to how social inequalities form before children ever enter school.

How are inequalities already forming before school starts?

Mollborn, Lawrence, James-Hawkins, Fomby (2014) termed the developmental stage that occurs between the ages of 0-5 as a “black box” because relatively little is understood about the role of social disadvantage in this part of early childhood. However, these formative years play a paramount role in shaping several adulthood outcomes. Thus, it should come to no surprise that researchers are trying to crack open this “black box”. For instance, Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (2003) showed that children face unequal academic preparation prior to school entry because poor children receive lower marks during the fall semester of first grade. In fact, Christenson (1999) indicated that one third of children will fail kindergarten due to factors related to poverty, neglect, sickness, and a lack of protection. There are countless empirical studies to imply that children do in fact enter the education system on unequal footing, but there is very little research that exists to suggest how these social inequalities manifest and differentially shape the experiences of families who are preparing their children for the kindergarten transition. Entwisle and Alexander (1999) asserted that this lack of research has profound implications because it has limited our understanding about how social inequalities form, are maintained, and affect children before they are ever introduced to the education system. A multilevel approach is needed to analyze how social inequalities form before the school transition and how this process impacts parents’ attempts to prepare their children for kindergarten.

When Entwisle et al. (2003) bridged the gap between the life course perspective and the school transition, groundbreaking progress was made in the field of early

childhood education because it demonstrated how kindergarten success can serve as a major predictor of later life outcomes. However, great strides are still left to be made, which includes doing more research to better understand what happens to children before they start school (Entwisle et al. 2003). My study answers this need and even goes beyond it because I interview parents who belong to the middle- and upper social class and compare those experiences to parents from the lower- and working social classes. These interviews illustrate the unequal conditions children face before school and how these social inequalities may be proliferated prior to kindergarten entry and thereafter.

My interview guide directly prompted parents to provide a definition of school readiness, and this study could inform the current literature about how this term is perceived and shapes how parents prepare their children for kindergarten and beyond. This could be helpful because there is a lack of consensus about how to universally define school readiness, which prevents us from establishing measurements to determine when a child is ready for school. Thus, Meisels (1998) contended that researchers should collect more data from communities, parents, and schools about how they construct school readiness. In addition, understanding conceptions of school readiness could guide us to collectively refine this term so that it better caters to the needs of all students regardless of parent social location.

Yeung, Linver, and Brooks-Gunn (2002) highlighted yet another gap in the literature by recognizing that school readiness requires a “multi-pronged approach” because it is essential for healthy childhood development. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (1995) stated that early learning must be analyzed

through a multidimensional lens since school readiness is so complex and is shaped by cultural, familial, interactional, and individual contexts (NAEYC Governing Board 1995). Therefore, my study fills a gap within the literature by identifying factors at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels to describe how children are differentially prepared for kindergarten and how this may pave the way for unequal trajectories and life outcomes as adults.

Kindergarten entry as a life transition

According to the life course perspective, we experience countless transitions throughout our lifetime, and entering school may be among the most significant. Entering kindergarten is a monumental life transition because a child will fill the student role for the first time, become acquainted with the roles of faculty members and classmates, and learn to navigate a schooling system that they will deal with for years to come (Entwisle et al. 1999). Although some children may not remember every detail of this life event, social science researchers argue that this transition is critical because a successful adjustment to kindergarten could improve grade retention rates, reduce usage of special education, increase rates of college attendance, decrease delinquency, and even reduce the likelihood of relying on welfare assistance programs (Zigler, Finn-Stevenson, Linkins 1992). Despite the fact that kindergarten success can mark the beginning of an educational and occupational pathway, very little research has been done to understand how children are prepared for this transition (Entwisle and Alexander 1998). Once again, my findings fill a gap within the literature because I offer one of the first qualitative, community-comparison studies that examines which multi-level factors shape the

kindergarten preparation process. Many researchers have highlighted the exigency for a multilevel approach to better understand how parents are preparing their children for kindergarten and how this is interconnected to the creation and perpetuation of social inequality.

What is school readiness?

Some researchers dedicate their careers to characterizing the main tenets of school readiness, yet we still have not reached a consensus about whether this term implies health, academic skills, chronological age requirements, or if the phrase means something entirely different that is waiting to be discovered (LaParo and Pianta 2000). Most definitions include three main domains of school readiness: health, socioemotional skills, and academic ability. This predominant definition of school readiness may not be widespread outside academia. Thus, we see that parents from the upper-middle-class Oxford community included in my study refer to school readiness as mainly encapsulating the academic domain. Meanwhile, the lower-SES Milton sample equates school readiness with socioemotional behavior. As a result, we tend to see parents talk past each other about school readiness and how to prepare children for the transition into school. Heaviside and Farris (1993) found that even parents and teachers disagreed about the definition of this term. Teachers believed a child was ready for school when he/she: 1) was physically healthy, rested, and well-nourished; 2) could verbally communicate needs, wants, and thoughts; and 3) displayed enthusiasm and curiosity when approaching new activities. Even though only 10% of teachers agreed, more than half of parents (60%) presumed that school readiness involved knowing the entire alphabet and other

basic academic skills before kindergarten entry (Heaviside and Farris 1993). This lack of consensus poses problems for the education system because it prevents stakeholders from determining which children are ready for kindergarten. For this reason, some school districts have implemented kindergarten entry exams in effort to measure school readiness; however, the American Academy of Pediatrics has advised against this because it fails to account for variability in parenting styles, neighborhood environments, exposure to child care, and several other factors that shape school readiness (Lewit and Baker 1995). Therefore, researchers must be aware of the advantages and limitations that are attached to every definition of school readiness, especially if we wish to implement early childhood interventions that are aimed to maximize the proportion of children who are ready for school.

Meisels (1998) is the first to argue that the various definitions of school readiness can fall into four main categories: maturation/nativist, environmentalist/empiricist, social constructionist, and interactionist. Mollborn and Dennis (2012) claimed that society most often uses the maturationist/nativist frame, which deems that a student is ready when he/or she reaches a certain age and level of maturity that allows them to sit quietly, stay focused, obey teachers' authority, and interact with other students appropriately (Meisels 1998). According to this definition, there is no intervention that exists that can possibly expedite the readiness process because children become ready on their own terms (Meisels 1998). We must tread with caution when dealing with this type of definition because it could potentially exclude countless 5 year olds who cannot realistically conform to these stringent requirements 100% of the time. Another type of school

readiness is referred to as the environmentalist/empiricist perspective, which considers a child to be ready for school when he/she knows how to write her/her name, recognizes all letters and numbers, and behaves politely to students and teachers (Meisels 1998).

Finally, the last two groupings of school readiness are the social constructionist and interactionist models. In these two models, school readiness is seen as a concept that can vary over time and across space since it accounts for policy decisions, interactions among teachers and parents, genetic endowment, and social identity. These last two categories of school readiness were a major contribution to the literature because it emphasizes that a child's cognitive ability is only one of many factors that influence school readiness, and the remaining variables have been relatively unexplored (LaParo and Pianta 2000).

How parent social location shapes the kindergarten transition

Upon situating the school transition in the life course perspective, it becomes apparent that we must become familiar with how the social location of parents influences the accessibility and affordability of safe neighborhoods, high quality schools, stimulating materials and experiences, and many other factors that contribute to school readiness. In other words, a multilevel analysis is imperative to our understanding of school readiness because kindergarten outcomes can predict adult outcomes that are associated with dropping out of high school and obtaining employment (Entwisle et al. 2003). In fact, Mollborn et al. (2014) argued that kindergarten is the most significant life transition because socioeconomic status begins to threaten children with unequal education experiences, which paves the way for future education and occupational life trajectories (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber 1993). Moreover, the life course perspective

explains how advantages/disadvantages can be accumulated over time (Elder 1998: 6).

My study expands on this theory by suggesting that the accumulation effect not only occurs over time but it can also transpire when the individual, interactional, and institutional levels interact. Kindergarten entry is important; therefore, policymakers, taxpayers, school faculty, and parents must work together to ensure that this transition goes as smoothly as possible for these young people who will be responsible for maintaining and improving our way of life in this country and around the world.

What does a multi-level approach look like?

A multilevel approach is necessary for my community comparison study because it demonstrates how community- and family-level social advantage and disadvantage shape school readiness. I pinpoint specific factors at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels, then I show how a parent's social location determines whether these factors translate into advantages or disadvantages. These advantages or disadvantages will ultimately shape how ready a child is for school. The multilevel approach is significant because it demonstrates how these advantages or disadvantages accumulate as the levels interact with one another. When this happens, school readiness and its associated outcomes are affected even more than before. Thus, the parents with the highest social location will have children who are afforded with the most advantages that influence and predict positive kindergarten and adulthood outcomes. Alternatively, the parents with the lowest social location are afforded with the most disadvantages, which is likely to hinder school readiness and its associated outcomes.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Approach

As mentioned above, the purpose of this project was to explore how community- and family-level social advantage and disadvantage shape school readiness. To successfully answer this research question, qualitative data was collected by conducting 20 parent interviews in two separate communities (given the pseudonyms Milton and Oxford) located in the interior West between the months of June and October 2016. Although a large body of literature seeks to understand the widening social inequalities young children face when they enter school, it is less clear how and why social inequality begins to plague our youth before they ever enter school. Thus, qualitative data is most appropriate for this study because it allowed parents to provide in-depth explanations about the relatively unknown experiences of preparing and transitioning children into the schooling system. These sorts of detailed insights explained how processes at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels can help or hinder school readiness among children. While teachers' understandings of school readiness are important, parents were the target of this study because their social location ultimately shapes factors such as child care, school placement, social situations, academic drills, and neighborhood quality. The two communities of Milton and Oxford were chosen because they are located in the same state, yet the demographics of each community are sharply different in terms of race/ethnicity, education level, and income. The communities were also selected in part due to convenience since I have been a resident in both of these towns. By designing a comparison study in this way, I identified significant similarities

and differences between these two communities in order to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on school readiness.

Data collection

Before the study began, the project and its various components were approved by the Institutional Review Board located at my university. A broad-based recruiting system was implemented to reach out to as many segments of the population as possible.

Participants in both communities were recruited through mass emailing lists, parenting groups, posts on Facebook, Craigslist advertisements, friends' referrals, and flyers posted throughout the community (restaurants, libraries, recreation centers). The requirements that needed to be met in order to participate in this study was that every participant had to be 18 or older and had to be a parent of at least one child between the ages of 3-7. In choosing this age range, I wanted to trace the gradual process of school readiness which includes how parents approached school readiness before their child entered school, their experiences of what it was like for their child to be in kindergarten, and finally a reflection about which aspects of kindergarten went well and where there was room for improvement. This study was funded by a public university research program for undergraduates, so all participants were compensated \$20 for participating in the semi-structured interview that was recorded and lasted one hour in total. To maintain confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms, the names of the actual communities were renamed, and any potentially identifying information was omitted.

The interviews took place at the time and public location of the participant's choosing, which included coffee shops, parks, and restaurants. The interview consisted of

three parts: a consent form that each parent signed to indicate that they agreed to participate in a recorded interview; a demographics form that the participant filled out to specify their race/ethnicity, gender, education attainment, occupation, and information about the other child's parent; and a semi-structured interview. The interview guide included a variety of questions such as how parents prepared their children for kindergarten, if/what types of resources were available in the community to help children prepare for school, how parents decided on where to send their children to school, their overall opinions about the school system(s) in the community, and what their thoughts were about their children's future. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed me to go off guide as needed, particularly when parents mentioned novel factors that influenced their children's school readiness. For instance, several Milton parents discussed increasing rates of crime in their community and explained how this was connected to their child's school readiness process. This was an unexpected finding, and I probed participants on this topic beyond the interview guide.

I identify as a young white Latina who will soon be receiving a bachelor's degree in sociology, and I realize that my positionality could have potentially shaped the interview interactions. For instance, more than half of the parents asked if I had any children of my own. When I informed them that I do not have children, many of them displayed facial expressions of confusion and inquired why I am doing this type of research if I was not a parent myself. My non-parent status inclined parents to provide very detailed responses to my questions because they may have assumed that I am unfamiliar with the kindergarten preparation process. There could be potential personal

biases being that I am a local to both the Milton and the Oxford communities. While this gave me a unique insider perspective because parents were able to talk to me about community characteristics that I had a basic understanding of, I still had an outsider perspective because I am not a parent.

Analysis

Pairing the parent interviews with longitudinal observations would have been the most optimal circumstance for this study because it would have allowed me to “cross-check” what parents said against what they actually did in terms of preparing their children for kindergarten. Due to the time constraints of this study, I decided to forgo observations because the school readiness process can last years and I would not have been able to get an accurate depiction of what parents do to approach school readiness by sitting in on these families’ lives for a short period. Similarly, I suspect that a content analysis would have allowed me to cheaply and quickly collect data that would suggest that Milton and Oxford children are indeed experiencing unequal preparation processes, but the findings would have fallen short because I would have had no understanding about why these differences are manifesting. Therefore, interviews were the most appropriate method for this study because they allowed me to save time, I had in-depth discussions with parents about how they prepare their children for kindergarten, and I accurately analyzed how these differential experiences shape unequal outcomes.

After I conducted all 20 interviews, I subsequently and manually transcribed each of them verbatim. A full transcription allowed me to inductively code case by case, which resulted in hundreds of potential themes. I narrowed my selection down by first

comparing and contrasting cases to each other, then by comparing the social location of parents, and finally by comparing the two communities to each other. By this time, I was beginning to see patterns of themes that repeatedly emerged from the data, so I began to code themes based on their level of analysis (individual, interactional, and institutional). I reread all interviews once again to gain an understanding of what parents discussed and what they did not discuss, which was essential because it revealed that parents see themselves as solely responsible for preparing their children for kindergarten. I finally coded the interviews one last time to select the quotes that I would use to illustrate my key results and show how multilevel factors influence the ways children are prepared for kindergarten.

Sample Composition Demographics

Ten of the 20 parent interviews took place in the Milton community, which is considered to be largely working-class with the median family income estimated at \$43,788 (U.S. Census Bureau 2015), compared to the state's median family income estimated at \$74,826 as of 2015 (U.S. Census Bureau 2015). Furthermore, 16.9% of Milton's population that is 25 years of age or older has a bachelor's degree or higher, 49.8% is of Hispanic or Latino descent, and 25% is below the poverty level. The other focal community is Oxford, which is about two hours away from Milton yet is very different. For instance, Oxford's average median family income is \$105,034 compared to the state's average estimated at \$74,826, 72.3% of the population that is 25 and older has a bachelor's degree or higher, 8.7% is of Hispanic or Latino descent, and the poverty level is similar at 23.1% (U.S. Census Bureau 2015).

As the Milton sample suggests, this community is much more diverse and socially disadvantaged than Oxford. Due to nonrandom sampling strategies, the demographics of the samples somewhat differed from the actual demographics of the two cities. The average age in the Milton sample was 27, and three out of the ten parents were teenagers at the time the target child was born. Four out of ten Milton parents identified as White, four as Hispanic, one as African American, and one as Korean. Seven of the parents identified as female, while the other three identified as male. One parent had a bachelor's degree, six parents had a high school diploma or equivalency, and three of them did not complete high school. One Milton parent was unemployed, three were stay-at-home mothers, and the other six worked in working-class positions, such as a police officer, dishwasher, clerk, receptionist, mover, and fast-food worker.

Ten interviews were conducted in Oxford, and the average age of this sample was 38 with no participant being a teen parent at the time the target child was born. All ten participants identified as being white, which somewhat matches the overall Oxford community since 88% of its population identifies as being white. Nine out of the ten Oxford participants identified as female, and the one remaining identified as male. Six participants had obtained a master's degree, three had received a bachelor's degree, and one had earned a vocational certificate. Four out of the ten participants were stay-at-home parents, four of them occupied professional careers, and the remaining two filled working-class jobs.

Limitations

The most obvious limitation of this study is that the race and class of individuals and communities could not be disentangled, so it is possible that these two social constructions were conflated at times. The goal of this study was not to map or describe kindergarten experiences based on identity, but rather, the intention was to understand how parent social location creates advantages or disadvantages that shape school readiness. It must be pointed out that none of the parents in either sample were foreign born or spoke English as a second language, and more research should be done to better understand how this portion of the population goes about preparing their children for kindergarten. In addition, this study only consists of 20 interviews in total, and thus it is cannot be generalizable to larger population. Nevertheless, it is important to note that I reached theoretical saturation with the few interviews that I conducted. Each participant had a story with specific details, but there were overarching themes that repeatedly emerged from the interviews. These recurring themes are the six multilevel factors that I will identify and focus on for the remainder of my argument. Hopefully, future researchers can foster larger and more representative samples to expand on my findings and early education as a whole. Despite its many limitations, this community comparison study should seriously be considered because it helps further develop theory on school readiness and it serves as preliminary research that will allow academicians to gain a better understanding of how parents' social location interacts with multilevel processes that ultimately shape how children are prepared for kindergarten and beyond.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This study expands the literature on school readiness because it reveals how factors at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels can translate into advantages or disadvantages depending on parent social location. As a result, I demonstrate how these advantages or disadvantages create, perpetuate, and exacerbate social inequalities by shaping school and adulthood outcomes. For instance, the individual level portrays that parents interpret their child's school readiness as an individualized pursuit; therefore, parents take full responsibility for school outcomes regardless of whether or not they are actually tied to the parent. In addition, the individual level exposes that parents form expectations for their child's adult future, and they tailor the kindergarten readiness process according to these projected outcomes. Inequality emerges because these expectations are largely based on the parent's current social location; therefore, children will be differentially prepared for school and adulthood. Next, the interactional level suggests that a parent's ability to form meaningful relationships with other parents and teachers is typically determined by social location and the affiliated resources of time, flexible work schedules, child care arrangements, and transportation. Finally, the institutional level demonstrates that there are threats and resources embedded in communities, schools, housing, and tax policies that differentially shape school readiness depending on parent social location. When we combine these three levels, it becomes abundantly clear that some children will be afforded great school readiness advantages, while many others will be challenged to overcome severe obstacles before they even learn what a classroom looks like.

When I conducted the 20 interviews in the Milton and Oxford communities, I found that the most obvious commonality among these parents is that they all lacked a sense of systems consciousness. In other words, these parents all conveyed that it is solely their responsibility to prepare their children for kindergarten, and they almost never explicitly identified that school readiness is profoundly impacted by factors that extend beyond a parent's control. In fact, parents frequently believed that their children's school readiness was a direct reflection of whether or not they were high-quality parents. This is sociologically significant because it reveals what types of pressure society puts on parents, and this also suggests that educational inequalities are being masked by simply blaming parents for educational outcomes. However, this as a multilevel study because parents implicitly discussed factors at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels that shaped school readiness even though they explicitly perceived this preparation process as their individual responsibility. We must reject unidimensional lenses and instead examine the various social structures that continue to perpetuate inequality among child before they enter school. Furthermore, a multilevel approach helps us understand that parents are not the only stakeholders responsible for school readiness, but rather policy makers, taxpayers, school officials, and all other community members must be held accountable for ensuring a successful transition among our youth since we will all eventually depend on them to run this society. If we wish to have competent society leaders in the future, then we must provide them with the fundamental foundation of education beginning in early childhood.

Individual Level

Neoliberalism/Individualism

This study was designed to better understand the differences between how Milton and Oxford parents prepared their children for kindergarten, but it was also constructed to capture and recognize the commonalities that the parents in these two communities share. As described above, among the most striking similarities was the overwhelming individualism all 20 parents conveyed when it came to preparing their children for kindergarten. Putnam (2000) suggested that our sense of group belonging is rapidly declining since fewer people are voluntarily joining organization such as Parent-Teacher Associations, The League of Women Voters, and club sports teams, and much more. As a result, he argued that Americans are feeling increasingly alone when embarking on daunting tasks which includes when parents prepare their children for kindergarten and beyond. In fact, all of the interviewed parents interpreted the school readiness process as solely their responsibility, which led them to believe that their child's level of school adjustment was a direct reflection on their parenting quality. Therefore, this lack of systems consciousness depicted by parents, policymakers, schools, and many others must be addressed if we wish to better understand the social inequalities that are associated with school readiness.

In the parent interviews, parents discussed the highlights and lowlights regarding their child's level of preparedness. For instance, parents expressed a great sense of pride when they told me that their child knew the ABC's and 123's because the parent's hard work of preparing them seemed to be paying off. We see this is the case with Milton

mother Anna when she explained how she approached kindergarten readiness with her son:

Anna: I have been working with him a lot, and I see improvement in his writing every day. We sit down at night and we do his “homework,” or that’s what we call it. He has a little book that we write in and date, so I can track his improvements each week. He is four years old and he knows his stuff. He is very smart. I taught him that and I am proud of that.

Anna is particularly satisfied with her son’s penmanship because she has devoted her time and energy into helping him practice. Anna has assumed the individual responsibility of preparing her child for kindergarten, and now she explicitly takes the credit for her son’s positive outcomes. On the flipside of that same coin, parents shamefully expressed this same type of ownership when their child was struggling with any aspect of kindergarten readiness as was the case for Claire and Shirley which I address below. Even though the literature has suggested that kindergarten outcomes are attributed to a number of factors that extend beyond the agency of the parent, I speculate that the neoliberal undertone of this country has enforced the idea that each individual is responsible for the well-being of themselves and their children. This individualistic ideology is reiterated by schools since they urge parents to take charge of their children’s education by being actively involved in the classroom and in the school as a whole.

Recall that Lareau (2011) found that middle and upper-class parents practice a parenting style known as concerted cultivation, whereas working and lower-class parents engage in a parenting style referred to as the accomplishment of natural growth. She argued that children who grew up with concerted cultivation are preferred and disproportionately rewarded in the education system and by individual school faculty members. This alludes to the idea that our schooling system, whether implicitly or

explicitly, regards this parenting style as being the “most fit” and as having the most value. My study complements Lareau’s because I suggest that it is not just schools who are determining “fit” parenting, but parents are also consciously judging themselves based on their child’s level of school readiness. As a matter of fact, parents will take accountability for school outcomes by going as far as calling themselves a failure if they believe that their approach to kindergarten preparedness fell short. Claire, a Milton parent, illustrated this self-stigmatization in her interview:

Claire: He can’t read or write yet, and he just finished the first grade.

Interviewer: Are his classmates able to read and write?

Claire: Oh gosh, yes. They are reading and writing paragraphs, and I am like oh my god! I mean, he can read some words, but like maybe 20 sight words in total compared to the 65-80 sight words the other kids can do. He can write his name, and he can write words that he can see, basically copying it down, but not by himself.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that?

Claire: I feel like I have failed.

Here, Claire interpreted her son’s lag in reading and writing as a result of something she did wrong when preparing him for school. Thus, this mother denigrated her sense of self-worth as a parent merely because of her son’s first grade academic performance. Our society tends to largely evaluate adults based on their socioeconomic status, whereas children are primarily assessed on the basis of how well they do in school.

To be clear, Milton parents were not the only ones who took responsibility for their child’s level of school readiness—Oxford parents did this as well. For instance, Oxford mother Shirley said:

Shirley: It was half-day kindergarten, and I just don’t think that he really thrived when he got there. It turns out that he had a little bit of a learning disability, which explains why he was having trouble. But I felt like I was a little bit of a failure

because I didn't feel like I had done enough. All we did was read, like that's all we did.

Although Shirley admitted that her son has a learning disability, she still attributed the fact that he did not “thrive” in kindergarten to her being a “failure” of a parent. She believed that her approach to prepare him was inadequate, and she concluded that her decisions are directly causing him to fall behind in school even though there are clearly other factors influencing his school readiness. This indicates that parents suffer from a substantial lack of systems consciousness in terms of the multilevel factors that shape kindergarten preparedness. Holding parents solely responsible for kindergarten readiness is a problem because it obscures our understanding of the factors at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels that influence school readiness. Moreover, believing only parents are involved in the kindergarten preparation process is a simplistic approach that ignores how multiple levels interact to accumulate advantages or disadvantages for certain children depending on their parents' social location.

Parents' long-term expectations

Even though the last question in the interview guide asked how parents envisioned their children's future, it is important to point out that all parents talked about adulthood throughout the interview without being prompted to do so. This implies that parents feel like they need to start molding their offspring as early as possible in the life course in order for them to be competent adults who can survive in an increasingly competitive world. That is, parents are fully aware of the high stakes that are involved in kindergarten readiness and how this transition could potentially shape future adulthood outcomes. Therefore, they formulate long-term expectations about their children's

futures, and they begin to prepare them for the projected adulthoods during the kindergarten transition.

According to Shanahan, Hofer, and Meich (2003:189), “planful competence refers to individual differences in people's ability to choose roles that are well suited to their interests and talents, and to pursue these roles effectively and with perseverance”. All interviewed parents exhibited this planful competence by already prior to kindergarten establishing roles that they expect their children to fill as adults, then devising and implementing a strategic plan that would prepare their children for these anticipated roles. While many erroneously assume that only parents of privilege consider their children’s future, it is important to note that all parents in this study seemed to have a similar time horizon that extended well beyond kindergarten and even high school graduation. In addition, 19 out of 20 interviewed parents hoped that their child would eventually attend some type of college, while the remaining one parent who resided in Milton asserted that “no one needs college.” The variation among parental social location only began to occur when parents discussed the realistic expectations that they had for their child’s future. These disparate expectations ultimately shaped how they prepared their children for kindergarten and which skills they began to equip them with at an early age. My study expands on the current literature because it highlights how the kindergarten preparation process can shape future trajectories related to socioeconomic status (SES).

Streib (2013) argued that parents who were raised in different social classes form varied educational expectations about their children’s future, and in turn these

expectations can influence children's performance and eventually life trajectories.

Gorman (1998) expanded on the concept of future expectations by adding that middle- and upper-class parents tend to believe that a bachelor's degree is the minimal credential that their children should obtain, whereas working- and lower-class families hold that college is one of the many options that their child should consider as adults. These varied expectations about higher education are critical because they can shape a child's view about college and whether or not they will pursue this endeavor as adults (Gorman 1998). My study continues to develop Gorman's (1998) idea by asserting that parents transmit their beliefs about higher education and future employment by discussing money matters, tips for professionalism, the importance of grades, and even school rankings as they prepare their children for kindergarten.

All interviewed parents made it clear that they wanted the best possible outcome for their child's future, so they began to equip them with skills and tools that they deemed would be most necessary for their child to successfully enter the "real world" when the time came. For instance, almost all Oxford parents explicitly framed college attendance as an expectation for their kindergarten-aged child, and they began to identify, communicate, and prepare their child to meet this expectation. This process typically entailed the parent emphasizing the importance of grades, performing academic drills with the child, and even informing them that they had savings accounts so that they could attend college. Oxford parent Marcus clearly articulated his long-term expectations that he has for his child:

Marcus: My wife did much better in school than I did, and her family is just kind of like that because they are all just a bunch of lawyers. They have just always

been driven and strived for higher levels of success, so I don't think there is any chance of our child not being successful in school because he already does so well. I have every plan and intention that he will not only attend college but he will do so on a scholarship of some sort. I am open to any of his ideas about where he wants to go, what he wants to pursue, and I am very excited for his future to see how it all plays out. My wife got scholarships all the way through school. If he could do that, then that would be spectacular and that's the goal. I want him to find something that he loves to do and that he would do with joy and happiness.

Interviewer: Would you still want him to go to college even if he did not get a scholarship?

Marcus: Oh yes, we would definitely pay for it to make it happen. Our whole focus and where we pour all of our resources financially and energy wise is into our child. He is the center of everything so that he has the opportunity to build what he wants from there.

Even though Marcus is open to his child pursuing a variety of career options, we

can gather that this parent expects that his son will sustain his current academic momentum, attend college on a scholarship, and carry on the legacy of family success.

Marcus has identified a clear trajectory for his son, and now he is working to prepare his child to successfully meet these adult expectations when the time comes. Hence, kindergarten preparation served as a starting line for these parents to begin preparing their children for what comes next: adulthood.

Milton parents displayed a similar sense of planful competence as well by thoughtfully forming expectations about their children's future. For instance, Milton parents discussed their deep desires for their children to attend college; however, they ultimately prepared their children based on what they thought would be the most relevant and realistic alternatives for their child's future. For most Milton parents, this meant that they suspected that their child would enter the workforce after graduating high school or join the military. Therefore, Milton parents began teaching their kindergarten-aged children about money sense, the importance of eye contact and handshakes for future

interviews, and teaching them how to overcome adversity. The stark contrast between Oxford and Milton parents' approaches to school readiness can be captured when comparing the following quote by Milton parent Gabriel to the quote above by Oxford parent Marcus:

Gabriel: I think it is important to teach him the value of a dollar at this age because I may give him some money for a field trip, and he needs know how much money to give the teacher and how much he should get back in change. I teach him that he will always need to always be alert and aware with stuff like that because I can't protect him all the time. It's just a good life lesson. These quotes suggest that these fathers are similar in the sense that they both

approached kindergarten readiness with long time horizons, and they both wanted to protect their sons by ensuring that they will be as ready as possible for adulthood.

However, their expectations varied substantially. Marcus predicted that his son will obtain a competitive scholarship and be admitted to an esteemed university, whereas Gabriel suspects that his child's future will require a sense of heightened awareness and self-reliance, even when dealing with people who fill positions of presumed trustworthiness. Because these parents' expectations differed, the ways in which they prepare their children for kindergarten and adulthood will ultimately diverge as well. We can see how parent social location shapes distinctive educational pathways that can lead to markedly unequal outcomes as adults.

My findings about parents' long-term expectations align with Lareau's (2011) because I illustrate that parents with a more privileged social location approach kindergarten readiness in a way that will equip their children with skills that are highly regarded in the education system. For instance, a teacher is more likely to approve of Marcus' child because he has been encouraged to embrace competition, he is adjusted to

the level of rigor that schools will impose on him, and he understands how to deal with high-pressure situations. Gabriel's son, on the other hand, has been taught to approach all situations with a level of skepticism to help prevent the possibility of bamboozlement. This type of cultural capital is typically undermined by schools, and it could even spark teacher dissatisfaction if it led the child to question the educator's position of authority. In other words, a firm grasp on a budget, knowing how to make a good impression, and understanding how to deal with life's inevitable struggles are key life skills, but they are not the ones that our educational institution currently acknowledges or values in terms of school readiness.

Although Milton parents want their children to attend college just as much as Oxford parents do, Milton parents did not frame college attendance as an expectation because they would not be able to assist their children with college tuition when the time came. More specifically, Milton parents thought that expecting college attendance was unethical because their child would have to put in all of the hard work to attend a school of higher education, and then they might be stuck with high-interest school loans that could potentially take years to pay back. Milton mother Morgan explained this double-bind situation during her interview:

Morgan: I would like for her to attend college. The only thing that I struggle with right now is how it is going to be paid for. It worries me about how my daughter would ever pay for college. I am hoping I will have some money to help pay for her to go because I wouldn't want her to be in debt for the rest of her life. It scares me.

Here, we see Morgan perform a cost-benefit analysis of her child attending college before she has even begun kindergarten. She worries that the enduring cost of debt will outweigh the benefits of obtaining a college degree, and she was certainly not

the only parent who felt this way. For instance, another Milton mother, Cassy, similarly described the financial stresses associated with college:

Interviewer: What are your thoughts about your child's future?

Cassy: Um, it is his choice. If he wants to attend the military, I am fine with it because I thought about joining. I just want him to be happy in whatever career he has. If it is just him going and getting a certificate in something, or if it's working at Wal-Mart, it is up to him. My mom is an assistant manager at a **[supermarket]**, and she has only been working there 7 years. If the job doesn't require school, then I don't think he should go to college. I just think he would end up focusing more on how to pay for college than actual college.

The two quotes suggest that these Milton mothers feel like encouraging college as an expectation is morally wrong because the burden of debt that is likely to follow, and it is their children who will ultimately have to deal with making payments for many years. These long-term conversations repeatedly occurred among both samples of parents, which implies that parents understand that the decisions that they make on behalf of their child today can have enduring impacts that shape adulthood outcomes. Accordingly, parents construe the school readiness process as one that requires the highest standard of moral judgement since their child's future fundamentally depends on it among other factors at the interactional and institutional levels.

Interactional Findings

As previously mentioned, none of the parents explicitly pointed to multilevel factors that influenced school readiness; rather, interactional and institutional mechanisms were implicit in the parents' accounts. Even as they gave themselves the sole responsibility for kindergarten preparation, parents talked a lot about parent social networks and parent-teacher relationships as being a critical resource to prepare their children for school. Hence, my multilevel analysis is justified because it demonstrates

that kindergarten readiness involves many other stakeholders in the community than just the parent. However, it is important to note that the individual level is in fact the most equal level in terms of creating and exacerbating advantages or disadvantages based on parent social location. In other words, social inequalities among kindergarten-aged children grow substantially as we move up to the interactional and institutional levels. Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) are some of the first theorists who explored a multilevel analysis to school readiness, and one of the main factors that they call our attention to is the interactions that occur between individuals that help facilitate the transition into kindergarten. These authors suggested that we must reevaluate the transition into school in order to identify how members in the community are interconnected and ultimately influence school readiness. I agree with this notion and I expand on their argument by pinpointing two types of relationships that seem particularly important in shaping kindergarten preparedness: I contend that social networks among parents and parent-teacher relationships are the most profound interactional level influences.

Building a Parent Community

I went into the interviews expecting that parent-teacher relationships were going to be extremely important for understanding school readiness, but I found that parents actually identified their social networks with other parents as more significant. It is essential to study these interactions because parents share vital information that can help parents improve their approach to school readiness; however, these parent groups are highly exclusive in terms of who is considered as an insider and who is kept outside the

network. Social capital is broadly defined as “the potential resources that are linked to membership in a certain group” (Bourdieu 1985: 51). Illustrating the social capital concept, Oxford parents repeatedly claimed that the biggest resource that they used to prepare their children for kindergarten readiness was their social network, which consisted of other parents in the community who had similarly aged children. The reason why participants valued this social network so much was because parents would discuss and exchange information regarding parenting styles, school selection options, stimulating learning materials, and much more. According to this context, it seems as though the social capital shared between some Oxford parents has nothing but endless benefits to offer. However, Portes (1998) points out that there are negative consequences associated with social capital as well, and this includes the exclusion of outsiders. In other words, Oxford parents frequently hinted at the fact that many parents were excluded from the resourceful parent community on the basis of race, class, and culture. In addition, Oxford parents typically identified themselves as “gatekeepers” in the sense they were able to determine who had access to this exclusive parent group.

Nine out of ten interviewed parents in Oxford described the parent social network as a group that stands together to deal with a variety of situations from explaining the importance of boundaries to their kindergarteners to organizing meet and greets at the local playground to kick off the new school year. Oxford parents revealed that they were able to gain access to this community through a number of forums, which includes attending school events, having their children engage in the same extracurricular activities, or joining virtual groups on social media. As soon as parents are accepted into

this community, they can take advantage of the school readiness information that flows freely between the members. It is not only the information that serves as a major resource, but the sense of “we-ness” that is generated between parents can be helpful as well because parents feel like they have someone to turn to when they are faced with school readiness obstacles. Oxford mother Tammy captured the interdependence between parents when she recalled a time when they were preparing to discuss sexual privacy with their children:

Tammy: We, as a parent community, really hunkered down and talked about how we were going to tackle this issue of discussing privates, boundaries, and appropriateness. We talked about who was going to say what and how to approach the issue to talk to the kids about it. So we kind of tackled it as a group, and that is how it goes with a lot of stuff since we have kids the same age who are experiencing similar behaviors and thoughts.

Tammy clearly identifies as a member of this “parent community,” and her typical collectivist approach can reduce feelings of loneliness that so many parents experience at the individual level. Thus, this finding at the interactional level suggests that school readiness is a group effort that requires the input of an entire community rather than the traditional belief that this responsibility solely falls on the shoulders of parents. In addition, these findings reveal how social inequalities can take shape at the interactional level being that some parents have access to a parent community while others do not. This lack of access can occur in many ways, including through the process of exclusion which took place in Oxford, or because the parent social network is nonexistent as is the case in Milton.

Because the information that flows through the Oxford community is so valuable, it should come as no surprise that the members of this group are protective about who

gains access to the social network. I refer to those members as “gatekeepers” because they are the ones who either grant parents with access to the group or deem them as “outsiders” and exclude them. After reviewing the Oxford parent interviews, it became increasingly obvious that those who had access to this group were predominantly white, elite stay-at-home mothers. The reason why this subpopulation was most readily accepted in the parent community was because they had the necessary resources to practice “intensive parenting” (Hays 1996). In other words, they had flexible work schedules to volunteer and participate in all of the school activities, they could center their lives around their children, and they were “self-sacrificing” to ensure that their children are emotionally fulfilled (Bell 2004). While some fathers did have access to the parent social network, the parents typically identified that it was more of a norm for mothers to directly engage in this group.

If parents were unable to embrace the intensive parenting style for any reason, then they would be excluded from the social network and they would miss out on the valuable information that could help improve their child’s school readiness. In fact, Oxford stay-at-home mother Alyssa describes the potential resources parents would forgo if they were excluded:

Alyssa: I know we have subsidized preschool education programs if you qualify, but I think it is hard to figure out who qualifies. Like how do you even know that this program even exists in the first place if you’re a mom who is working? I don’t know where a newcomer would get that information because I found out about that information through parent friends in the community. I don’t know where you get information if you are working as a housekeeper or something like that and you are not connected with wealthy people and wealthy [Oxford] moms. If you were someone like that and you have a child with needs, will you know that there is this free program offered that can work on those needs? I don’t know.

As Alyssa pointed out, she discovered programs that helped better prepare her children for kindergarten by utilizing the parent social network that primarily consists of wealthy, stay-at-home moms. Alyssa suggested that parents who deviate from these social identity characteristics typically do not have access to the group, and this prevents those parents from taking full advantage of community resources that could elevate school readiness. Sometimes, the process of exclusion was so rigid that Oxford families would forbid their children to even be around parents/families that were deemed as “outsiders.” Candace, an Oxford mother, illustrated this frankly when she said:

Candace: I didn’t really have an issue with all of that, but it was the parents that I didn’t like. This sounds really terrible because of what I do for a living, but most of the kids she was going to school with were C-CAP [Child care assistance program that helps subsidize costs for low-income, working families] kids. Halloween parties and Christmas parties would roll around, and parents weren’t really talking or they would be standing in the corner with hoodies over their heads and arms crossed. That’s when I decided that I was absolutely not doing that. I want other parents who are engaged in their kid’s schooling and interested in what is really going on in their classrooms. It was really that that made me decide to start looking elsewhere. It was really the parents that threw me off at that school because they were not engaging and they didn’t really seem to care about their kids’ education. I didn’t want her to be there.

Here, Candace explained that she actively excluded low-income parents from her network altogether by removing her child from the school and placing her in a new one that aligned more closely to the mother’s identified social class. Candace acknowledged that these parents attended school events, but she justified her decision to remove her daughter from this school by claiming that they were not engaging in their children’s education properly. Candace certainly was not the only Oxford parent who gaged a parent’s level of engagement based on class. For example, Cora asserted this idea when she said:

Interviewer: How did you decide where to send your children to school?

Cora: I hate to even say this. I am not saying that I only want my children to be around other wealthy children because I don't feel that way at all. But I do think that if I didn't have some upward mobility, then a lot would have to go by the wayside. I just think that instances of bullying happen more in families that struggle very hard with finances. I felt like a child that was really crying for help would have a higher chance of being tended to with the parent environment at [Mountain Vista Elementary]. I liked the idea that the parents at this school seemed really involved, and I am just being totally honest.

This quote is profound because it suggests that Cora's decision about where to

send her children to school was almost entirely based off of the social class of other parents. While some may assume that parents are considering factors like teacher quality, grade point averages, and programs that are offered at a school when deciding where to enroll their child, this quote implies that we must do further research on the interactions between parents because it can profoundly impact school outcomes. Additionally, these quotes show how some Oxford parents serve as gatekeepers in the sense that they dictate who is allowed to gain membership to the parent social network, who has access the resourceful information that flows between the members, and which families can interact with their children. This is sociologically interesting because it directly reflects that parents who belong to lower social locations are already at a disadvantage when preparing their children for school, and being excluded from a parent community that exchanges valuable information about school readiness puts them at an even greater disadvantage. Meanwhile, the children with parents who belong to this parenting community are extremely privileged, and these advantages accumulate when parents collaborate with others to refine and perfect their approach to school readiness. The Oxford community demonstrated how parents can miss out on social capital due to the

process of exclusion, whereas the Milton parents exhibit what it is like to bypass social capital altogether because a parent community is seemingly nonexistent in this town.

Milton parents noted that their community lacks a parent social network, and they voiced their desire for this resource to become available. They believed that it would be useful because it may help parents better prepare their children for kindergarten, especially first-time parents who are unfamiliar with navigating the educational system. McNamara Horvat, Weininger, Lareau (2003) argued that parent communities differ among middle- and upper-class families compared to working- and lower-class families. While my findings suggest that social networks do in fact play out differently based on the social location of a community, my Milton sample diverges from McNamara Horvat et al's (2003) findings since they were not experiencing a sense of parent community whatsoever. This is problematic because it suggests that parents are completely bypassing the interactional-level mechanisms that can greatly enhance school readiness. Milton parents understand that this could be a potentially useful resource, and they wished that they could somehow facilitate this meaningful relationship among parents. In particular, Milton mother Anna expressed this need in the community:

Anna: Maybe the City could host a youth group for kindergarteners or something. It wouldn't be so school oriented, but it would help our kids with interaction. Stuff like that would also help parents interact with other parents. It would help us parents become friends and actually talk to each other. We need something like that.

Here, Anna framed the lack of communication among Milton families as an issue that needs the attention of city government. While she does not explicitly explain why relationship building among parents is important, we can refer back to the Oxford sample who describe their social network as directly helping them socially, academically, and

emotionally prepare their children for kindergarten. Thus, it comes no surprise that Milton parents explained that they actively try to seek out parent relationships in the community. In fact, Milton mother Cassy took it upon herself to create an online group that would make it easier for parents to schedule playdates and social outings so that similarly aged children and their parents could form friendships; however, she reported that this idea has been somewhat ineffective in capturing the interest of other parents. When I asked parents why they suspected that there is a lacking parental social network in the Milton community, Claire said:

Claire: I don't really know. I have never talked to my friends about it. The most my friends and I will talk about it is by asking stuff like, "What day does school start?", or "You got your school supplies?" and that is it. We probably don't talk about it because the parents just go with whatever the teacher says.

Claire, as well as every other parent, implied that it is a norm in the Milton community that school readiness is not discussed among parents because school faculty members are presumed to be the specialists on kindergarten preparedness. Because they are not seen as experts, it is difficult for parents to engage in a purposeful dialogue about experiences, resources, and suggestions that could help enhance school readiness among children. Although it is unclear why Milton parents defer to the expertise of teachers while Oxford parents do not, we must speculate if it perhaps is connected to different cultural beliefs. For instance, teachers fill a relatively esteemed position in our society, and some cultures believe that it would be a sign of disrespect to question or cast doubt on the instruction of these educators. When these people submit to the teacher, they pay a price because other parents who belong to the culture of hegemony may ostracize them. The reason why this may occur is because people of the dominant culture tend to believe

that engagement is only displayed when a parent asserts themselves by challenging a teacher and cross-checking their advice with other parents. Indeed, this would explain why social capital among Oxford parents is such a strong factor that influences school readiness among kindergarteners; whereas, a sense of parent community in Milton seems to be virtually absent. The participants in both samples suggested that an open parent-teacher relationship is also significant, which I address next.

The Importance of a Parent-Teacher Relationship

Lareau (1987) highlighted the possible tensions that can emerge between parents and teachers when she found that teachers believed their students would have been promoted rather than retained if their parents would have taken more active roles in the school. This author's findings enlightened my research because it suggests that a parent's agency and their child's cognitive ability are not the only factors that shape school readiness, but rather there are influences at the interactional level that must be accounted for as well.

While both the Milton and Oxford community recognized the importance of having an open and honest relationship with their child's teacher, it was abundantly clear that the Milton and Oxford samples differed in how they forged this connection. For instance, Oxford parents claimed that the easiest way to build rapport with teachers was by being a classroom helper, which requires a flexible work schedule since this volunteer service would typically take place during regular business hours Monday through Friday. Not only does this allow the parent and teacher to build a relationship, but Oxford parents reported that it also enables them to monitor teachers to ensure their child is being

appropriately and rigorously educated. Oxford parents who can take the time to volunteer are also at an extreme advantage because they can learn techniques from teachers and apply them at home. Thus, we see how social inequalities among children develop since some parents are unable to volunteer because they must go to work and financially provide for their families. Furthermore, children with parents who can afford to volunteer will experience even more hidden advantages because the parents can bond with teachers who may then give the child preferential treatment by selecting them to attend special classes, assigning them to the best first-grade teacher, or even informing the parent about special resources offered within the school. Oxford mom Alyssa explained how her child has benefitted from the relationship that she built with his teacher:

Alyssa: I was the room parent in kindergarten for my kids, so I got to see the teacher and the class all the time and they know you. And there is a teacher here in the first grade that no one likes, and we never had her. When it was time for my kindergarten teacher to place my child for the next year into first grade, she said that she would never stick my kid with the teacher that no one likes. It was like she knows me, and she wasn't going to put me with the bad teacher. But you really got to wonder who she puts there, and that would be families that she doesn't connect with, which is really bad, too.

Here, Alyssa highlighted that the parents who personally connect with the teacher are the ones who are afforded special benefits that will help bolster school success. Conversely, those who cannot afford to take off work to volunteer at their child's school are inevitably the ones who do not connect with the teacher and end up with unfavorable circumstances that put their child at an educational disadvantage.

The Milton parents undoubtedly care about their children's education, and some even expressed their interest in volunteering to build this intimate relationship with teachers; however, given their socioeconomic status, this is not always an option due to

transportation, work schedules, or child care conflicts. Milton mother Melanie personifies this idea when she reflects on her daughter's experiences of school placement:

Interviewer: How did you decide where to send your child to school since she moved around so often?

Melanie: Well, she was placed in the first school because we didn't really have an address. So I had to just go to the district and they just assigned me a random school. She has been placed in a couple schools like that before, and it was inconvenient because I couldn't travel. The teachers didn't care about us though. Instead, they would just tell me all the things that I was doing wrong, yet they would never actually try to help by making recommendations. I just felt like the parent-teacher communication was not there. Then, I looked at the school near where we are living now, and I found out that the bus picks her up right in front of the apartment. It makes a big difference, and people don't realize that.

Here, we see a chain of events occur that ultimately shape school readiness. First,

Melanie lacked adequate housing and reliable transportation, which made it more difficult for her to get her daughter to school every day on time. The frequent absences and tardiness resulted in a deteriorated parent-teacher relationship because the educator presumed that it is the parent's responsibility to make sure their children are attending school (regardless of the circumstances). Melanie did all that she can to safeguard her child's education; however, the district's decision to place her child in a school that is largely inaccessible is a condition that extends beyond this parent's agency. Even though Melanie voiced her struggles and requested help, this teacher blatantly ignored the external factors that are involved. Instead, the educator, like many parents, lacked systems consciousness and resorted to blaming the parent, which sacrificed the line of communication between the parent and teacher. When this happens, it makes it even more difficult to help a child succeed in school.

Six out of the ten parents interviewed in Milton mentioned that they have a difficult time effectively reaching out to teachers and building a meaningful relationship

with them. The participants admitted that this has created a major roadblock because they experience feelings of distrust toward their child's teachers. Too often teachers overlook the parent's situation and what type of resources it takes to be able to volunteer, and these teachers prejudge the parents who are absent from school activities as being disengaged and disinterested in their child's education. This type of presumptive labeling is resented by parents and causes an even bigger divide between parents and teachers, which only continues to impinge on the child's level of school readiness. As we move up the multilevel ladder once more, we see how various factors matter for school readiness, and how inequality progressively exacerbates before a child enters school.

Institutional-Level Findings

Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) argued that the institutional-level is highly understudied when it comes to kindergarten preparedness. Thus, I closely examine this level because it draws our attention to housing, school, and tax policies that shape school readiness and early childhood inequalities. I highlight the pressing issue of the affordability and accessibility of high-quality child care because these education programs can contribute to the preparation among kindergarteners and even later life outcomes. For instance, Helburn and Howes (1996) suggest that children who are enrolled in high-quality child care prior to kindergarten may experience higher school performance, higher occupational attainment, higher incomes, and less involvement with the criminal justice system. However, many families are unable to enroll their children in these programs being that very few qualify for assistance, many state programs are outdated, and there are long wait lists (Mollborn and Blalock 2012). The White House

Conference on Children voted that child care was the most serious problem facing America's families in 1970 (Zigler et al. 1992), and there has been very few childcare reform proposals since then.

Beyond child care, my multilevel analysis examines how housing segregation determines the quality of schools that children attend and how this shapes educational outcomes. Having a basic understanding about how factors at the three levels interact to create and exacerbate inequalities give stakeholders a better idea about how/when to intervene in the early life course to ensure that "all children in America enter school ready to learn" as pleaded by President Bush in 1989 (Meisels 1998). Once again, the institutional level is by far the most distal from the parent, which frequently leads them to overlook this level and its forceful effects. Nevertheless, both Milton and Oxford parents hinted at the barriers that exist at the institutional level, including the unaffordability of child care, high rates of crime, and even school costs. These institutional-level factors are categorized as either threats or resources, both of which make a big impact on school readiness. It is important to identify institutional-level factors to understand how they make an impact on school readiness, especially those that seem much less intuitive like crime rates within a certain geographical area.

Threats to School Readiness

Crime

Community safety is an institutional-level factor that some parents too often take for granted in the sense that they can send their children off to school with the expectation that they will return home at the end of the day. However, this is certainly not

the case for some Milton parents being that 9 out of 10 participants expressed fears of sending their children to school due to increasing crime rates in their community. Their anxieties were well supported by annual statistics since the chances of becoming a victim of violent crime in the Milton community is 1 out of 111, compared to the state's average of 1 out of 312 (Neighborhood Scout 2015). In fact, Milton is rated as being safer than only 1% of cities in the United States (Neighborhood Scout 2015). In addition, recent tragic events have occurred across the United States, which include the Columbine High School Massacre, the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting, and the Virginia Tech Massacre among many others. At this point, the reader still may be questioning what this has to do with school readiness, but I found that physical safety was the most salient factor for Milton parents because it helped them determine whether or not to send their children to child care programs. Thus, it comes to no surprise that Milton parents experienced the children's sendoff to school differently than Oxford parents because the annual likelihood of becoming a victim of violent crime is estimated at 1 out of 463 residents (Neighborhood Scout 2015). In fact, no Oxford parent mentioned the concept of physical safety even once during the interviews. Ontological security is a largely invisible factor that can easily be taken for granted, until a massacre strikes and creates feelings of instability, negativity, and vulnerability.

The Milton interviews revealed that parents were much more likely to question a school's ability to protect their child during an emergency than its competency to properly educate their child. Milton father, Nico, explained this idea more thoroughly:

Nico: I think that the way the community is now makes it hard because the family structure isn't there for the kid.

Interviewer: So you said “the way the community is now.” Can you expand on that?

Nico: Just the crime rate and the drugs. I think all of that has an impact on your kids’ education. You want to build a relationship with the teachers just because most parents don’t feel safe with leaving their kids. I think once you actually get to know the teachers, the school, the parents, the whole faculty, it gives you more relief to leave your kids there. You need to feel safe leaving your kid somewhere, and you have to be confident in the teacher that they will protect your kid if something bad happens. I guess you need to build that trust with the teacher to feel like you, as a parent, are prepared to send them off to kindergarten. I will pretty much do anything to build that trust and safety net with them. The communication at their school is great, so that helps with the trust issue.

Nico is obviously concerned with school readiness, but he recognized that crime

hinders the kindergarten preparation process because he is so worried about whether his child is safe at school or not. In other words, the threats to his child’s physical safety must be reduced so that this Milton dad can focus more on teaching his son the social and academic skills associated with school readiness. Desiree was yet another Milton parent who described crime as heavily influencing kindergarten readiness when she says:

Desiree: There is a lot of bad going on in this community, and parents are scared to let their kids go anywhere lately. That was my number one thing when I was working because I wasn’t sure how safe I felt with letting my baby go to daycare. Then, I felt even more unsure when there was a robbery right next door to the daycare, and I didn’t find out until I went to go pick her up later on that day. I wasn’t notified when it happened, and that has been happening pretty frequently. Anytime some violent crime happens in the area, I just want to know about it when it happens. That way, I am notified and I have the discretion to decide if I need to come pick my child up or not. I want contact with the teaching staff, and I want it to be a friendly yet informative interaction. That way, I know that I can trust them and they know that they can trust me. Parents just have a lot of anxiety that something is going to happen to their kid when they are at school, God forbid.

Here, Desiree explained that community crime has directly influenced how she

has prepared her daughter for school because she was unsure if she should send her child to child care, a learning center that is presumed to enhance school readiness. This quote also suggests how institutional crime can shape the interactional level through the trust

that parents have for teachers and their competency to protect their child during an emergency. Some factors at the individual, interactional, and institutional level are hidden from the view of parents, which is exactly why we must analyze school readiness through a multidimensional lens. This will allow us to understand school readiness more deeply, and it can also inspire us to create more holistic interventions that could improve school readiness among all children regardless of their parent's social location.

Childcare Costs

According to Helburn and Howes (1996), children who are enrolled in high-quality childcare programs are more likely to be emotionally-secure, have a better understanding of language use, and are less aggressive toward others. As they become adults, these children are more likely to have higher incomes and pursue high education (Helburn and Howes 1996). Hence, high-quality child care prior to kindergarten is incredibly important for establishing school readiness; however, the costs of these programs can sometimes be more expensive than the costs of college. For instance, the state's average cost of child care for a four-year-old child is estimated at \$14,950/year, whereas the average cost for public tuition in this state is \$9,478/year (Child Care Aware Cost 2016). More importantly, college costs can be covered through the use of loans, grants, or accumulated savings that are not available to parents of young children. Therefore, the money to cover the costs of child care typically comes straight out of the pockets of parents/guardians, so it increasingly difficult to enroll a child in a high-quality program given that the state in which these two communities are located ranks in as the 5th least affordable for center-based care (Manthey and Sporrer 2014).

The Oxford sample admitted that the price for high-quality child care is outrageous, but it was a cost that they were willing to pay so that their children could have the best education possible. Oxford parent Candace explained how expensive childcare can be when she says:

Candace: For us, we didn't really have a lot of options, but daycare was a really good way for her to be prepared and for her to be ready. Again, not a whole lot of options, but I am glad that daycare was an option. We spent probably as much as a mortgage payment for 2 and a half years for her to be in a place that we felt was really good for her... So we currently have me, my husband, and one child. We would love another child, but we cannot afford a second due to daycare costs, especially because we live in [Oxford] county.

Here, we see another parent perform a cost-benefit analysis, but this time involves weighing the high costs of child care against the joy of having another child. In fact, Candace stated that childcare is so expensive that it is like taking on a second mortgage payment just so that her daughter could be well-prepared for kindergarten and beyond. This middle-class mother recognized that she already struggles to provide high-quality care for one child, so she concluded that there would be no way possible to take on additional childcare expenses associated with a second child. Thus, we must speculate if childcare in our country is becoming so unaffordable that eventually only the top income earners will have access to these programs and its endless benefits. Three stay-at-home mothers that I interviewed in Oxford understood the advantages of childcare, and they enrolled their children in at least a part-time program despite not needing the care. Indeed, all parents in both samples agreed that early education programs were the best way to prepare children for kindergarten, but it comes at a cost that only a few can afford.

Many parents in the Milton sample identified that they could not afford one mortgage payment, let alone a similar cost for their children to attend a high quality

preschool program. Instead, their children would have to forego the benefits of these programs and some parents would even choose to stay home from work to keep childcare costs low. Hence, early childhood inequalities form among children before they ever enter kindergarten because parents with a high social location will have children that are disproportionately exposed to high-quality childcare programs compared to the children who belong to lower social location families. Paradoxically, Mollborn et al. (2012) argued that low-income children benefit more from preschool programs than high SES children like those located in the Oxford community. Childcare costs were not the only expenses that shaped how children were differently prepared for school, but it was also the hidden prices of school supplies, uniforms, and enrollment fees that impacted school readiness.

School Costs

Shopping for school supplies with an excited kindergartener can be a momentous time until the parent proceeds to the checkout line to realize that the cost of school supplies for the average elementary school student stands at \$200 (Flannery 2016). Eight out of ten Milton parents recalled their sticker shock due to the expense of school supply shopping. In particular, Milton mother Anna captured what it is like to pay for school supplies for multiple children:

Anna: Being a stay-at-home mom and not making any money is hard when I am trying to get his school supplies and school clothes ready. It's pricey. Getting them set up for school is just very hard. You have to get them the right clothes and backpack to make sure they aren't going to get bullied for what they're wearing, make sure they have the right supplies on the list required by teachers, and then we also have to make sure we can afford it. I am going to have to get three times the supplies this year, and that's hard.

Here, Anna depicted the hurdles that parents have to overcome when it comes to purchasing the right tools that children need to succeed in school according to the standards of other children, the teacher, and the parent's wallet. The hidden cost of school supplies is a factor that we must become more aware of being that children need these items in order to enter the classroom ready to learn. Anna's quote demonstrated how stressful school supply shopping can be due to the lack of affordability, and she later went onto explain that she has been forced to decide which supplies her children will need as soon as they start school and which ones they can do without until the family's next paycheck. This mother, like all of the other interviewed parents, clearly cares about her child's education, but there are social structures that extend beyond the parent's agency that can hinder the school readiness process.

If the cost of school supplies were not enough for Milton parents to juggle, most of the community's K-12 schools require students to wear pricey uniforms. Interestingly enough, the schools in Oxford did not mandate students to wear uniforms, so these parents were afforded an additional advantage in the sense that they did not have to worry about paying for this attire. Meanwhile, Milton mom Desiree explained how the affordability of basic costs truly impacts school readiness:

Desiree: I think there could be more resources to help parents figure out what they are needing and how they can get to it. For example, there are fees to sign your kid up for school and you also have to pay for uniforms upfront, so some parents don't sign them up that year because they can't afford it. I would like to see resources that pays for some of the costs, I guess.

Here, Desiree explained how the unaffordability of school costs directly influence school readiness because some parents decide to delay school enrollment. While there are some donation programs and other organizations that can help pay for these costs,

Desiree convincingly argued that we need more resources to increase the accessibility and affordability of school items so that all children can enter kindergarten ready to learn.

Community Resources Elevating School Readiness

The median house value in the Oxford community is estimated at \$684,460, which makes it some of the most expensive real estate in the nation (Neighborhood Scout). This is significant because local taxes help pay for local schools; therefore, neighborhoods with extremely high property values will have more money to spend per student compared to neighborhoods with lower property values. Furthermore, every community can vote on bills that increase taxes so that schools will have even more money to spend on each student. When accounting for property taxes and all other tax increases, this numerically translated to Oxford schools spending \$9,247 on each student per year (IRES MLS 2016). As a result, Oxford students are likely to have more positive school outcomes because these schools can afford to have smaller class sizes, offer competitive compensation that attracts more high-quality teachers, pay for updated textbooks and other teaching materials, and support early childhood programs. Oxford mother Andrea illustrated the benefits of living in a neighborhood with well-funded schools:

Interview: What are the pros and cons of the school that your son attends?

Andrea: The neighborhood schools are great here, so we didn't even have to think about looking around. The hours are great and they are able to take care of a lot of the logistics of being in school. They do the laundry, they feed him, and they take care of him, which is great. They have a phenomenal playground, they have a fantastic art program, they have music, and all sorts of stuff. For us, it just seemed like all of this stuff would just broaden his mind and get him to do stuff that he wouldn't otherwise do on his own. The kids like the activities. I think there are generally high-quality teachers there. Then for the cons, I think that it is a high-performing school, so I don't think it is particularly innovative. They

implement new technology, but I think schools that struggle seem to be taking more risks and they are more willing to try new programs and shake things up. Whereas, when you have a school where all the kids are passing the standardized tests, it's like why would you change anything? I would like to see more modern programs. It's great that the teachers are super experienced, but they are not all open to innovation because they have been doing this for 10-15 years and they found what works for them.

Here, Andrea drew the connection between what it is like for her child to attend a high-quality school and how it enhances school readiness. In fact, Andrea claimed that the school is so “high-performing” that it is almost a weakness since the techniques to school readiness have been proven to be successful and have now become stagnant. Even though Oxford schools are rated as some of the best in the nation, this community poses great “push” factors for parents and other residents who can no longer afford high property costs and large tax increases. Ergo, these parents usually have to relocate to more affordable communities with lower quality schools, which can lead to different levels of school readiness compared to the children who remain in well-funded schools. In addition, we see how the institutional factor of implicit housing segregation shapes subsequent outcomes associated with the kindergarten transition as well as early education inequalities.

The median house value in the Milton community is estimated at \$122,179, which is well below the nation's average median house value at \$234,900 (Neighborhood Scout). Once again, we must understand that housing values are directly interconnected with children's school readiness because local property taxes largely dictate how much funding local schools will receive. In Milton, city schools annually spend \$7,244 per student (Department of Education). Hence, Oxford schools are annually spending \$2,000 more per pupil, which has tremendous implications by Milton class sizes being bigger,

most schools struggling to afford a full set of class textbooks, and beneficial sports and art programs being cut. We can see how these institutional factors directly impact school readiness in a conversation I had with Milton parent Melanie says:

Interviewer: What do you think the ideal transition would look like as far as phasing kids into school?

Melanie: The schools out here aren't particularly the best. The school system out here sucks in my opinion. She went to [Howard] elementary, and they were studying from books and homework packets that were from the 90's. I just didn't understand why they weren't doing anything that was up to date.

Interviewer: Can you tell me more about your opinion regarding [Milton's] schooling system?

Melanie: My daughter has been to about four or five different schools. She was going to [North Point Elementary]. I didn't like that school because they would always talk about all the bad stuff my daughter does, but they would never try to recommend me any type of counseling or any way to help her succeed more. They told me that if my daughter didn't get it together, then she would have to go to a private school where they didn't have no recess and no break time. They would just have to sit there and strictly do work.

Here, Melanie described how a low-funded school system can lack the necessary

resources to adequately teach all children. For instance, she noted that one school was working with curriculum materials that were literally older than the parent. This is profound being that teaching techniques and even some educational information has evolved substantially within the last 25-30 years. In addition, the school offered to transfer Melanie's daughter to a private school, so we must speculate if the faculty resorted to this option because they thought that this private school had more appropriate resources to work with this child. High-quality teachers, art and athletic programs, and more individual time with teachers can exponentially enhance school readiness among children, but the current distribution of funding and resources allows for some children to be more prepared for school than others. Although the factors at the institutional level seem distant and removed from the parent, I have sufficiently argued how the factors at

this level can either directly help or hinder school readiness. When we combine the individual, interactional, and institutional factors, it becomes clear how advantages or disadvantages manifest to create and perpetuate social inequalities that begin to affect children before the school transition.

Case Studies

As a final justification for my multilevel approach to school readiness, I chose to compare the kindergarten preparation experiences articulated by Oxford mother Cora to those of Milton mother Claire. This will allow us to recognize how multilevel favors translate into advantages or disadvantages that lead to different levels of school readiness and unequal outcomes.

Oxford Mother Cora

Cora, a tall, Caucasian woman, is the mother of a four-year-old son and a five-year-old daughter. She thought her perspective on school readiness was particularly unique because she experienced the kindergarten process back to back. She described her family as “a traditional 1950’s model” because she is largely responsible for child-rearing tasks while her husband works at a nearby university as a tenured faculty member. Throughout the interview, Cora emphasized the detailed measures that she took to get her children prepared for kindergarten, which included “reading 5-7 storybooks per day”, making “educational mixed CDs” for them to listen to in the car, and getting them familiar with grammar by “creating fun games for them to engage in.” She admitted that these efforts were necessary because it is her “duty to raise productive members of society”, which begins in kindergarten. When she discussed this obligation, tears began

to fill her eyes and she said that she “just wants to do a good job with them.” This indicates that she has accepted sole responsibility for kindergarten and other life outcomes. She spoke extensively about her children becoming adults, and how she stresses the importance of school to her children so that they will be inspired to “pursue a lifetime of learning,” which includes college. In fact, Cora asserted that there are no situations where she would find it acceptable for her children to decide against college because the job market demands a degree.

One of the many resources that Cora utilized to prepare her children for kindergarten is her circle of parent friends who have similarly-aged children. Cora even brought one of her parent friends with her to the interview and introduced her as the “early education guru”. According to Cora, their families frequently spend quality time together by partaking in playdates every weekend, attending zoos and museums together, supporting each other at PTA meetings, and discussing new tips and tricks to school readiness. This is a major advantage because these mothers can work together to refine their techniques that will help their children be as successful as possible in kindergarten. Furthermore, Cora formed close relationships with her children’s teachers by volunteering as the classroom helper and maintaining the school’s website. The tight-knit relationship with teachers “paid off” because Cora’s children were invited to join a farm preschool that a teacher recently opened. Thus, we see how the individual and interactional level factors merged together to afford Cora’s children educational benefits that will most likely be accompanied by positive school outcomes.

Cora mentioned that she owns a “beautiful home” with a great neighborhood school (which is rated among the top ten best elementary schools in the state) (Niche 2017). Her children attended the part-time preschool offered at this school as well as the farm preschool located in the community as well. This mother acknowledged that the costs associated with two preschools “are not cheap by any means,” but she believed that the price was worth her children being well-prepared for kindergarten and beyond. Cora described her home as being “located in a peaceful neighborhood where her children can ride their bikes to school,” which implies that Cora feels safe to her children autonomously go to and from school. Cora and her family were afforded proliferated benefits at all three levels, which may help her children experience heightened levels of school readiness.

Milton Mother Claire

Claire is also a white woman who is the mother of a seven-year-old son. She defensively began the interview by explaining that many of the school readiness “mistakes” that she made in the past were because her and her husband were “so young when they became parents”. She then went onto call herself “a terrible mother” because she believed that she was the main reason her son needs a speech therapist. She stated that she never had time to help him with academic skills when he was younger because she was always working to keep “food on the table.” She hopes that it is “God’s will to heal him so that he can become smart enough to get a trade job that lets him work with his hands.” This demonstrates that she, like all other parents, lack systems consciousness because she thinks the only source that she can currently turn to for school readiness

guidance is her spirituality. The individual level is in fact the most equal level because all parents see themselves responsible for their child's education, but we see early childhood inequalities exacerbate as we move up the ladder of levels.

The Milton community lacks a parent social network because they largely rely on their children's teacher to educate them about school readiness. Claire recalled a time when she volunteered at her son's school to better understand how his teacher gets him to do work in class. However, Claire's day of service was cut short when the teacher asked her to "leave and never come back" because her son was acting out more than he normally did with his mother in sight. This suggests that Claire was unable to establish a relationship with this teacher, which prevented her from learning valuable techniques that would help her better prepare her son for school. This ultimately created a tension between the parent and teacher, which only further debilitated the child's school readiness since the line of communication between her son's main caregivers were at risk. If we compare Claire's experience back to Cora's, we can begin to see how unequal outcomes begin to form before a child ever enters the school system.

As described above, Claire's son struggled with reading and writing, and so the school urged Claire to enroll him in an online program that could improve these skills. Claire noted that she "cannot afford internet, so there was no way that she could buy that program." Claire was among the several Milton parents who discussed the exorbitant cost of school supplies by saying that she is "rarely able to afford everything on the shopping list." This leads her to feel like her son's teachers shun her, which only increases the parent-teacher tension even more. Thus, we see how the interactional level and the

institutional levels compound to exacerbate disadvantages that may threaten this child's level of school readiness because he will have to overcome many obstacles that Cora never even have to consider.

This was in no way a longitudinal study, but we can speculate on how Cora's and Claire's experiences played out differently and may result in unequal outcomes. Cora's children did not just attend one extremely high-quality childcare program, but they were enrolled in two preschools. Therefore, they potentially received double the benefits, which helps with language proficiency and positive socioemotional behaviors. In contrast, Claire mentioned that her child did not attend any form of childcare until he entered mandatory kindergarten, and she struggled to enroll him on time because the sign-up process was unclear and "no one had ever talked to her about it before". Cora's flexible working schedule as a stay-at-home mother allowed her to spend large amounts of one-on-one time with them to maximize their academic skills, whereas Claire was working more than 40 hours a week and still could not afford to cover all the essential costs. Claire fears that her son is beginning to fall so behind in school that "he may have to repeat a grade at some point within the next few years". If it is true that kindergarten is a major indicator of success as an adult, then we must consider how Claire's and Cora's children may already be on two different educational trajectories that could eventually result in profoundly unequal adulthood fates.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The original research question was how do community- and family-level social advantage and disadvantage shape school readiness. I answered this question by conducting a community comparison study that examined the differences and similarities between the cities of Oxford and Milton, which differ by community- and individual-level social class and race/ethnicity. I did this by interviewing 10 parents from each community (totaling 20 interviews) who had at least one child between the ages of 3-7 years. The decision to conduct interviews among parents who reside in these two distinct communities successfully answered my research question because I learned how some of the major factors at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels influence school readiness. Although parents see themselves solely responsible for school readiness, their talk about the preparation process informed the research that there are many more less intuitive factors that affect this key transition in the life course.

This neoliberal approach also leads parents to feel a sense of loneliness because they believe that they cannot reach out to anyone for help when facing the daunting task of preparing children for kindergarten. As such, we need to shift toward a more holistic approach to school readiness by understanding that it is not only the parents' responsibility for preparing children for kindergarten, but it is also rests on the shoulders of schools, policymakers, taxpayers, and all other members of society because a successful transition into kindergarten can shape future educational and occupational attainment. This means that our children's achievement both in kindergarten and as adults is fundamentally interconnected with societal prosperity in the future.

Both samples of parents also approached kindergarten readiness according to the long-term expectations that they had for their children. In contrast to classed stereotypes, all interviewed parents considered a long time horizon for their children which extended well beyond kindergarten and into adulthood. The noticeable variation began to occur when parents identified different types of expectations that were largely shaped by the social location and previous experience of parents. These diverging expectations led parents of different social locations to equip their children with disparate skills.

Social capital between parents was surprisingly important when it came to shaping how children were prepared for school. In particular, the parent community that was formed in Oxford was the main resource that parents utilized to prepare their children for kindergarten. This social network was so useful because it served as a forum where parents could collectively discover what the best approaches were to school readiness. However, this group was highly exclusive because parent members served as gatekeepers and only allowed parents to join this group if they shared a similar social location. The parents who deviated from the preferred social identity were frequently excluded from the group and the useful information that flowed between them. Milton parents claimed that they lacked a parent community altogether, so they were unable to take advantage of this resource that could have helped them better prepare their children for kindergarten. This has profound implications since the parents who missed out on social capital are most likely the ones who would benefit most from this resource. In addition, these wealthy, elite, stay-at-home mothers experienced proliferated advantages within the school system because they could volunteer to form bonds with teachers who

may grant their children special benefits. Still, some Milton mothers were unable to make it to required parent-teacher conferences or other school events because they struggled with the issues of inflexible work schedules, obtaining adequate transportation, and/or seeking out reliable childcare for younger siblings. As a result, these parents were unable to regularly volunteer, which prevented them from forming building a meaningful relationship with the teacher. Because the interactional level is less acute than the individual level, we could speculate that this is why parents and schools currently display such a lack of systems consciousness. The institutional-level factors were even more implicit, but the mechanisms at this level undoubtedly shape kindergarten readiness.

The main institutional factors that influenced how parents prepared their children for kindergarten included crime, childcare costs, school costs, and neighborhood resources. I framed the factors at this level as either threats or resources for school readiness. In particular, the threats to school readiness was community crime and the unaffordability of school readiness. Milton's high crime rate shaped how parents prepared their children for kindergarten because it made them question the teachers' competence in protecting their children during a potential emergency. However, discussions related to ontological security among Oxford parents never came up during interviews possibly because this community is statistically safe so the threat of harm on their children may seem less relevant to them. In addition, I pointed out that the costs of school and childcare were major factors that influenced school readiness since many parents would have to delay their child's enrollment because the registration fees, uniforms, and school supplies were so unaffordable. Meanwhile, Oxford parents noted

that these expenses are astronomically high, but it was a price that they paid to ensure that their children were ready for kindergarten. Finally, I examined how housing matters for school readiness because the local property taxes will help determine the school's quality and per pupil spending. This implies that the unequal distribution of resources at the interactional level is a serious issue that must be addressed if we truly wish to see all children enter kindergarten ready to learn.

My multilevel approach to school readiness examined how community- and family-level social advantage and disadvantage shape kindergarten readiness. This further developed school readiness theory because I demonstrated that parents perceive themselves solely responsible for kindergarten readiness, even though there are many other factors at the individual, interactional, and institutional level that shape the kindergarten preparation process. In particular, I argued that a parent's social location determines whether the multilevel factors translate into social advantages or disadvantages, which leads children to be differently and unequally prepared for kindergarten. This is significant because it illustrates how early education inequalities form and exacerbate before children enter school, and I suggested that these disparities grow even wider as they move through the education system. The implications of this approach is profound because it indicates that the educational trajectories of socially advantaged children begin to diverge and drift away from the trajectories of less privileged children before any of them even learn what a classroom looks like. As such, future research should be conducted to understand what can be done to help increase systems consciousness among parents in terms of school preparation responsibilities.

Additionally, researchers should try to better understand which interventions should be implemented to most effectively improve the kindergarten readiness gap among children between the ages of 0-5.

Limitations of the Study

This study had limitations that must be identified; nevertheless, it makes a major contribution to the school readiness literature. I only interviewed a total of 20 parents through a broad-based convenience sampling strategy, so the results and findings cannot be generalized beyond the actual sample. My community comparison study only involved two communities, so future researchers should work to better understand school readiness among a generalizable population that includes several communities across the nation. Additionally, I am a local to both of the communities where the research took place; therefore, I acknowledge that my personal biases may have influenced my interpretation of the data. The one-time interviews with parents prevented me from comparing their practices to what they verbally disclosed, so we must question if the participants may have embellished certain facts in order to provide the most socially acceptable answers. However, it is worth noting that some of the conversations that I had with parents in both communities did become intimate and emotional with two subjects even displaying physical tears during the interviews. This suggests that this study is not simply about children entering kindergarten and learning to sing the alphabet, but rather, parents interpreted these interviews as a discussion of meaning making around how they see their children as members of society that will ultimately shape our future. Future researches should implement multilevel approaches to school readiness by collecting longitudinal

and generalizable data so that we can better understand the factors that shape unequal education pathways before children ever enter the education system. This type of research could inform us about what types of interventions would be most effective in promoting readiness among all children, and it would help us become more aware that this key transition can be most effectively improved when policymakers, schools, parents, taxpayers, voters, and all other members of society are willing to co-create common and equitable solutions.

Policy Implications

For centuries, children were expected to be mass producers in our increasingly industrialized country, so they would work long hours in dangerous factories to financially contribute to their household. 1938 marked the end of this era as the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed, which placed limits on the minimum age for employment and the maximum hours a minor could work (U.S. Department of Labor 2016). Legally speaking, children were able to enjoy a time of liberation and “just be kids” with minimal responsibilities. However, the process of deindustrialization began in the 1980’s as a result of globalization, and this has made our society more competitive than ever (Abeles and Congdon 2011). Now, parents are coming to realize that they must do all that they can to help their children become marketable in order to eventually obtain a higher-paying job than what they had only to maintain the same standard of living. My study reveals that the quest to mold standout children for future employers begins very early in the life course. In fact, Oxford parent, Cora confirmed that she began “prepping her children for life while they were still in the womb.” The other parents in my study

also went to great ends to prepare their children for the anticipated cutthroat job market before kindergarten even begins. While our society no longer believes that our children should obtain employment like we did during the early 20th century, we now expect them to be educational producers who should receive the best grades, be enrolled in AP/ “gifted and talented” classes, commit themselves to several extracurricular activities, and volunteer the most hours to their community (Abeles and Congdon 2011). We believe that this is essential for our children because it may translate into getting accepted into highly-ranked colleges and/or obtaining the best and most secure jobs. In other words, parents instill neoliberal ideologies into their children at a very young age by encouraging them to prioritize their self-interest, understand the fundamentals of competition, and accept responsibility for their fates. The stakes are dauntingly high, so parents and children alike are becoming more stressed out from the pressure and mental rigor that is involved in this preparation process.

As previously mentioned, the three domains of school readiness include cognitive ability, maturation/chronological age, and health. There are plenty of studies to indicate that health is the most significant of the three. The absence of health suggests that a child is physically sick; however, health should account for mental wellness as well. When we factor mental health in, I speculate that school readiness is being threatened due to the extreme pressures that children experience from parents, schools, and several other sources in society. Thus, our country should strive to improve the first five years of life for all children so that school readiness can become a responsibility shared by all

members of society, including parents, policymakers, taxpayers, and school faculty members.

My study suggests that parents are currently fixated on the social and academic aspects of kindergarten readiness, yet they tend to completely minimize the importance of their child's health. This has great implications because a sick child who is academically and socially prepared may still be unready for kindergarten because he/she would have to deal with the burden of illness first, which may include frequent absences from school to recover and even being unable to retain information at school due to increased cytokines (proteins that signal the body is sick while simultaneously impairing normal brain function). Because school preparation begins so early within the life course, we should consider implementing policies that safeguard the health of children by providing free, accessible prenatal care to all carrying mothers throughout the pregnancy period. This would be helpful because babies who lack sufficient prenatal care are three times more likely to die, and some researchers also hypothesize that it could be a leading cause of learning disabilities among young children (Child Trends Data Bank 2015). To address the mental health of children and their parents, we should also offer free counseling/therapy programs to all families because it could help them work through issues like post-partum depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, schizophrenia, and much more. Promoting mental wellness among families is beneficial because it could reduce the possibility of neglect and/or help a recovering child or parent redirect their focus back on kindergarten readiness. We could also create legislation that is aimed at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels of kindergarten readiness.

Many parents feel increasingly alone when it comes to preparing their child for kindergarten, so we should collectively create a program that assists parents with school readiness. In the program, various stakeholders could facilitate classes that educate parents about school placement options, the enrollment process, and potential resources to cover the associated costs of kindergarten. Additionally, parents would be encouraged to learn more about the effects of long-term expectations and how they shape their child's perception about higher education and occupation attainment. This could encompass teaching parents about the social and financial benefits of college, that there are financial aid programs to help with costs, and that every child should at least consider pursuing higher education. A program such as this could address the disadvantages that occur at the individual level because parents would feel like they have people to turn to when preparing their child for school, and it would help push the next generation to reach their maximum potential. Furthermore, this program would have several facilities located in every state that could reduce issues at the interactional level.

The program's facilities could be a place where parents would have the opportunity to build relationships among other people, including teachers and other parents. In other words, this program would conduct learning circles so stakeholders could collaborate and learn about different approaches, experiences, and recommendations of school readiness. The formation of the parent community would be similar to Oxford, except that it would be done in a more formalized setting and there would be a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, culture, or any other social identity. Moreover, teachers would

be invited to these gatherings where they could share valuable information and advice about how parents should be preparing children for kindergarten before they enter. The teachers and parents could build bonds with one another by aligning their values, and they could even engage in a meaningful dialogue about false assumptions and inaccurate stereotypes regarding parenting styles and social identity. As the parents are partaking in the learning circles in one room, their children could be interacting in another nearby room since social preparation is so essential to kindergarten readiness. Finally, this program could tackle issues at the institutional level.

Milton, like many other cities in this nation, struggle with high rates of crime, and my participants suggested that this was the most influential factor at the institutional level that shaped school readiness. The program that I am proposing could work alongside law enforcement agencies to create a safer environment by organizing effective neighborhood watches because this deters crime and could provide parents with a stronger sense of ontological security. In addition, stakeholders of kindergarten readiness could work together to create gun awareness campaigns that encourage people to lock their weapons and store them in a secured safe when not in use to prevent the possibility of them getting in the wrong hands as was the case in the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting. Another institutional-level factor was the costs of school, particularly the cost of school supplies and uniforms. My program would reduce these barriers by adopting a check-out system, which would allow students to borrow necessary items for the academic year (uniforms, calculators, rulers, scissors, etc.). Students would return the materials so that others could reuse it when school started again in the fall. To address the cost of

childcare, we would have to extend beyond my program by pushing our government to divert tax revenue toward providing universal, high-quality childcare for children between the ages of 0-5. In addition, we would need to advocate that all schools do away with costly enrollment fees. These two pieces of legislation may be expensive, but Mollborn et al. (2014) argued that every dollar invested in childcare programs tend to have an \$8-14 return later on. While I am able to offer policy proposals that manage most of the identified multilevel factors, future researchers should continue to consider how we can overcome housing segregation. I also recognize that it would take years to implement a program like this, so it is important to discuss how we can help children who enter school with major disparities now.

As I have demonstrated, there are countless interventions that we can apply to improve the lives of 0-5 year olds in our country. However, we must consider how the education system could shift to be more equitable and accommodating to students who have already entered school. To do this, I propose that stakeholders design an education system that facilitates group learning by challenging students to innovatively embark on projects in their own community that implements the fundamentals of math, science, reading, writing, history, art, physical education, intercommunication, and volunteer service work.

City planning curriculum for children is emerging all over the country, and this could give our youth the opportunity to learn the basics of democracy because they will be encouraged to voice their visions and ideas while simultaneously being expected to value and consider the opinions of others. The education reform that I am proposing

should expand beyond city planning by assigning each class with a specific community problem that they can imaginatively approach, such as tainted water, food inaccessibility/unaffordability, or the increasing homeless veteran population. Students would brainstorm ideas to collectively improve their community issue and they would receive guidance from their interested teachers. This approach would help facilitate collaboration, engagement, and cross-cultural competence among diverse community members, which could enhance relationship building among parent social networks and parent-teacher relationships.

Under this new model, children would not be expected to return home from school only to complete hours of homework, but rather teachers would ensure that children are absorbing the necessary information when they can successfully apply academic-based skills to the real world. For kindergarten-aged children, this may involve counting the seeds that they will plant in the community garden or learning to spell their names in the dirt that they till. As the children display mastery, the curriculum can be up-scaled to introduce computer coding, engineering, professional writing, and so on. In addition, this community based learning would always welcome parents to participate when possible, but we would need to guarantee that parents with inflexible work schedules or limited transportation/childcare options could get involved in other ways. For instance, parents could offer a list of ideas that they brainstorm with their children to contribute to the community project, schools could offer free childcare during parent-teacher conferences, or teachers could accommodate the parent by holding video conferences or conducting them in locations that are within walking distance. Fiscally

conservative voters, politicians, and other skeptics would likely oppose an education reform such as this, but we must ask ourselves if we would rather direct our resources to early childhood education now or if we are willing to put these financial resources toward better supporting the criminal justice system and welfare assistance programs later. The pivotal decision is ultimately ours to make on behalf of our children's future.

Upon the completion of these community projects, schools would not offer letter grades as feedback, but rather they could identify ten areas of improvement and ten areas of excellence. In other words, the number of improvement areas must match the number of excellent areas so that our reformed system does not become entrenched with stratification like our current one. At the same time, it would challenge students to understand the importance of commitment, time management, teamwork, critical thinking, and valuing diverse perspectives. This would help children feel less stressed because they would no longer feel as though they are being viewed under a microscope by their teachers or being pinned against their fellow classmates. Instead, they would learn how the skills and theories taught in a classroom can be applied to the real world. In addition, it would put the parents at ease because their children would be acquiring the actual skills that are traditionally viewed as attractive to potential employers. Finally, it benefits society as a whole because it would teach our future adults to approach wicked problems, such as the social inequalities related to school readiness, in a multi-dimensional way. This would increase our sense of systems consciousness because we will be teaching our future adults that they are responsible for the outcomes of this nation, regardless of whether they are directly or indirectly connected to a particular social issue.

Indeed, we must begin to propose innovative policies that will push us to stop blaming individual children and their parents for unequal conditions by shifting the responsibility to all stakeholders to create a society that will readily and equitably serve all children who can shape a bigger and brighter future for us all when they become adults.

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APPENDIX 1

Pseudonym	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Parent Age	Highest Level of Education	Occupation	Other Parent's Occupation + =Marriage
Jacklyn	White	Female	30	Bachelor's Degree	Homeschool Teacher	+Location Director
Marcus	White	Male	47	Bachelor's Degree	Business Consulting	+Professor
Alyssa	White	Female	37	Master's Degree	Admissions Manager	+Patent Attorney
Tammy	White	Female	39	Master's Degree	Human Resources	+IT
Candace	White	Female	34	Master's Degree	Social Worker	+Service Writer
Rosemary	White	Female	44	Master's Degree	Stay-At-Home Parent	+Sales Management
Katy	White	Female	33	Certificate	Massage Therapist	+Personal Trainer
Cora	White	Female	39	Master's Degree	Stay-At-Home Parent	+Professor
Andrea	White	Female	37	Bachelor's Degree	Consultant	+Product Manager
Shirley	White	Female	43	Bachelor's Degree	Stay-At-Home Parent	+Software Engineer

OXFORD SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

Milton Sample Demographics

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Parent Age	Highest Level of Education	Occupation	Other Parent's Occupation + =Marriage
Claire	White	Female	28	Bachelor's Degree	Receptionist	+PTA
Desiree	White/Hispanic	Female	21	High School Degree	Unemployed	+Unemployed
Cassy	White	Female	26	11 th Grade	Fast Food Worker	Carpenter
Melanie	White	Female	24	GED	Stay-At-Home Parent	Deceased
Gabriel	African American	Male	26	11 th Grade	Mover	Dancer
Joseph	Hispanic	Male	31	High School Diploma	Dishwasher	+Unemployed
Anna	White	Female	24	11 th Grade	Stay-At-Home Parent	+Mechanic
Morgan	White/Hispanic	Female	23	High School Diploma	Store Manager	Bartender
Emily	White Korean	Female	36	High School Diploma	Stay-At-Home Mom	+Consultant
Nico	Hispanic	Male	34	High School Diploma	Police Officer	Correctional Officer

APPENDIX 2

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interviewer's name: _____

Date: _____

Interview/Participant #: _____

Interview Instructions: Find a quiet place where participant feels most comfortable to conduct the interview. Ask for permission to record the interview, request for them to sign a consent form, and have them fill out demographics form. Distribute money incentive and collect a receipt.

Introduction/Lead in:

*Thank you very much for sitting down to speak with me today and for participating in my study. I am interested in the ways parents prepare their children for kindergarten, and I think it's very important to talk with parents about their thoughts and ideas on the matter. We'd like to hear from you about what your child's life is like as well as yours, and how these are relating to your child's current school system. (*Stop, ask if they have any questions.*)

*The interview should last about an hour and I would like to record it, if that is okay with you (*wait for them to agree*). (Be sure to say/include the participant's study number and the date. Do not say their name.)

*****Thank you! I really appreciate you participating in our study.**

Could you please tell me about your family structure?

*****I'd like to ask you some questions about your family structure and parenting styles regarding the act of preparing your child for kindergarten*****

1. I am interested in the ways parents prepare their children for kindergarten, can you tell me how you do this or will go about doing this?
2. Do you think it's necessary to prepare children for kindergarten?
Probe: If not, why not?
Probe: If so, why/how so?
3. What is it like to prepare children for kindergarten in this community?
4. What is the ideal situation? What would the transition look like? What would you have needed to achieve this?
Probe: If you did achieve the ideal situation, how did you do it?
5. Let's think about you for a minute, when you were about your child's age. Describe your childhood.

Probe: Where did you (and your spouse) grow up?

Probe: How does your child's life differ from your life as a child?

Probe: What was your relationship with your parents like?

Probe: How did your parent prepare you for kindergarten?

Probe: Did you feel like you had all you needed to be well-prepared for kindergarten and beyond?

6. Tell me about you and the other child's parent. What are your occupations and highest levels of education attainment?

Probe: Where did you go to school?

Probe: Where do you work?

7. When you're working, where is your child? How much time do you have with your child when you return from work?
8. What things are necessary and important for parents to feel like their children are prepared for school?
9. How did you decide where to send your child to school?
10. How do you suppose other parents prepare their children for kindergarten?

11. Are there resources in the community that help better prepare your child for kindergarten? How about someone else's child?

Probe: Do you feel like you have all the necessary resources to prepare your child for kindergarten?

Probe: If not, what types of resources would you like to see become available to prepare your child for kindergarten?

12. What do you think about the schooling system your child will be or is enrolled in? What do you like about it? What do you dislike about it? (i.e. teacher-student ratio is too large, the school doesn't have the necessary tools to adequately teach my child, standardizing testing/teaching, etc.)

Probe: What do you know about this schooling system?

13. What are your thoughts about your child's future?

****Thank you! This concludes the interview.**